



## Women's bodies as dominated territories: Intersectionality and performance in contemporary art from Mexico, Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean

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**Abstract.** Since the 1970s, artists from Central America, Mexico and the Hispanic Caribbean have explored the connection between imperialism and gender violence through innovative artistic proposals. Their research has led them to use the female body as a metaphor for both the invaded geographical territory and the patriarchal incursion into women's lives. This trend has received little to no attention and it behooves us to understand why it has happened and, more importantly, how the artists are proposing we examine this double violence endured by the women who live or used to live in countries with a colonial present or past. The resulting images are powerful, interesting, and a great contribution to Latin America's artistic heritage. This study proposes that research yet to be done in other Global areas where colonies has been established, since it is possible that this trend can be understood, not only as an element of the Latin American artistic canon, but also integral to all of non-Western art.

**Keywords:** Gender; contemporary art; body; performance; Latin America.

### [es] Cuerpos de mujeres como territorios dominados: interseccionalidad y performance en el arte contemporáneo de México, América Central y el Caribe hispano

**Resumen.** Desde la década de 1980, artistas de América Central, México y el Caribe hispano han explorado la conexión entre la violencia imperialista y la violencia de género a través de propuestas artísticas innovadoras. Sus investigaciones les han llevado a presentar el cuerpo de las mujeres como una metáfora que representa, por un lado el territorio invadido y el cuerpo de las personas que viven en el territorio y por otro la incursión del patriarcado en la vida de las mujeres. Dicha tendencia ha recibido poca o ninguna atención y es importante que entendamos por qué ha sucedido y, más importante aun, cómo las artistas proponen que examinemos esta doble violencia vivida por mujeres que viven o han vivido en países con un presente o pasado colonial. Las imágenes que resultan de las propuestas artísticas que se estudiarán son poderosas, interesantes, y una gran contribución al legado artístico latinoamericano. Este estudio propone que se estudie además si la tendencia está presente en las prácticas visuales de otros territorios pos-coloniales o coloniales, ya que es posible que la tendencia estudiada no solo pueda ser entendida como un elemento del canon artístico latinoamericano, sino de todo el arte no-occidental.

**Palabras clave:** Género; arte contemporáneo; cuerpo; performance; América Latina.

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## 1. Women's bodies as dominated territories: Intersectionality and performance in contemporary art from Mexico, Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean

*[...] both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (Spivak, 1988, p. 287)*

In Mexico, a young performance artist named Lorena Wolffer walks the runway, as models are wont to do. Several years prior, the Puerto Rican film director, Ana María García, premiers a documentary where a woman is wheeled on a stretcher into an OR. Both artists are analyzing the relationship between their colonial and postcolonial realities and violence against women. Since the 1980s, artists from Central America, Mexico and the Hispanic Caribbean have explored the connection between imperialism and gender violence through innovative artistic proposals. Their research has led them to use the female body as a metaphor for both the invaded geographical territory and the patriarchal incursion into women's lives.

This trend has received little to no attention and it behooves us to understand why it has happened and, more importantly, how the artists are proposing we examine this double violence endured by the women who live or used to live in countries with a colonial present or past. The resulting images are powerful, interesting, and a great contribution to Latin America's artistic heritage.

In addition to acts of misogynist and domestic violence, which are known and perpetrated worldwide, Central America, the Spanish Caribbean, and Mexico exhibit certain kinds of aggressions towards women that are exclusive to the region. The femicides in Ciudad Juárez, Guatemala, and El Salvador are examples of these kinds of attacks, which stem from the violence generated by the military presence in these territories due to civil wars and the war on drugs. We could also add the so-called "operation": the mass sterilization imposed on Puerto Rican women from the 1940s to the 1980s as a direct result of the country's colonization. Thus, there is an aspect of violence associated with political hegemony that affects women specifically and rather harshly. It is a kind of violence that does not attack colonized men, nor not-colonized women. And thus, by the definition of intersectionality provided by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is an intersectional violence.

Artists studied in this text present sexist violence and colonial violence either as an intersectional manifestation or as an addition (not as a whole). If their

bodies incarnate oppression to all the peoples living in a territory—when they are denouncing imperialist violence—they are including men as victims also. From both perspectives—intersectional violence or the adding of different forms of violence—this article pretends to shed light to an artistic representation that speaks universally.

## 2. The Subalterns of the Desert

In 1935, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) paints what could be the first work of art in history to denounce gender violence: *A Few Small Nips*. Some artists had already created pieces allusive to rape and other types of violence against women, but not with the intention of condemning it. In *A Few Small Nips*, Frida depicts a story that appeared in newspapers about a woman who was attacked and murdered by her husband. Not only does the artist feel political concern towards the violence against women, but also states she identifies with the victim and feels she has been “murdered by life” (Aliaga, 2007, p. 154).

Kahlo was an inspiration for the artists that would go on to create pieces with the intent of highlighting the nexus between violence against women and foreign occupations. In her work, Kahlo does not set out to present a connection between the colonialism suffered by her country and the misogynist attack against this woman, or women in general. However, we must acknowledge that Frida was a revolutionary anti-imperialist artist who, like Mexican muralists, used elements of Mexican folk art to repudiate the imposition of an invading culture.

The first art piece mentioned in this article is by Lorena Wolffer: *If She is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?* (1997-2017), where she uses the beaten female body as a metaphor for Mexico. In the performance, the artist is a runway model. Her outfit, evoking the colors of the Mexican flag, was a dark green dress with red and white accessories (boxing gloves and a scarf). Bruises, wounds, and bloodstains were visible all over her body. The spectator can immediately discern elements that are associated with violence against women in popular imagery, such as bruises and bloodstains. The artist would go on to make more pieces related to this theme (eg.: the projects *Evidences* (2010-2011) and *While We Slept (The Juarez Case)* (2002-2004). “The performance presents me as a ‘battered model:’ a battered and abused people that insist on presenting themselves as healthy and attractive” (Wolffer). The model also embodies women who live under the constant societal pressure of looking beautiful. The spectator witnesses a woman whose sole purpose is to be viewed but is not entirely beautiful because she has marks on her body. It’s a dialectical problem.

As the title of the piece states, “She is Mexico”. The artist uses the colors of the Mexican flag in her attire, her body is Mexico, her body is the land. The signs of abuse on her body illustrate how U.S. imperialism treats her nation. Another element of the piece is a recording playing in the background throughout the performance. In it, the spectator can hear people conversing in English about the future of Mexico, particularly its participation in the “War on Drugs”<sup>2</sup>. The speakers are U.S. Congress members, and they are not discussing the intervention of Mexican police and military into U.S. territory, but into their own Mexican territory. These are U.S. lawmakers making decisions about the work and responsibility of people on the other side of

<sup>2</sup> The author interviewed the artist on September 6, 2013.

the border. The marks of violence in the artist's knees and face denote how the U.S. treats Mexico as a society incapable of administrating itself. Thus, Lorena Wolffer is studying the intersectional violence endured by Mexican women: colonial violence and gender violence. As Johan Galtung states (1971) "the world consists of Center and Periphery nations; and each nation, in turn, has its centers and periphery. Hence, our concern is with the mechanism underlying this discrepancy, particularly between the Center, and the periphery in the Periphery" and presents this inequality as structural violence. Lorena Wolffer demonstrates a similarity between both types of violence (concerning the colonial aggressions to the periphery, which is Mexico and its inhabitants, and the patriarchal violence towards Mexican women, which are the periphery within the Periphery).

The geographical area that is the object of our study has one of the highest rates of violence against women and LGBTIQ peoples, and an oppressive relationship with the United States. Consequently, some forms of gender violence are directly associated with imperialistic invasion. The artist explores one of the most horrific types of violence in the area in her piece *While We Slept (The Juarez Case)*. For this project, Wolffer again uses her own body to probe men's manifestations of hate towards women and how this is linked to women's bodies and sexuality. Here the artist appears laying down on a mortuary stretcher, inside a gallery, wearing a blue factory uniform like those used by the maquiladora workers<sup>3</sup>. She sits up and turns to face the audience. Thereupon, she unbuttons the uniform jacket, she lifts her bra over her breasts and pulls down her pants and panties, which she leaves hanging from one leg. The scene is a recreation of how most murdered women in Ciudad Juarez are found. Since 1993, the corpses of more than 450 women have been discovered showing signs of an extremely violent death (Starr, 2017, p. 1359) and more than 1,500 have disappeared in Juarez (Maloney, 2017, n.p.). During the piece *While We Slept (The Juarez Case)*, the public can hear a voice in the background narrating facts gathered from newspapers and news reports about the murder of fifty women in the city. Most remark on how the victims were dressed; they also mention their ages and some physical characteristics. Moreover, the narration recounts the blows and wounds on the bodies. As the narration describes the location of the wounds, Wolffer marks herself in those same places.

By branding her skin the artist shows the audience how the wounds are focused on certain parts of the women's corporeal frames. At first, the marks seem like from an autopsy or those made on an anatomy that will undergo surgery. Then they overlap and become incomprehensible. However, before long you notice a pattern. There are more marks in some parts of the body than in others, showing that there are areas of the figure that can be interpreted as sexual and that at the same time are the targets of misogynous attacks (Root, 2010, p. 10). While she draws on her skin, Wolffer makes direct eye contact with the spectators. In an interview conducted after the performance, the artist declares it is a technique aimed at "making everyone responsible" (Sevilla, 2002, p. 6). The performance lasts between half an hour and

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<sup>3</sup> After the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed, many U.S. technology companies set up a series of assembly plants called maquiladoras at Mexico's northern border. The products manufactured in countries outside of the American continent are taken to the maquiladoras to be assembled—with low labor costs (\$5 a day)—and then transported to the United States, where, ever since NAFTA, they are not taxed when crossing the border.

40 minutes. When it ends, the artist stands and gets dressed, once again presenting herself as an ordinary laborer of Juárez's maquiladoras. Then she covers her body with a black sheet and with another wraps her head and neck, as if she were a corpse.

The last account is of a woman that was suffocated with a towel. The artist covers her body with blankets and towels until she disappears; the same way that femicides makes women disappear before the total impunity of the murderers and the states. And this way, she ends the performance in complete darkness, as if it were a metaphor for femicide, which erases and annihilates the bodies and lives of women. But the body of Lorena Wolffer was—at least for one hour—a firefly, light. (Atencio, 2013, n.p.)

Dressing herself as a maquiladora, Lorena Wolffer broaches the post-colonial situation, and how she sees herself linked to femicides and the gender violence happening in her country. The maquiladora workers are victims of the U.S.'s imperialistic relationship with Mexico and the former's exploitation of foreign workers. Furthermore, the military presence at the border has masculinized the zone and contributed to rampant misogyny. As Olivia Wood states: "Through the feminization of labour in maquiladoras, women have been specifically targeted as an exploitable workforce, while simultaneously the border itself has been masculinized through militarization policy" (2010, n.p.).

Other Mexican artists use clothes as an allegory for the presence of the violated and murdered body in Juárez. Oftentimes, a remark about the victim's attire is included in the description of femicide scenes in Ciudad Juárez. With the installation *Cimbra* (2006), the artist Teresa Margolles inserts herself in the conditions and reality of Juárez's women. The piece is best described as fabrics and clothes submerged in a big, wooden, canal-like structure filled with clay, water, and cement. The filth and paste do not let the observer know what they are seeing. The garments, mixed in with the cement and water, belong to the victims of misogynist attacks in the border city. Here, the act of looking meets the use of clothing as a personification of the victims. The clothes are made to cover oneself, but also to conceal or show certain parts of the body. As previously mentioned, in the descriptions of the Juárez victims, a disproportionate emphasis is given to what the woman was wearing. One must wonder if this is because people believed that what the victim was showing or refrained from showing led to her fatal destiny? Or that her death matters very little because her style or way of dressing is associated with the poor women of Juárez?

Because it is a problem related to the political situation at the border, Margolles places the clothes in a wooden box without a lid; the sides of the box are the walls, to remind the viewer of the current situation at the U.S.-Mexico border. The figure evoked by Teresa Margolles is a distinct example of the subject that embodies the colonized woman. Her place on the societal hierarchy (relative to Galtung's center (1971, p. 81)) eventually leads to her death.

### **3. The Internal Conflicts in Guatemala**

Women in Central American are among those who experience the worst instances of patriarchy in the world. For example, El Salvador is the country with the highest number of femicides worldwide as stated by the article "Femicide in Latin America".

As a result of the disquieting levels of female homicides in some regions of Mexico and Central America, the World Health Organization has declared femicides to be at an epidemic level.

The intentional and violent killing of women (murders, homicides, and parricides), simply because they are women, is each time acquiring larger dimensions in the Central American countries. The problem known as femicide, which called the world's attention due to its dramatic dimension, especially in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, is also affecting the Central American countries today, and no organized or efficient actions have been conducted until now to stop its escalation and prevent more violence and killing of women. Possession of weapons in hands of groups that were related before to armed conflicts in some countries of the region, weapons that are in hands of merchants, as well as the growing rate of poverty, constitute two factors which, without being the causes of femicide, constitute the backdrop in which it develops and aggravates. (Central American Council of Human Rights Ombudsmen, 2007, n.p.)

The military interventions that shook the region led to internal strife, which lasted until the mid-1990s, and produced a vast number of deaths and disappearances. In a majority of the countries, people were frequently tortured or murdered in broad daylight, leaving these countries' social environments in shambles. This complex situation exacerbated misogynist violence. The racism imbedded in the military training of Central American enlistees and U.S. soldiers, and the desire to take over lands that have belonged to indigenous civilizations for thousands of years, has also fostered a radical type of gender violence towards indigenous women. In Guatemala alone, between 1966 and 1976, 5,829 incidents of misogynist violence were reported and more than 200,000 people disappeared or died during the military conflict, as stated by Toledo and Acevedo (2008). 83% of these people belonged to Mayan ethnic groups. In this milieu, 25% of the reported cases were gender-based; moreover, 99% of the sexual violence was committed against women (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999, p. 20).

The culture of violence that arises from these clashes—which also happened in other countries of the region—has bred more gender-based aggressions than the world average, with the added problem of racism. As a matter of fact, due to the alarming levels that misogynist violence has reached in Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador, a number of the most important contemporary artists from Central America have dedicated some of their projects, or their entire careers, to address the topic of gender violence. Two such artists are the internationally renowned<sup>4</sup> Regina José Galindo and Priscilla Monge, the former from Guatemala and the latter from Costa Rica.

Although the victim of violence is frequently represented as a passive woman for the viewer to observe, Sandra Monterroso shifts this narrative by presenting herself as a proactive survivor in her video *Lix Cua Rahro. Your Tortillas My Love* (2003-2004). Monterroso, from Guatemala, is one of the most notorious contemporary creators in Central America<sup>5</sup>. In *Lix Cua Rahro. Your Tortillas My Love* she ties the

<sup>4</sup> Later we will mention the artistic achievements of Regina José Galindo. As for Priscilla Monge, the artist has participated in the Havana Biennial (1997), the Sao Paulo Biennial (2000), the Venice Biennale (2001, 2013), and as part of collective exhibitions in world-renowned museums such as the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia and the Brooklyn Museum.

<sup>5</sup> Has participated in events of museums with international importance such as the Centre Georges Pompidou and

Mayan tradition of preparing food to the process of making meals for her husband, and carries out a ritual seeking revenge from the abuse or slavery to which she is subjected. In the video/performance, Monterroso makes tortillas grinding the corn with her teeth—instead of using a mallet—and spits it into the saucepan where she prepares the dough. The rage felt by an abused woman, and the form in which she uses the means at her disposal to defend herself, is represented here as an abstract concept in the action of the artist. The act is disassociated from the woman's suffering because the dinner guest will probably not notice a difference in taste. At the same time, the act has a connotation of instability and leads one to think about how lonely she is: a woman that enjoys a satisfaction only she is privy to, and which will not affect anybody directly.

The artist performs a ritual in the language of the Qékchi people where she curses her ex, shows how prison-like a tumultuous romantic relationship can be, and defends the rights of her country's indigenous people, all at the same time. One of the problems the artist is concerned about is that many Guatemalan women speak languages other than Spanish, a situation that prevents them from accessing justice. Furthermore, most of these women are poor and do not have the recourses to hire an interpreter. As a result, the majority of cases go unresolved. This is also the aftermath of imperialism in Central America, people that speak non-imposed languages have a disadvantage when compared to people speaking languages brought by colonizers.

At the end of the video, she uses a rock to engrave a heart shape on the tortillas that are ready to be fried. This action can be thought of as a symbol of the hope these women place on relationships, the hopes that are dashed with the first insult or strike. The artists of the countries studied here refer to their roots and customs that are considered traditional to rescue or defend them in the face of an imposed imperialistic culture. The trend comes from a strong influence of post-revolutionary Mexican painters.

María Adela Díaz, also Guatemalan, presents herself as a victim, the female and colonized subject in *Ambrosia* (2000) (Fig. 1). Díaz displays her body as a decomposing corpse in a see-through box. For the performance, she is dressed in white, her eyes are covered, and surrounding her are 25 thousand male flies that, like the artist herself, cannot escape from the box. The decomposition of the body represented by the flies also hints at putrefying nourishment. The flies' onslaught mimics the way that men attack women, as if they were food to be enjoyed. Díaz presents herself as a woman being assaulted by all those men (male flies) that murder, insult, and abuse women on a daily basis in Guatemala. The woman is both ambrosia (succulent food) and putrescence. It is the perfect metaphor for the position women hold in the patriarchal system, where women are seen as nothing, and men feel entitled to abuse them. María Adela Díaz's eyes are covered during the performance, a signifier of justice, but also of the death penalty and executions by firing squad. As Toledo and Acevedo mention, "this immediately transports the audience back to one of the practices of both the war and post-war eras, that of kidnapping and its consequences on the person, who is violently deprived of their freedom and will be terribly abused in a variety of sophisticated ways, because it relates to a body that is culturally violable, the body of colonial imagery" (2008, pp. 62-63). The anatomy is again presented as territory, that is doubly invaded by imperialism and patriarchy.



Figure 1. María Adela Díaz, *Ambrosia*, 2000. (Photography: Andrea Aragón).

A significant sample of the work by the Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo takes a hard look at the patriarchal violence that goes hand in hand with the post-colonial situation in her country. Galindo is one of the most recognized contemporary artists in the world. Her work has been shown in more than 40 individual exhibitions internationally since 2005. That same year, the artist, who at the time was just 31 years old, received the Golden Lion prize at the Venice Biennale (Toledo, 2005). Galindo belongs to the generation that started producing art after the implementation of the Guatemalan Peace Accords and have thus associated their artwork to the political changes that took place as a result of the accords, and have studied the violent and militarized history of their respective countries.

The work of Regina José Galindo inserts itself into the rules of the political-poetic and of the body as a demarcated territory and intersection between the public-private: the public, collectivized body, that via the ritual gesture of dramatization inverts its status as individual to create a social territory of condemnation, catharsis, sacrifice and atonement. (Perea, 2011, p. 93)

In her work *Meanwhile, They Are Still Free* (2007), Regina José Galindo also uses her own anatomy as a representation of the women that have faced thousands of assaults at the hands of soldiers that invaded, and are still invading, the lands that belong to Central America's indigenous people (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999, p. 20). If there is a subject that has suffered the consequences of the wars and prevailing violence in Central America it has been indigenous women. The worst of these hostilities happened between 1980 and 1983 (Aguilar, 2005) amid



the Guatemalan Civil War, which began during the Cold War and was caused by the military control the United States held in Guatemala and other Central and South American countries (Cullather, 1994, n.p.). The race and gender-based violence endured by all individuals of the region has created a precarious environment, particularly for indigenous women. As a result, Galindo (of indigenous ancestry, and who was pregnant at the time) demands justice for these women who are left at the bottom of the social pyramid. For the performance, the artist had her hands and feet tied to a bed frame with umbilical cords, as a symbol for both birth and abortion. She was laying face up, naked, and with her legs spread. The piece is meant to shed light on the conditions of the Guatemalan women who were raped between 1980 and 1983. According to gathered data<sup>6</sup>, 1,317 (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999, p. 22) women were sexually assaulted. These were indigenous women, some of them pregnant, who were consistently raped by military personnel. Several women became pregnant as a result of the rape and those that were already pregnant had induced abortions.

The usually positive association of umbilical cords with the provision of nourishment for the growing baby is overturned and [...] grotesque elements become threatening, as they are associated with the abuse of the female body. Here the abject, associated with the indigenous pregnant body as 'Other', and the umbilical cords, which are a kind of female bodily excretion, elicit a sense of disgust as well as provoking a feeling of the uncanny in the viewer. (Lavery and Bowskill, 2012, p. 60)

The artist alludes to the freedom of the perpetrators in the title of the piece because this is gender and racial violence that has gone unpunished. The piece studies a form of intersectional aggression (Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989) because it is suffered only by indigenous women, neither by indigenous men, nor by non-indigenous women.

#### 4. Colonialism and Post-Colonialism in the Caribbean

The Caribbean has also undergone multiple interventions and invasions. Additionally, the region's inhabitants face racial discrimination and a hegemony imposed on the region by the European colonization of the Caribbean. Here we will only study Spanish-speaking countries (specifically Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico), but a large part of the Lesser Antilles is still occupied territory.

Although Cuba managed to break free of its colonial situation, the legacy of U.S. and European invasions has affected the life of its inhabitants. It is also worth mentioning the fact that imperialistic intentions from the United States have the habitants living the effects of an economic blockade. Ana Mendieta is another artist who probed the violent environment Latin American women have lived under and

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico "To document the sexual violence the women suffered entails difficulties of diverse natures, because some women show evidence in themselves of the impact that this type of aggression had on them, on their families and on their communities. Likewise, to understand this specific violence during the Guatemalan Civil War it is necessary to be aware of the affiliated ethnicity, because it was in large part Mayan women the ones who suffered this violence. One of the main difficulties that the Historical Clarification Commission had to face was that the women did not want to speak about the violence they suffered." Translated from: Informe Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, Guatemala Memoria del Silencio, 20-21.

examined her own experience as a forced migrant. The artist was taken to the U.S. at age 12 as part of Operation Peter Pan organized by the CIA and the Catholic Church. This was a program where 14 thousand unaccompanied Cuban children were relocated to the U.S. with the intent of saving them from Fidel Castro's communist regime (González Mndri, 2008, p. 253). Mendieta felt out of place all her life. She was also a victim of the racial discrimination and xenophobia that exists towards all those who are not white, heterosexual, bourgeois men in the U.S. According to Jane Blocker, the artist was told to "Go back to Cuba, bitch," while she was a student in an Iowa school (Blocker, 1944, p. 15). Hence, she too suffered the double discrimination—racial and gender—that Latin American women experience within their countries, and, to a harsher extent, outside of them.

Studying at the University of Iowa she developed her first works of art that use the body for. Her anatomical structure was used with two main purposes: the first is to show the pain women experience under the patriarchal system and the second is as an element that has been transplanted into a strange culture, and that in some way wishes to return to its homeland. Because of this, the visual language of Cuban culture is always present in Mendieta's work. The first phase of her artistic career takes place at her alma mater, where rituals—some inspired by Santería—are her main form of communication.

One of her first pieces to take on gender violence utilized the tradition of the bloodstained sheet, a custom that is no longer common in the west, but is still practiced in certain regions of Latin America given their devotion to the Virgin Mary. In many Latin American countries families expect, or expected, women to remain virgins until marriage. To prove the bride's chastity, there is a custom of examining the bed sheets used by a couple on their wedding night to see if there are bloodstains. The bedclothes were hanged in the backyard or balcony, oftentimes by the new bride herself or by the groom's family, for the neighbors to see that the bride had been a virgin. It is understood that most of the stains had to be fabricated or enlarged using any red liquid found around the house. The blood was a symbol of a hymen that had been intact, of a woman that safeguarded her "purity" until marriage. Her knowledge of this tradition, prevalent especially in Mexico where the artist has ancestry, inspired Ana Mendieta to create two ritual-styled pieces that represented the form in which the white sheets are bloodied: *Death of a Chicken* (1972) and *Untitled* (Body Print/ of Iowa) (1974).

Echoing the practices of her home country's hybrid religions—such as Santería and Palo Monte—in her piece *Death of a Chicken* (1972) Ana Mendieta decapitates a white chicken to explore the symbol of the bloodstain and purity. The bird's white plumage "is transformed into the exposed white sheet showing the curious community that the bride was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, a virgin—as 'clean' as the white sheet—at the time of her wedding." The virgin's purity was sacrificed for the pleasure of her husband, leaving behind a trail of blood. The chicken is sacrificed, as is the woman's virginity. Mendieta holds the convulsing chicken while it splatters blood in every direction, staining its white feathers and the artist's nude figure. The nakedness is meant to symbolize purity and cleanliness. The woman-victim has been stripped of its privacy and its right to self-ownership.

By selecting symbols directly related to her homeland, Mendieta signifies the return, the transplanted life and body of a forced migrant. Plus, the artist is a metaphor for all Latin American and Latino women in the United States.

In her 1973 series, *Silhouettes*, Ana Mendieta starts to associate her anatomy to the land, and with this, the desire to return to Cuba. Her piece *Untitled (Body Print/ of Iowa, 1974)* belongs to this series; in it, the action is both a performance and an installation. The piece consists of the artist laying on the ground under a white sheet covered with bloodstains in the form of the artist's silhouette. Both *Death of a Chicken* and *Untitled (Body Print/of Iowa)* require blood as an essential material; this became a common element in her work. For Mendieta, the red fluid can be used to scrutinize the theme of violence, but it is also what brings us together as a people. The artist sees blood as not only a common component in Latin American imagery, but also a return to the culture from which she was uprooted.

During her short career Ana Mendieta worked almost exclusively with the themes of gender violence and the violence with which she was uprooted from her home. During her time as a student she performs the very graphic *Rape Scene (1973)* at the University of Iowa campus. The piece was meant to raise awareness on the issue of rape and murder after the artist heard about the death of nursing student Sara Ann Otten inside the campus. The crime also inspired other artworks where the artist uses copious amounts of blood, such as the interactive installation *People Looking at Blood (1973)*.

In 1971, while she worked on all these projects in Iowa, Mendieta began traveling to Mexico, a place she frequently visited until 1977. It was there that she began developing her series *Silhouettes* in 1973 with the objective of establishing a relationship with the land. Employing elements from Santeria, but also from ancient Mexican rituals, the artist tried to reestablish a connection with her past and her homeland. The series is classified as feminist because the artist tries to recover Aztec and Taino (Mexico and Cuba, respectively) female deities, in a beautiful homage to the mother goddess, for Latin American religious history. Although this series is classified as feminist, the content has nothing to do with gender violence specifically, with the exception of some pieces.

In 1973 she presents *Mutilated Body on Landscape*, one of the first pieces where the silhouette of the artist, and its relationship with nature and scenery, is the main element in the image. In this piece Mendieta wraps herself with a bloodstained white sheet. On the area over Mendieta's womb there is an animal's heart. It belongs to a cow, a mammal whose heart is bigger than a human's, but is approximately the same size as a woman's uterus. The blood has flowed down the sheet and covers the whole floor where the artist is laying, making it look like the scene of a horrific murder. Once again, Mendieta intends to carefully examine the image of femicide and a mutilated body. Her figure is entirely covered by the fabric, making her seem like a mummy. It is the image of a person that has died and whose heart is outside their body.

Both the heart and blood are elements of life, but once either is outside the body they conjure an image of death. In Aztec, as well as Christian iconographies, blood is presented as an ingredient of life; it heals and purifies and is as well representative of suffering and demise. The heart outside the body is also a recurring symbol in the images of the Virgin Mary, to symbolize the pain she's suffered as a mother who witnessed her son's death. Another symbolic image that can be mentioned is the Heart of Christ, which represents the life he gave for humanity's sins. Likewise, the image of the heart is present in the Aztec legend of Tenochtitlan. As the myth goes, Copil, son of Malinalxochitl, was trying to steer Mexican society away from the

course his uncle, Huitzilopochtli, wanted for them. Huitzilopochtli's army murdered Copil, and threw his heart into Lake Texcoco, where the city was eventually founded (Bahr, 2004, pp. 741-42). Hence, the heart on Ana Mendieta symbolizes a woman's uterus, a birthplace, and a space of sacrifice, and is, at the same time, the organ that takes her to her death, because it is what differentiates women from men, women who are murdered for being different.

We can talk about Cuba as a country that has lived imperialism, and that even though it still suffers from its colonial past, it has gone through a decolonization process. However, Puerto Rico, another one of the Greater Antilles and also a Spanish-speaking country, is still colonized. After being invaded by Spain in 1492, Puerto Rico was ceded to the U.S. in 1898 as spoils of war. Ever since 1492, Puerto Ricans have endured many atrocities committed against them, and in 1898 the situation did not change for the better. With the intention of studying the reality of an invaded country, the artist Marina Barsy-Janer proposes her body as a colonized territory in the project (*De*) *Colonial Reconquista* (2014) (Fig. 2). The performance is split in in two acts, one at the Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art and another along the streets of San Juan, Puerto Rico. For her piece, the artist divides and sections off her body and associates this to the violence her fellow compatriots have had to endure under imperialist rule and the violence women suffer under the patriarchy. The art piece begins with the artist having the word COLONIA (Spanish word for colony) tattooed on her back in view of the public. Marina Barsy-Janer comments on the piece:

Inscribing the skin is a recurring practice in the territories of the body, as a detonating sign of signifiers for the performativity of the subject in society. This work presents the social definition of the body as civic terrain, its politics within national soil, and the memory scarred on it. In a decolonization of the senses, a feminine community has been called up to inscribe my skin, forming a sign that will be a return from the invisibility... towards what is visible... the sound of the skin as it wakes up and presents itself as an open wound. We propose the permanent mark on the skin no longer decorative and/or elective but as a cry of protest enacted as a physical crease; like a conceptualizing of the colony's body being marked by an other-reflection. (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico – MACPR, 2014, n.p.)



Figure 2. Marina Barsy-Janer, (*De*) *Colonial Reconquista*, 2014. (Photography: Arnaldo Rodríguez Bagué).

Once the word has been permanently inscribed on her back, she uses a lawyer to give seven women the seven parts of her body containing letters. The women—Olga Orraca Paredes, Yma Ríos Orlandi, Marisel Robles, Colibrí Sanfiorenzo Barnhard, Soraya Serra Collazo, Awilda Sterling-Duprey and Angeli Vélez—will each become proprietor of a part of Barsity-Janer's anatomy. "The participants will accept the donated territory of my skin corresponding to their mark-action, making them owners and authors of this. It is a contextual double narrative of retaking ownership of the titular jurisdiction extracted from our female corporal territories and the ominous positioning of a relationship of the right over the other" (Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Puerto Rico – MACPR, 2014, n.p.).

Surrendering parts of her anatomy to other women is a way of discussing the patriarchal appropriation of female bodies, and the appropriation of the body that men violently execute. However, in this case the concept is spun on its head because it is women who become possessors of Barsity-Janer's body. Marina establishes her body as a territory, as a colonized area, or as the colony incarnate. In yielding her body to another, the artist also explores the territorial invasion and appropriation executed by imperialism. This imperialistic incursion also happens with the bodies of those who live in the colonized territory. By legally relinquishing ownership of the tattooed skin, the artist dramatizes and sheds light on the reality lived by colonized people. It is precisely that appropriation of bodies that leads to gender violence and the colonial brutality lived in Puerto Rico.

In the second act, the artist walks along the streets of San Juan holding one mirror in front of her and a smaller one tied to the back of her head. The first is round and big and reflects her face; it helps her look at herself. The second looks backwards and causes the people that walk behind her to see themselves in Barsity-Janer's colonized and appropriated body.

We began this article talking about a scene of a woman who is wheeled into an OR. This scene is from Ana María García's 1982 documentary, *The Operation*. The film is about the sterilization of countless Puerto Rican women from 1940 to 1980, one of the many atrocities committed against Puerto Ricans since 1898. What was once called "the operation," given how frequently it was performed, was the practice of the removing or disabling the reproductive organs of Puerto Rican women based on the theories of eugenics and social Darwinism. The sterilizations were sanctioned as a means of curtailing the amount of people in the U.S. who were poor or considered socially inferior, mainly non-white races and ethnicities. In 1937, the U.S. governor, Blanton Winship (1934-1939), approved Law 136 "that regulated the teaching, disclosure, and counseling of eugenics principle [...] in hospitals, public health units, prenatal, maternity, childcare centers and other public maternity clinics and hospitals in Puerto Rico" (Puerto Rico House of Representatives).

The sterilizations were, for the most part, performed without the consent of the woman who was undergoing the surgery (Briggs, 2002, pp. 143-45). Doctors devised excuses and ways to carry them out without the woman finding out. On occasions they rendered the women's reproductive organs useless after a C-section, in others they operated saying it was appendicitis, and in some cases they convinced the women by assuring them the procedure was reversible. In the latter cases, it would not be until years later that the victim would find out they could not bear children, because the odds of reversing the procedure were extremely low. In the film, some

of the women interviewed said they volunteered for the surgery because they were never informed of other contraceptive methods. The documentary also shows how far family planning clinics went to convince women the surgery was right for them, making house calls or inviting them to group meetings where they forced the women to sign a document agreeing to the sterilization.

As Helen Rodríguez Trias mentions in the documentary, there is a difference between population control and birth control. The use of contraceptives goes hand in hand with a woman's right over her own body and reproduction. Conversely, population control is an imposition of the State—be it a foreign or domestic—and it is a violation of human rights.

Obviously, forced sterilization is one method the state is using to say to black, third world and poor women: “we don't want more of your kind.” “Family planning” as an institutionalized program systematically carried out by the U.S. government both here and in many third world countries should be distinguished from the right of women and men to limit the number of children they have by using safe methods of birth control. “Family planning” programs have consistently placed the profits of multi-national corporations above the needs of the people. Nowhere is this clearer than in Puerto-Rico where the Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA) estimates that 35% of all Puerto-Rican women have been sterilized. (Horan, 1977, p. 6)

Throughout the documentary, Ana María García compares official information (laws, acts and the action of doctors and hospitals) against the testimony of women who were sterilized. It begins with a person narrating how her family is on the brink of disappearing, because she and all her sisters were sterilized, and how she fears her nieces will suffer the same fate. It was the reality that many Puerto Rican women faced given the country's colonial situation.

The film also presents women's bodies as a metaphor for the country. In *The Operation*, Ana María García overlays images and sounds to create a double image of patriarchal violence and colonial violence. For example, in the scene mentioned at the beginning of this article the visuals are of a woman being taken to an OR, while the audio is of a song written by Antonio Cabán Vale (El Topo);

I know that at twenty you lost  
the hope of giving new seed  
and when I looked at myself in the mirror  
I saw myself turned into sterile land.  
(Negrón-Muntaner, 1993, pp. 67-78)

As the verse ends, and the doors to the OR close—with the women on the stretcher behind them—a recording of the 1898 U.S. invasion of Puerto Rico appears on screen. Thereupon, the author narrates the events that unfolded with the arrival of the foreign troops, because it befits us to understand the context in which the mass sterilization took place. Sterilizing someone against their will is one of the most violent acts that can be committed against a woman, and in this case, it is a type of aggression directly associated to the colonial condition of the territory. It is not gender violence perpetrated by the victim's partner or ex-partner, but by an invading state and imperialistic apparatus. Women are generally seen as objects in the patriarchal

society. Moreover, white, western, bourgeois men objectify everything they consider to be different, thus, non-white women become victims of double violence.

We have used specific examples to show how the women of Mexico, Central America and the Spanish Caribbean have been twice colonized. They are the victims of violence because they are black, indigenous, Latin American and, on top of that, women. The men that live in these territories commit acts of violence, but they are also victims of imperialist violence. Thus, the women are twice colonized, twice invaded; their bodies belong to both the colonized men and the colonizers. For centuries women have been the victims of violence in this misogynous war; this gender violence even shares similar characteristics to imperialistic violence. Most of the manifestations described here are intersectional because they are not suffered by colonized men, nor by non-colonized women.

For this reason, artists have adopted the practice of using their body or the representation of the female corporal space to present or examine the assault at the crossroads of body and land. In the artworks presented here, the bodies belong to women, but these also represent a geographical territory. Most of the examples studied are performances or actions where the artists use their anatomy to embody the invaded territory and the flesh of all the women. The artists' bodies are the people who experience colonial violence—the others, the indigenous men and women, and the inhabitants of the countries south of the Río Grande—personified in the protagonist of the artistic action.

According to the findings of this article it can be deduced that similar practices are present in the rest of Latin American visual arts and even non-Western artistic practices. With further research this tendency can be possibly established as a canon present in performance art made in post-colonial and colonized territories.

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