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## To Be Magic: The Art Of Ana Mendieta Through an Ecofeminist Lens

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TO BE MAGIC:  
THE ART OF ANA MENDIETA THROUGH AN ECOFEMINIST LENS

by  
ELIZABETH ANN BAKER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Art History  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## Abstract

Ana Mendieta was a Cuban-born American artist whose unique body of work incorporated performance, activism, Earth art, installation, and the Afro-Cuban practices of *Santería*. She began her career at the University of Iowa, where she initially received her degree in painting in 1969.<sup>1</sup> It was not until 1972 that Mendieta shifted radically to performance art.

Though she was raised Catholic, she developed an interest in the rituals involved with *Santería*, a culturally predominant Cuban religion, and it deeply influenced her work in her choice of materials and settings.<sup>2</sup> *Santería* is one of the major faith-based lifestyles of Cuba and is characterized by a synthesis of Afro-Cuban and Catholic characteristics, along with its own unique teachings and rituals. Also a prominent theme in Mendieta's work was her sense of displacement and her insatiable desire to reconcile her Cuban heritage, which she attempts to resolve, not only through her art, but also during several trips to Cuba.

Greater still in its contribution of influence to Mendieta's work was the ecofeminist movement which amalgamated elements of the feminist and environmental movements; Ecofeminism's emergence in the United States coincided with the rise of Mendieta's career during the 1970's. The movement focused on the correlation between the oppression, degradation, and exploitation of women and the oppression, degradation, and exploitation of the Earth.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am" *Woman's Art Journal* 20 (1999):12.

<sup>2</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Evans, "James Triptree Jr.: Rereading Essentialism and Ecofeminism in the 1970s," *Women's Studies Quarterly* (2015): 223.

This thesis examines the life of Ana Mendieta and analyzes how her works may be viewed in an ecofeminist context. It analyzes how Mendieta's work acts as a reflection of her cultural, social, and political reality and discusses ways in which characteristics of *Santería* and ecofeminism as a discourse influenced the imagery and symbolism used in Mendieta's artwork throughout her brief career. Formal analysis of Mendieta's artwork and contextual and historical analysis of Mendieta's life, the ecofeminist discourse, and Afro-Cuban spirituality are explored in this research.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated, first and foremost, to the memory of Ana Mendieta and her inspirational legacy.

This work is also dedicated to all those who have suffered at the hands of domestic abuse or partner violence.

Finally, this work is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather, John Baker.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to extend the deepest expression of gratitude to all of those that have made this thesis possible. I would like to thank Dr. Ilenia Colón Mendoza for all of her guidance, support, and dedication throughout the development of this work. To Dr. Margaret Ann Zaho, thank you so much for contributing your time and encouragement. And finally, thank you so much to Dr. Maria Cristina Santana for your enthusiasm and direction. I consider myself very fortunate to have you all as professors and mentors; this would not have been possible without you.

I would also like to thank my parents, Patrick and Linda Baker, for making my college career possible and for encouraging me to achieve academically. Thank you so much for being loving and supportive of my passion, and for believing in my ability to succeed. Thank you for inspiring me to live life to the fullest.

Finally, thank you so much to my dear friends, Nikki Craig and Gaby Van Ravenswaay, as well as to the Executive Board of the UCF Art History Club, for being there to love and support me throughout this process; thank you for keeping me grounded.

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## Chapter One: Biography

Ana Mendieta was born on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 1948 in Cuba's capitol city, Havana.<sup>4</sup> Her family held a high level of prominence both within contemporary political and social spheres, and within Cuba's history. Mendieta's maternal great-grandfather, Carlos Maria de Rojas had been a general in the Cuba struggle for independence from the Spanish, and had famously sacrificed his livelihood when he burned down his own sugar mill in order to prevent the Spanish from benefiting from it. On her father's side, Mendieta's great-uncle, Carlos Mendieta, had been the president of Cuba in the 1930's. Mendieta's father Ignatio, had participated in the 1959 revolution against Fulgenico Batista, had many political connections, and worked as a lawyer.<sup>5</sup>

Mendieta was born into a turbulent time for Cuba. The Castro regime had formulated an armed resistance against Batista's regime in 1959 and, like much of the Cuban population, Mendieta's family supported Fidel Castro's revolutionary, socialist ideologies, at least initially. Once Castro's Communist agenda was verified, the family quickly broke ties with the regime and began to identify with the counterrevolution.<sup>6</sup> The family also had strong conviction in the Catholic Church, which did not support Castro's uprising or Communism.<sup>7</sup> In 1961, the U.S. broke diplomatic relations with the increasingly politically turbulent Cuba, and so began the push

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Sherrill, "A day in the life of Ana Mendieta," *Modern Painters* (2006): 138.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Woman's Art Journal* 20 (1999):12.

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, "Ana Mendieta's Primal Scream," *Americas* 44 (1992):44.

by hundreds of thousands of Cubans to escape. Ultimately, 215,000 Cubans fled during these early years of Castro's reign.<sup>8</sup>

Ana was, with her older sister Raquelín, subsequently shipped to the United States as part of a program that became known as Operation Pedro Pan, an initiative by the Catholic Diocese of Miami, created to remove young Cubans from the country in the wake of the Communist Revolution<sup>9</sup>. Ana was only twelve years old on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1961, when she landed in Miami International Airport. Many of the children involved in the program had family to stay with upon arriving in the United States; the Mendieta sisters had no one but each other. Their first weeks in the United States were spent in refugee camps before they were then transferred to Dubuque, Iowa. Mendieta would spend the next six years in various foster homes and church-run housing, until she was reunited with her mother and younger brother.<sup>10</sup> On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 1966, Ana's mother Raquel and younger brother Ignacio left Cuba on a Freedom Flight and later settled in Cedar Rapids, Iowa to be near Ana and Raquelín.<sup>11</sup> It was not until 1979 that her father was reunited with the family, eighteen years after they were first separated, due to his detention by the Cuban government on grounds of multiple charges of anti-Castroism.<sup>12</sup>

It was during her difficult adolescence in Iowa that Mendieta was first exposed to discrimination in the midst of the racially charged Midwestern United States during the civil rights movement of the 1960's. "In the Midwest, the girls experienced not only a new

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<sup>8</sup> Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 14.

<sup>9</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, "Ana Mendieta's Primal Scream," *Americas* 44 (1992): 44

<sup>10</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Women's Art Journal* 20 (1999): 12.

<sup>11</sup> Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, "Primal Scream," 44.

environment but a new sense of difference, compounded during their adolescence...Ana and [Raquelín] became targets of racism...These experiences exacerbated their feelings of alienation and displacement...”.<sup>13</sup>

Mendieta had shown an interest in art from an early age and received a B.A. in 1969 and her M.A. in painting in 1972, both from the University of Iowa. In the same year, she gave up painting and began to pursue a M.F.A. in the university's multi-media and video program, led by Hans Breder.<sup>14</sup> Mendieta is documented as describing painting as not being “real enough,” and said in a 1985 conversation with Joan Marter: “The turning point in my art was in 1972 when I realized my paintings were not real enough for what I wanted the imagery to convey – and by real I mean I wanted my images to have power, to be magic.”<sup>15</sup> In 1972, Mendieta created her first earth-body work, *Grass on Woman* [Figure 1], followed by *Death of a Chicken* [Figure 12], which was performed at the University's Intermedia studio during the same year.<sup>16</sup> It was Hans Breder that introduced Mendieta to the Mexican countryside in his annual “work study adventures” to archaeological sites in Oaxaca, where Mendieta, “...acutely identified herself... and developed a reverential sense for sacred place and space.”<sup>17</sup> Mexico became a foster-homeland of sorts, and it was these early trips to Mexico that would inspire Mendieta to begin her *Siluetas* Series [Figures 2,3,4,5,6], a project in which she would invest upwards of seven years of her career.

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<sup>13</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, “Pain of Cuba, Body I Am,” *Woman's Art Journal* 20 (1999):12.

<sup>14</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, “Ana Mendieta's Primal Scream,” *Americas* 44 (1992): 44.

<sup>15</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, “Pain of Cuba, Body I Am,” 12.

<sup>16</sup> Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 16.

<sup>17</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, “Primal Scream,” 47.

From 1976 up until just after receiving her M.F.A. in multimedia and video in 1977, Mendieta frequently took trips to New York with Breder and began to develop relationships with some of the local artists, getting a feel for the art scene and the politically charged climate that was New York in the 1970s; by the time she moved there in 1978, she had already developed a network of artistic circles that she could work within.<sup>18</sup> Mendieta began experimenting with unique combinations of motifs that permeated popular 1970's art, including feminism, performance, Earth art, video, and installation. "...emphasis on process and the body and the relationship between artwork and viewer contributed to the redirection of Mendieta's style."<sup>19</sup> Also an emerging concept in the art world at the time was the idea of identity through art. New York artists were, "taking to the streets, responding to the escalation of the Vietnam War and the unrest wrought by the spread of the feminist and civil rights movements."<sup>20</sup> Artists of the time were incorporating their activism and social beliefs in their artwork, making powerful statements about a wide variety of issues, and Mendieta flitted around the edges of this identity movement as well, though she seems to have floundered initially while attempting to find exactly where she fit in amid all of the sophisticated New York revolutionaries without conforming to a movement that would either try to edit her art or make her a commodity.

Lucy Lippard, a writer and influential member of the New York art scene, mentioned one of Mendieta's early works in *Ms.* magazine, a well-known feminist publication, and used Mendieta's images a year later to illustrate one of her articles in *Art in America* about women's body art. Mendieta had made an early performance piece at the University of Iowa called *Rape-*

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<sup>18</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta," *Art in America* (2004): 142.

<sup>19</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Woman's Art Journal* 20 (1999): 12.

<sup>20</sup> Laura Roulet, "Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba," *American Art* 26 (2012): 22.

*Murder*,<sup>21</sup> [Figure 7,8,9,10] which focused on campus rapes and spoke out against domestic violence and abuse. For the performance, Mendieta staged a home invasion and rape scene in her own apartment, featuring herself as the victim, and invited her classmates and peers to her apartment to “witness” the scene of the crime. She placed blood and shattered objects around the scene, indicating struggle and violence, and Mendieta herself stood bent over the kitchen table, hands bound above her head, lower body fully exposed and covered in streaks of blood. Like in many of her works, Mendieta places herself in the role of the object of her work, and the performance is a clear comment on the devastation caused by violence and rape. This work is perhaps Mendieta’s most overtly political performance. Despite this, and other overtly feminist works, she resisted conforming to the feminist label as it was understood in the U.S., even though she seems to have adhered to the movement’s ideologies. Her hesitation to recognize the movement was likely due to its lack of representation of Latinas and immigrant women. This struggle was evidenced by Mendieta’s heavy involvement in the Task Force on Discrimination against Women in Minority Artists, which was established in 1978 by the Artists in Residence (henceforth A.I.R.) Gallery, as well as her curated show entitled “Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States,” which took place at the A.I.R. Gallery in New York in 1980.<sup>22</sup> The A.I.R. Gallery website asserts that while with the gallery, Mendieta, “...sought to highlight the struggle of women artists of color. She responded to the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the art world and made it a personal mission to bring women of color into the conversations about feminism in spaces.” The show featured women artists of color, many of them immigrants or artists from, what many considered, underdeveloped (non-

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<sup>21</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, “Pain of Cuba, Body I Am,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 20 (1999): 12

<sup>22</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 48.

Western) countries. Mendieta continued to struggle to reconcile the notoriety of the academic art institution and her desire to address race and class issues within the institution itself. For these reasons, Mendieta was unable to justify labeling herself a feminist or qualifying her art as feminist. “Although Mendieta was active in feminist art circles – she exhibited with the women’s collective A.I.R. Gallery from 1978 to 1982 and also contributed to the journal *Heresies* [Venus Negra Figure 11] – she later grew leery of being narrowly pigeonholed as a feminist, or merely as a Latina artist.”<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, Mendieta would come to realize that her real purpose in creating art was to reconcile her personal sense of displacement and mend the link between herself and the country of her birth. “Having been torn from my homeland during my adolescence, I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb. My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe.”<sup>24</sup> Mendieta used the Afro-Cuban religion of *Santería* to help repair this spiritual relationship with her homeland. *Santería* is a syncretic Afro-Cuban form of worship that combines Catholicism and African Yoruba traditions. Though Mendieta’s family had been staunchly Catholic, she had been introduced to the practices of *Santería* through the servants working for the Mendieta’s Cuban household; “...this form of worship provided her with a schematic philosophy based on the powers of the earth, linking nature and the spiritual realm.”<sup>25</sup> One of Mendieta’s earliest uses of *Santería* ritual translated into performance was in her piece *Death of a Chicken* [Figure 12], Mendieta’s only piece to incorporate animal

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<sup>23</sup> Laura Roulet, “An Mendieta as Cultural connector with Cuba,” *American Art* 26 (2012): 22.

<sup>24</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, “Ana Mendieta’s Primal Scream,” *Americas* 44 (1992):45-46.

<sup>25</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, “Primal Scream,” 47.

sacrifice.<sup>26</sup> In *Santería*, blood is attributed to *ashe*, or life force, and blood would play a major role in Mendieta's entire body of work, just as it plays a vital role in *Santería* practices.<sup>27</sup>

*Santería* allowed Mendieta to unite all aspects of her art; performance through ritual, spirituality through nature, and heritage through Cuba. It proved to be the ultimate vessel of artistic identity for Mendieta, and she would draw on the practices and imagery of the religion for the rest of her career.

While in New York, Mendieta began meeting other Cuban expatriates who shared and supported her desire to return to her homeland.<sup>28</sup> The first opportunity to do so arrived in January of 1980, when Mendieta was part of a cultural exchange trip to Cuba as a member of the *Círculo de Cultura Cubana* (Cuban Cultural Circle) [Figure 13]. Her enthusiasm and passion quickly gained her ties within the Cuban art community and the support of the Cuban government in the creation of her art. She would take seven trips back to Cuba over the next three years of her life, sometimes acting as tour guide for the program, and sometimes exhibiting and creating her work. B. Ruby Rich, a film critic and friend of Mendieta's, once said about her: "She knew every Latin artist in New York, male and female, and was always pushing all of them – to be ambitious, to break stereotypes, to make their mark."<sup>29</sup> Mendieta was very passionate about promoting cultural and artistic exchange between the United States and Cuba, recruiting her American friends to travel with her to Cuba, and also attempting to organize trips for her Cuban artist friends into the United States – the latter being a much more difficult task. The

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<sup>26</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta," *Art in America* (2004): 140-141.

<sup>27</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Woman's Art Journal* 20 (1999):13.

<sup>28</sup> Eleanor Heartney, "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta," *Art in America* (2004): 140-141.

<sup>29</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 48.



artists that she impacted through these trips to and from Cuba remember her as, "...part of the first rapprochement between Anglo and Latin American artists, describing her as a 'connector'."<sup>30</sup>

Mendieta first met Carl Andre at an A.I.R. Gallery panel discussion in New York in late 1979.<sup>31</sup> Andre was a staunch Marxist, Minimalist and identity artist, and the two ran in similarly elite New York art circles. Mendieta briefly returned to New York from Rome – she had received the Prix de Rome in 1983 and the award allowed her to live and work in Rome at the expense of the American Academy for several years – to marry Andre on January 17<sup>th</sup> of 1985, though she continued to work in Rome as before for months at a time.<sup>32</sup> In August of that year she returned to New York, and on September 8<sup>th</sup>, 1985, Mendieta somehow “went out the window” (as purported by Andre in the 911 emergency call) of the 34<sup>th</sup>-floor Greenwich apartment that the couple shared, falling onto the rooftop of a delicatessen below.<sup>33</sup> No photographs of Mendieta’s body or the crime scene were taken. The art world’s response to Mendieta’s death was overt and sides were quickly taken. Andre’s trial was scheduled to begin within three days of the opening of the first-ever retrospective for Mendieta at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in SoHo. During the week of the opening, Soho was covered in anonymous posters calling for witnesses of the crime to come forward. Andre’s arrest at the scene of the crime was followed by a three-year legal battle that ended in his acquittal, leaving the art world reeling and leaving those who knew Mendieta to morosely recall her early works,

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Roulet, “Ana Mendieta as Cultural Connector with Cuba,” *American Art* 26 (2012): 22.

<sup>31</sup> Eleanor Heartney, “Rediscovering Ana Mendieta,” *Art in America* (2004): 142.

<sup>32</sup> Heidi Rauch and Federico Suro, “Ana Mendieta’s Primal Scream,” *Americas* 44 (1992):48.

<sup>33</sup> Vincent Patrick, “A Death in the Art World,” *New York Times* (1990).

which emphasized the importance of awareness in cases of domestic violence and abuse [Figure 7,8,9,10].<sup>34</sup>

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of June in 1992, five hundred protestors with the Women's Action Coalition amassed for the opening of the new Guggenheim Museum in SoHo. The group was protesting the inaugural exhibition's disproportionate representation of male artists, among them Carl Andre, to the one female artist. A banner was created by some of the protestors that read, "Carl Andre is in the Guggenheim. Where is Ana Mendieta? ¿*Donde está Ana Mendieta?*"<sup>35</sup> On May 19<sup>th</sup> 2014, the feminist No Wave Performance Task Force held a protest of the Carl Andre retrospective taking place in the Dia Art Foundation in Manhattan entitled "We Wish Ana Mendieta Was Still Alive." Artist Christen Clifford, playwright Karen Malpede, and other NWPTF protestors gathered outside of the gallery, performed readings from texts about violence against women, and created a banner featuring the title of the protest. The main event of the protest consisted of Christen Clifford carrying a plastic bag full of chicken blood and organs, dripping blood down the length of the side walk leading to the exhibit, before emptying the decaying contents in front of the entrance into Dia's Chelsea offices. The event received minimal media attention, though the event was reported on by Jillian Steinhauer in a May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, article featured in the web-based art news magazine, Hyperallergic. The following year, on March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the NWPTF organized "CRYING; A PROTEST" at the Andre retrospective at the Dia's Beacon location. The protest was a so-called "cry-in/ silueta party," and consisted of participants crying, wailing, and openly emoting inside of the gallery space; participants were

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<sup>34</sup> Vincent Patrick, "A Death"

<sup>35</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999) 1.

instructed to, “bring your own tears.” The event was reported on by Marisa Crawford on March 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and the article was again featured in Hyperallergic.

Much of Mendieta’s works were left un-cataloged, and her family, in partnership with the Galerie Lelong in New York, have spent years organizing Mendieta’s over two hundred pieces. Since her death, there have been multiple solo retrospectives, including ones organized by the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea in Spain, the Hirshorn Museum in Washington D.C., the Hayward Gallery in London, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Des Moines art Center in Iowa, the Miami Art Museum and the De La Cruz Collection, also in Miami.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (Munich, Berlin, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2008), 19.

## Chapter Two: Ecofeminist History

The terms *écologie féminisme* and *écoféminisme* both emerged for the first time in the writings of French feminist theorist François d'Eaubonne in the 1970's. In her works *Le féminine ou la mort* (*Feminism or Death*) and *Ecologie feminism: revolution ou mutation?* (*Ecology-Feminism: Revolution or Mutation?*), d'Eaubonne, "...looks at cultural and social concerns dealing with the relationship that the oppression of women has with the degradation of nature."<sup>37</sup> The origins of ecofeminist theory as we know it today can be traced back to these texts.

François d'Eaubonne was born in Paris in 1920 and attended the University of Toulouse and the School of Fine Arts of Toulouse. The product of a highly political time in Europe, d'Eaubonne was at various times during her early life a member of the Communist Party, – coincidentally the same political party that resulted in Mendieta's displacement to the United States – a part of the French Resistance, a co-founder of the *Mouvement de liberation des femmes* (Women's Liberation Movement), a participant in the founding of the *Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire* (Revolutionary Homosexual Front), and the 1978 founder of the *mouvement Ecologie et Féminisme* (Ecology and Feminism movement.) As it happened, the ecology and Feminism movement would have a much greater impact in Australia and the United States than it would in her native France.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Aneel Salman and Nuzhat Iqbal, "Ecofeminist Movements – from the North to the South," *The Pakistan Development Review* (2007): 853.

<sup>38</sup> Danielle Roth-Johnson, "Back to the Future: François d'Eaubonne, Ecofeminism and Ecological Crisis," *The International Journal of Literary Humanities* (2013): 52-53.

D'Eaubonne's first work, *Feminism or Death*, written in 1974, discusses how, "society's disregard for women is comparable to its contempt for the environment." Four years later, d'Eaubonne published *Ecology-Feminism* in which, "her overall goal [was] to describe and analyze how impacts on the biosphere, the question of energy choices, genetic engineering and the control of women's reproductive capacity [were] all concrete manifestations of the intersections of ecology and feminism. She also [speculated] about how control over all of these was wrestled from women with the advent of patriarchy, and [elaborated] upon the regressive changes that ensued from such a shift." In short, her works dissected the impacts of patriarchy on cultural perceptions of women, people of color, the poor, and nature and promoted the implementation of anticonsumerist, socialist, ecologically-driven social consciences.<sup>39</sup>

In essence, d'Eaubonne's works serve as a call to women to act in efforts to save the environment. Her works express that, because the unique experiences of women and marginalized groups equip members with a better understanding of oppression, these marginalized people possess the ability to more easily relate these types of oppression to the destruction and denigration of nature under the manipulation of patriarchal constructs. D'Eaubonne's work has been critiqued as polemical with overt essentialist assertions; these critiques and others are discussed further in later chapters.

As aforementioned, ecofeminism failed to gain momentum in its early stages in France, but work was being done in the U.S. to progress an ecofeminist awakening. American theorist and writer Rosemary Radford Ruether published *New Woman/New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and*

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<sup>39</sup> Danielle Roth-Johnson, "Back to the Future: François d'Eaubonne, Ecofeminism and Ecological Crisis," *The International Journal of Literary Humanities* (2013): 53.

*Human Liberation*, “one of the initiating texts for [American] ecofeminism” in 1975.<sup>40</sup>

“Plumbing classical philosophy, Christian theology, Freudian psychology, and classism, racism, and sexism in the age of science and industry, Ruether argues that Western culture has come to identify women with nature, while nature has become merely a field for the exercise of male power and control. She concludes her study with a call for revolution: ‘How do we change the self-concept of a society from the drives toward possession, conquest, and accumulation to the values of reciprocity and acceptance of mutual limitation?’”<sup>41</sup> Ruether’s utopian ideology set the stage for many other theorists, philosophers, and writers, including Susan Griffin, Elizabeth Dodson Gray, Carolyn Merchant, and Andrée Collard, to broach the concept as well, finding solace in the idea of a future where the concept of hierarchy and “other” is eliminated and reverence for the earth and all people prevails. In Ruether’s 1997 publication, *Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women*, she writes, “Ecofeminism is founded on the basic intuition that there is a fundamental connection in Western culture, and in patriarchal cultures generally, between the domination of women and the domination of nature.”<sup>42</sup>

It was not until 1980 that it began to build as a substantially active movement in the United States. The movement was primarily a result of, “the nonviolent direct action movement against nuclear weapons,”<sup>43</sup> and also coincided with the popularization of other ecologically driven movements in the U.S. The movement was formerly initiated with the “Women and Life

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<sup>40</sup> Vera Norwood, *Made From This Earth: American Women and Nature* (University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 262.

<sup>41</sup> Vera Norwood, *Made From This Earth*, 262.

<sup>42</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Ecofeminism: First and Third World Women,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (1997): 34.

<sup>43</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 262.

on Earth: Ecofeminism in the Eighties” conference, held in Amherst, Massachusetts in March of 1980. This conference was developed by Ynestra King of the Institute of Social Ecology in Vermont, Anna Gyorgy of the antinuclear Clamshell Alliance, Grace Paley, and other activists and academics. The conference marked the first time ecofeminists had convened in an organized, academic setting in the United States.<sup>44</sup> “In both ecofeminist theory and ecofeminist political activism ecology and peace have been inextricably linked since the first explicitly ecofeminist political gathering, the Conference on Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the 80s, at which a thousand women met for three days to explore these relationships (April 21-23, 1980.”<sup>45</sup> A year later, Susan Adler, with the help of other activists, held the West Coast ecofeminist conference of 1981.

These conferences facilitated the emergence of various groups and actions that adhered to the ideologies of ecofeminism. One such action, the Women’s Pentagon Actions (WPA) of 1980, was influenced by the theoretical writings of Susan Griffin, Ynestra King, Charlene Spretnak, and Starhawk. Similarly, in 1983, the Seneca Falls Women’s Peace Encampment and the Puget Sound Womens Peace Camp emerged.<sup>46</sup> Many other antimilitarist, environmental groups began to identify as ecofeminist as well during that time, and the label became more and more common. During that same year, Ingrid Newkirk founded People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), a well-known organization that has maintained agency since its creation and remains influential today. The group’s early activism was marked by its opposition of the

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<sup>44</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 262.

<sup>45</sup> Ynestra King, “Engendering a Peaceful Planet: Ecology, Economy, and Ecofeminism in Contemporary Context,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* (1995): 15.

<sup>46</sup> Noel Sturgeon, “Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action,” *Routledge* (1997): 61.

practice of cosmetic animal testing and protesting of fur trapping and ranching practices.<sup>47</sup>

Activism of the WPA, PETA, and others involved acts of civil disobedience, demonstration, and direct action, and aimed to make, "...connections between militarism, sexism, racism, classism, and environmental destruction."<sup>48</sup> The immergence of this kind of activism, both grassroots and wider-spread, marks the movement's departure from a strictly academic arena and its emergence in boots-on-the-ground activism. When considering the feminist wave construction, the academic, theoretical, and uncompromisingly active approach developed as a result of these conferences, combined with a focus on intersectionality and inclusivity promoted by early theoretical texts, signifies the ecofeminist movement's role as connector or bridge between second and third wave feminism.

Scholarship and activism intertwined even further as the movement experienced marked escalation with the "Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory" conference which was organized by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein. The conference took place in March 1987 at the University of Southern California. "This well-attended conference marked the beginning of a rapid flowering of ecofeminist art, political action, and theory... The conference also marks the point where the word ecofeminist began to be widely used to describe a politics which attempted to combine feminism, environmentalism, antiracism, animal rights, anti-imperialism, antimilitarism, and non-traditional spiritualities."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Sue Heinemann, *Timelines of American Women's History*, (Perigee Trade, 1996), 164.

<sup>48</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 262.

<sup>49</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism*, 263.



This second major conference came to signify a kind of “settling” of ecofeminism within the sociological discourses, and it saw the adoption of many characteristics that we now prescribe to ecofeminism, both as a movement and a theoretical discourse, not the least of which being the term “ecofeminism” itself. What had begun in France as a relatively unknown term used in theoretical feminist texts was now being used both by theorists and activists in the U.S. to describe a fast-growing movement.

In 1985, the WomanEarth Feminist Peace Institute was created by founding ecofeminists Ynestra King and Starhawk, “with the intention to establish an ecofeminist educational center, at first in the form of a summer institute, that would produce theory, conduct research, teach classes, publish an ecofeminist newsletter or journal, and support political activities of various kinds...at the heart of WomanEarth was the idea that it would confront racism head-on – that antiracism would be central to its definition...”<sup>50</sup> The institute was founded on the goal of having an equal number of women of color and white women involved in the organization at all times, especially within its decision-making bodies. This organization likely would have greatly endeared Mendieta, considering the great deal of activism that she did in an effort to progress the careers of artists of color and increase visibility of people of color in general. In 1986, WomenEarth successfully organized a conference based on this principle of racial parity at Hampshire College. The group dissipated shortly after for reasons that are unclear, though it was likely due to a combination of lack of effective leadership and differences in opinion among

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<sup>50</sup> Noel Sturgeon, “Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action,” *Routledge* (1997): 78.

members. Despite the relatively short period of activity, the group's influence greatly impacted the movement by setting a precedent that promoted intersectionality and inclusion.<sup>51</sup>

The collapse of WomenEarth correlated with first signs of a waning of the ecofeminist movement in the U.S.. It had never developed into a popular movement in its own right, especially when compared to mainstream feminist movements. Ecofeminism was primarily a movement of educated women, which resulted in both a great deal of theoretical and scholarly development, but also an inaccessibility to the general public, preventing the movement from ever really entering the mainstream. Ecofeminism has since become a more globally dispersed movement, and less of a distinctly compartmentalized movement, its goals and ideologies instead seeping into the agendas of other movements. The movement's ideology is now realized by such activists as Vandana Shiva and members of the Asian Indian Chipko movement, which resisted industrial logging and deforestation, and by members of the goddess spirituality movement such as Carol Christ and Starhawk. It should be noted that there are those who do not believe that we are able at this time to name ecofeminism as a movement with any kind of certainty.

“...there are also those who contend that Ecofeminism has not yet developed into a social movement. Sale (1987) argues that it is ‘too early to speak of Ecofeminism as a “movement”’ (p. 302) and that it is best thought of less as a movement than a philosophy – or perhaps not movement at all, in the traditional sense, nor even some kind of ‘tendency’ within a movement, but rather a way of re-regarding the world that can be brought to bear on a whole variety of movements and tendencies.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Noel Sturgeon, “Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action,” *Routledge* (1997): 78-79.

<sup>52</sup> Aneel Salman and Nuzhat Iqbal, “Ecofeminist Movements – from the North to the South,” *The Pakistan Development Review* (2007): 854.

Even Ynestra King in her 1995 publication admits that, “ecofeminism as a living, breathing historical movement is very much in its infancy”<sup>53</sup> a sentiment that is still shared by many theorists and activist alike.

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<sup>53</sup> Ynestra King, “Engendering a Peaceful Planet: Ecology, Economy, and Ecofeminism in Contemporary Context,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* (1995): 15.

### Chapter Three: Santería

*Santería*, also referred to as *regal de ocha*-Ifá (meaning, the rule of the Orisha, or deities, in the Ifá region), Orisha spirituality or simply Orisha, played a huge role both in the development of Cuban heritage and in the artwork of Ana Mendieta. "...*Santería* is pervasive in Mendieta's art. Her belief in a life force or 'universal energy' that reverberates through all organisms, and in the ritual invocation of *ashé* or divine power, magically animated her works with anger, pleasure, hunger, and longing."<sup>54</sup> Through her artwork, Mendieta displayed a reverence for both the symbolism associated with the religion and the faith's history of resilience despite oppression.

To understand Mendieta's draw to the imagery and symbolism associated with the faith tradition, one must also understand the history of the faith itself. Orisha spirituality originates in Africa, and was the spiritual tradition of the indigenous Yoruba people of the southwestern region of what is contemporarily known as Nigeria. These were a diverse people that, while they shared some social and cultural similarities, did not view themselves as a unified society or group until the British began colonization in the nineteenth century. War and conflict among the peoples of this area became more frequent at this time, and prisoners of war were most often sold as slaves to Europeans and brought to the Americas and the Caribbean. During the mid nineteenth century, when the demand for slaves in America was at its peak, wars among southwestern Africans were waged for the sole purpose of participation in the lucrative slave

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<sup>54</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 18.

trade.<sup>55</sup> It was largely this internal warring between Africans that was responsible for such massive amounts of humans being torn from their homes and sold into slavery. It was by this means that Orisha worship began to spread in the mid nineteenth century, when Yoruba people were enslaved by colonizing Europeans and brought to the West, namely to the Americas and the Caribbean.<sup>56</sup>

The Haitian Revolution in 1794 marked an increase in demand for slaves in Cuba. Before the Haitian Revolution, Cuba had been used primarily as a provisional stop for European ships sailing back across the Atlantic. The revolution, however, resulted in the move of the center of the Caribbean sugar industry from Haiti to Cuba. Since sugar was in very high international demand at the time, more laborers were needed. An estimated 500,000 to 700,000 Africans had been displaced to Cuba before slavery was abolished there in 1886. “The influx of Yoruba-speaking captives available in the African slave markets and greater demand for laborers in Cuba brought the greatest influx of Yoruba peoples to Cuba in its history.”<sup>57</sup>

At the height of the slave trade, Cuba had already been long colonized by the Spanish, a process that had begun in 1492 with the voyage of Christopher Columbus. Subsequently, the majority of Cubans practiced Catholicism, the official religion of Spain. The tradition of slavery on the island, however, predates Columbus by more than two centuries. In the 1260’s a comprehensive legal doctrine called *Las Siete Partidas* del Rey Don Alfonso el Sabio was instituted. Under these codes, slaves were given the rights to marry, own property, and purchase

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<sup>55</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Praeger, 2007), 16.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería*, 16.

<sup>57</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería*, 17.

their freedom.<sup>58</sup> The doctrine hugely impacted the development of post-Columbus slavery in Cuba, and on Cuban culture in general. The Siente Partidas' lasting influence is evidenced in the, "supposedly milder slave system in Latin America and more liberal attitudes on the part of the Iberian colonial powers."<sup>59</sup> There was also a level of acceptance of any system that promoted higher-spirits, as it was believed that this would increase productivity and efficiency.

"On paper, the slave legislation that was applied in the Spanish Empire did appear relatively humanitarian... scholars often produce the Código Negro Español (Spanish Slave Code) of 1789 as evidence of the mildness of the Spanish slave system. It required master to 'educate' their slaves, though this was limited to instruction in the Catholic religion... in fact, the entire code was not implemented in Cuba, as the Creole slave owners feared that its publication would lead to a slave rebellion... African cultural and religious forms were also perpetuated because, although the Spanish Crown demanded that Africans be baptized, often at the port of embarkation, economic factors overruled concern about the assimilation of the slave population... Spanish pragmatism, rather than suppressing manifestations of African culture in the colonies, permitted practices which did not affect the exploitation of slave labor. Slaves were made to sing and dance in the belief that this would raise their spirits, boost productivity, and discourage rebellion... For reasons of social control, institutions that tended to preserve rather than eliminate African cultural traditions were actively encouraged."<sup>60</sup>

Because the right to purchase freedom remained in effect even into the nineteenth century and was a very commonly implemented right, by the time slavery was abolished in Cuba over a third of the black population were members of a free demographic known as *gente de color*.<sup>61</sup> These freed former slaves are mainly responsible for developing *Santería* as it came to exist in Cuba, as a fusion between African spirituality and Spanish-influenced Catholicism.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Praeger, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 8.

<sup>60</sup> Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity*, 8-11.

<sup>61</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería*, 20.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería*, 20.

Though it may seem that Orisha spirituality was destined for extinction, due to the seeming incompatibility between it and conservative Catholicism, it was able to persist. It was not at all uncommon for enslaved or newly freed Africans seeking spiritual community to form religious congregations of their own called *cabildos de nación*, or simply *cabildos*. These institutions electing leaders, helped newly arriving Africans assimilate to their environment, aided the sick, ensured proper burials for the deceased, raised funds to buy individuals' freedom, and promoting an overall sense of community.<sup>63</sup> Each *cabildos* was representative of a distinct African ethnic group, called *nación*, and they acted as quasi-political bodies as well as social clubs. The colonial Cuban authorities supported, or were at least tolerant of, the *cabildos* because, while they promoted a sense of community and spiritual solidarity, they also divided the African population and prevented revolt. "The Cuban authorities hoped to provide a safety valve against discontent based on members' social conditions while inserting a wedge between groups based on their different customs."<sup>64</sup> By the mid eighteenth century and the peak of the slave trade, many of these institutions had become very expansive. It was through these institutions and because of the prevailing sense of solidarity among people and spiritual tradition that the African religions were able to endure, at least to an extent.

After the abolition of slavery in Cuba in 1886 and since Cuba gained independence from the Spanish empire in 1898, practitioners endured some persecution which resulted mainly from lingering racism and marginalization of black people, and also from misconceptions regarding certain rituals and practices involved with Orisha worship. From 1902 until 1958, many *cabildos*

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<sup>63</sup> Christine Ayorinde, *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 11-12.

<sup>64</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Praeger, 2007), 20.

were disbanded by authorities. It was during this time that practitioners of African-based traditions began to form new communities of worship and turn to independent, *casas de Ocha*, or houses of the Orisha. It was in these spiritual houses that people had the ability to practice privately, or with close family and trusted friends. Many spiritual leaders of old *cabildos* helped to establish the new houses of worship, and modern day *Santería* is practiced under the same guidelines that were laid down during this time. The religion did, however, continue to be associated with a negative stigma, until the 1960s and the Castro regime. “Afro-Cuban religions, including *Santería*, Palo Monte, and Abakuá, experiences alternating periods of repression and tolerance throughout the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Castro government gave Afro-Cuban religions public recognition as ‘the people’s folklore,’ and at the beginning of the twenty-first century they continue to regard these religions as an important part of their cultural heritage and as a source of tourist income.”<sup>65</sup>

One of the primary elements of the *Santería* tradition is a force referred to as *ashé*, which, “can be understood as the energy of the universe.”<sup>66</sup> The deities in which *ashé* forces have manifested are called Orisha, a pantheon of which represent natural forces and act as patrons and protectors. Orishas are deities that originated in the African traditions and that have also been influenced by Catholic saints. In fact, many originally African deities came to be directly associated with a Catholic religious figure, effectually combining elements of both faiths to create an entirely new faith. The Orisha also, “represent a level of power that is approachable

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<sup>65</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Praeger, 2007), 21-22.

<sup>66</sup> Clark, *Santería*, 32.



through ritual action and so provide one very important focus for the Yoruba religion.”<sup>67</sup>

Because the Orisha, and therefore the *ashé*, are accessible mainly through ritual practice, rituals become extremely spiritually significant to practitioners of *Santería*. Ritual is seen as a way to make contact with the spiritual aspects of the natural world, allowing for a reestablishment of balance in people’s lives. The *Santería* ritual is representative of the way in which one become spiritually nourished or fulfilled, effectually acting as an equivalent to the traditionally Catholic homily. Knowledge and teaching regarding the Orisha and the rituals that invoke them is passed down through oral tradition, and types of ritual differ based on geography and ancestry.

Mendieta recalls many aspects of *Santería* ritual in her artwork, focusing especially on elements such as fire, blood, water and earth. Mendieta performed her pieces without an audience, often finding a secluded spot, filmed or photographed the performance of her piece, and then later exhibiting the film or photograph in a gallery setting. The introverted nature of her works eludes more to intrapersonal, intuitive practices or rituals, whereas the need for an audience is indicative of performance. This ritualistic quality of the works, as well as Mendieta’s focus on the relationship between her body and the earth, directly connect her works with *Santería* ritual. Mendieta uses the *Santería* ritual in place of a more traditional postmodern performances. This is made evident in both her *Feathers on a Woman* [Figure 14] and her *Blood and Feathers* [Figure 15] performances, in which she invokes the image of the white rooster. The white rooster is a symbolically significant animal and symbol in *Santería* practice, and it is ritualistically sacrificed in an act of exchanging energy from the physical realm to the spiritual

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<sup>67</sup> Mary Ann Clark, *Santería: Correcting the Myths and Uncovering the Realities of a Growing Religion* (Westport, Connecticut, and London: Praeger, 2007), 34.

realm. Mendieta performs this ritual more literally in *Death of a Chicken* [Figure 12], though in *Feathers on a Woman* she transforms the rooster into a human person, and in *Blood and Feathers*, she becomes the rooster herself. In this way, Mendieta analyzes every aspect of the ritual, from the standpoint of performing it, to the manifestation of the symbol, to actually being the sacrificial offering. It should also be noted that Mendieta was particularly interested in this symbolism when she was still involved with Breder at the University of Iowa, before she was able to travel back to Cuba. The ritual acts as connector to Cuba for Mendieta.

Another *Santería* element involved with Mendieta's works is the blood element which is related to *Santería* through sacrifice. "The act of sacrifice is integral to *Santería* initiation rites, and Mendieta communicates the pain of exile and displacement in these ritual performances. Like the uprooted Santeros whose rituals reconstitute ties to the community, Mendieta, in a shared bodily experience of ritual, places herself in a community that helps her feel whole."<sup>68</sup> In her work *Death of a Chicken* [Figure 12] Mendieta recreates the sacrifice of a chicken, holding a decapitated and still flailing chicken by its feet and allowing the blood to cover her naked body in a kind of direct transfer of energy and *ashé* from the animal to herself. In order to cleanse a person's life of imbalance and chaos, one is sometimes asked to present sacrificial blood to the Orisha. In both of Mendieta's *Body Tracks* performances – both the 1974 [Figure 17] performance and the 1982 [Figure 16] performance – Mendieta drags her blood-coated arms down a surface, leaving tracks in blood. In these performances, Mendieta seems to genuflect as she runs her hands and arms down the surfaces, sinking to her knees, as if surrendering to the cleansing power of the blood and *ashé*. *Santería* practices utilize the sacrificing of objects, food,

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<sup>68</sup> Kaira M. Cabañas, "Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Woman's Art Journal* 44 (1999):13.

and sometimes animals in order to incorporate a feeling of mutual exchange into the rituals. Sacrifice, especially of blood, is seen as a means through which one can regain balance and bring their lives back to the path of their destiny.

Simply living in Cuba would have exposed Mendieta to *Santería* practices; the traditions and imagery associated with *Santería* saturate Cuban culture. Mendieta also would have gained exposure to *Santería* through the servants and staff of the Mendieta's Cuban household. The reasons why Mendieta would have felt a connection with the spirituality and the people who practice it become very clear when one analyzes Mendieta's own life and history of displacement and oppression, and how she may have perceived her own experiences as corresponding with that of historical practitioners of *Santería*. Mendieta's interest in primitivism, which is evidenced through her work, has to do with her deeply rooted opposition to colonialism, both as it occurred throughout history and as it is manifesting in contemporary society. Taken from Mendieta's own notes:

“The colonization of the Americas in which the natural inhabitants where [sic] submitted to a violent system of inhumane exploitation which cost the lives of thousands of them including the extinction of whole cultures and people (i.e.: the Antilles) are [sic] evidence of this type of colonization. No longer will open brutal violence be implemented. Colonization and neo-colonization will be disguised by modern tecnics [sic], to paraphrase the leading ideologists from the great colonizing Potencies: ‘to elevate the underdeveloped people to a higher standard of living.’ In the past as well as in our own century in order to facilitate the expropriation of the natural richness of a territory and/or use the people as labor, the process which has been and still is very much implemented is DECULTURATION. Its purpose being to uproot the culture of the people to be exploited.”<sup>69</sup>

Mendieta had a clear affinity for those that had been colonized in the Caribbean, and she identified with their experiences of displacement, exploitation, marginalization, and cultural

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<sup>69</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 40.

separation. “In them, she saw herself, transplanted, exploited by political systems beyond her control, subjugated to the laws of others, robbed of her land, and separated from her culture. In Mendieta’s view of the ‘primitive,’ she always to a certain degree sees herself.”<sup>70</sup> She felt real bereavement over the loss of culture and freedom, and she perceived similar oppression occurring in her own lifetime. Mendieta would continue to choose the way of the oppressed over the way of the oppressor. She created art that appreciated cultural elements of a people long oppressed and exploited, because she did not believe that devaluing a culture was right or just in any context, not even for the sake of so-called progress. She would reject institutional religion in favor of a spirituality that focuses on closeness with nature and values individual intuition over generalized teachings and doctrines.

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<sup>70</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where Is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 40.

## Chapter Four: Ecofeminist Theory

Ecofeminism has experienced a great deal of criticism, from the time of its conception until its decline and beyond. In this chapter, the theoretical elements of ecofeminism and the criticism that it faced will be discussed.

At the very essence of ecofeminist theory and practice lies the belief that the oppression of women and the abuse of the natural environment are connected through patriarchal, Capitalist systems, both political and cultural.

“Ecological feminism is a feminism which attempts to bring about a world and a world view that are not based on socioeconomic and conceptual structures of domination (Warren and Cheney, 1991). According to Karen J. Warren (1989), oppressive conceptual frameworks share at least the following characteristics: 1.) Value hierarchies – (up-down) thinking; ranking diversity. 2.) Value dualisms – a set of paired disjuncts in which one disjunct is valued more than the other. Examples: male/female where males are always valued more; nature/culture where human culture is always valued more. 3.) A logic of domination – where differences justify oppression. While there are many varieties of ecofeminism, “all ecofeminists agree that the wrongful inner-connected domains of women and nature exist and must be eliminated” (Warren, 1991,1).”<sup>71</sup>

This social phenomenon is seen as resulting from a Western sensibility that values consumerism and industry and devalues nature and many pre-colonial characteristics that could be considered "uncivilized." There are also cultural hegemonic elements at play that also contribute to the oppression of marginalized groups that do not comply with traits possessed by the dominant culture (i.e., white, male, upper-middle class, heterosexual, cisgender, not disabled.) But how and why did this belief take hold in the Western world? To answer that question, one must look to the seat of Western culture, ancient Greece.

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<sup>71</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 204.

## Dualism

The concept of dualism can be traced back to ancient philosophies laid down by the Greeks, who, "...developed philosophy and politics in largely in a dualistic framework."<sup>72</sup> Some theorists have argued that the subconscious influences of dualist thinking has remained consistent throughout history, while other argue that dualist societal characteristics have manifested through sporadic, modern resurgences in the popularity of the philosophy. Ultimately, "...both ancient and modern forms of dualism reflect and justify exploitative social relations, especially, though not exclusively, the exploitation of women."<sup>73</sup> At its most fundamental definition, dualism is a philosophical concept that involves breaking most things or principles into two distinct and contrary sets of dichotomies. "The term 'dualism' has a variety of uses in the history of thought. In general, the idea is that, for some particular domain, there are two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles."<sup>74</sup>

In respect to this theory, the irony of the English pronunciations for the words "dual" and "duel" should not be lost on the reader, especially when considering most dualistic dichotomies are in direct opposition with each other. The Western dualistic model should also not be confused with the Chinese philosophies regarding the concept of yin and yang. This is because the dual forces of Chinese philosophy, while presented as fundamentally opposite forces by nature, are also inextricably linked by their creation of a whole, and ultimately represents the

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<sup>72</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, "Third-Wave Feminism and the need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality," *NWSA Journal* (2004): 155.

<sup>73</sup> Alison M. Jaggar, Susan Bordo, *Gender/body/knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, (Rutgers University Press, 1989): 7.

<sup>74</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dualism/>>.

complementary nature of forces that may at first appear contrary. Western dualism, on the other hand, treats each dichotomous aspect with polarity and contradiction.

Dualistic philosophy can be traced back to the founders of the two major, albeit divisive, philosophical schools of antiquity, Plato and Aristotle. The classical forms of dualism focused on what is known as the mind/body problem, which was seen as the quintessentially oppositional dichotomy. "...what is the relationship between mind and body? Or alternatively: what is the relationship between mental properties and physical properties?...Dualist say that the mental and the physical are both real and neither can be assimilated to the other... In sum, we can say that there is a mind-body problem because both consciousness and thought, broadly construed, seem very different from anything physical and there is no convincing consensus on how to build a satisfactorily unified picture of creatures possessed of both a mind and a body.”<sup>75</sup>

Platonic and Aristotelian beliefs differ when it comes to the mind/body paradigm. Plato tended toward the idea that the mind was superior and that all things consisted of reflections or manifestations of intellect-ruled Forms. Platonic philosophy discussed the transient and temporary nature of aspects of the physical world, including the body, and exalted the role of the intellectual Forces that both facilitate thought, creation, and spirituality while also building the physical world, which is derived from Forces. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed that the nature of things belonged in the physical world, making thought and intellect attributions to the nature of physically-bound forms.

“In dualism, ‘mind’ is contrasted with ‘body’, but at different times, different aspects of the mind have been the centre of attention... The classical emphasis [on the mind] originates in Plato's *Phaedo*. Plato believed that the true substances are not

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<sup>75</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dualism/>>.

physical bodies, which are ephemeral, but the eternal Forms of which bodies are imperfect copies. These Forms not only make the world possible, they also make it intelligible, because they perform the role of universals, or what Frege called ‘concepts’ ... Aristotle did not believe in Platonic Forms, existing independently of their instances. Aristotelian forms (the capital ‘F’ has disappeared with their standing as autonomous entities) are the natures and properties of things and exist embodied in those things. This enabled Aristotle to explain the union of body and soul by saying that the soul is the form of the body. This means that a particular person's soul is no more than his nature as a human being... Aristotle believed that the intellect, though part of the soul, differs from other faculties in not having a bodily organ. His argument for this constitutes a more tightly argued case than Plato's for the immateriality of thought and, hence, for a kind of dualism.”<sup>76</sup>

These philosophies were studied and popularized by theologian Thomas Aquinas, and subsequently the theories worked to shape Christianity and medieval society, and have as a result become deeply ingrained in Western culture to the point of being indistinguishable. As is evidenced by the previously quoted text, the Aristotelian materialist approach is seen as being the, “more tightly argued,”<sup>77</sup> superior school of thought, a sentiment shared even by theological philosophers such as Aquinas, whose appropriation of Aristotelian teachings regarding form treats the soul and spiritual intellect as substance of humans until the time of death when soul is liberated from body. “...though the form (and, hence, the intellect with which it is identical) are the substance of the human person, they are not the person itself... The soul, though an immaterial substance, is the person only when united with its body. Without the body, those aspects of its personal memory that depend on images (which are held to be corporeal) will be lost.”<sup>78</sup> I believe this partiality is also starkly evident in Western society as a whole, and can be

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<sup>76</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dualism/>>.

<sup>77</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism".

<sup>78</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/dualism/>>.



seen in many aspects of Western attitudes and perspectives, especially within the hard science and scientific research fields. For example, in the emphasis placed on logic and objectivity, in the use of the empiricist scientific method, and in positivist methodologies and epistemologies.

Considering the fact that these ancient philosophies and Western society have always been so mutually inclusive, it may be problematic for some to label Cartesian, or substance, dualism as it was outlined in René Descartes' *Meditations*, the first edition of which was published in 1641 in Latin, as a "resurgence" or "reinvention" of dualist philosophy, but it is seen as such by many none the less. This is primarily because. "Descartes' conception of the relation between mind and body was quite different from that held in the Aristotelian tradition.”<sup>79</sup>

Descartes' school of thought focused on two kind of substance: “matter, of which the essential property is that it is spatially extended; and mind, of which the essential property is that it thinks” a stance that displays Descartes' distinctly mechanist leanings in terms of the property of matter. At its core, the Cartesian belief centered on the role of thought as the essence of mind and the role of spatial extension, or mass, as the essence of the body. Descartes reconciles the fact that what was emerging at the time of the Enlightenment as mechanical sciences or “hard sciences” could not account for thought as a physical substance by attributing to it its own mental substance, distinguishing the two realms conclusively. According to the Cartesian model, each aspect survives independently from each other because the mind and the body are inherently different in every element of their makeup, and the philosophical principles of the model are best simplified by Descartes' enduring phrase, “Cogito, ergo sum (Latin: ‘I think, therefore I am’).”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Robinson, Howard, "Dualism"

<sup>80</sup> *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "mind-body dualism", accessed February 29, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/mind-body-dualism>.

## Domination

In ecofeminist theory, dualism and patriarchy go hand in hand in that dualism provided justification for inequality. The connection between dualist philosophy and ecofeminist theory occurs in the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is described within feminist discourses as, “the dominant organizing principle or the permeation throughout society of the ruling elite’s values, attitudes, beliefs, and morality. To the extent that people internalize this prevailing consciousness, it appears natural.”<sup>81</sup> The concept of hegemony is employed through patriarchy, or the system through which the dominant culture, consisting of white, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-aged, able-bodied, upper-to-middle class, men, are elevated and the non-dominant culture, or anyone not exhibiting those specific characteristics, is marginalized. The importance of hegemony and dominant culture in as it relates to dualism is best described by Judith Lorber in her 1991 essay *The Social Construction of Gender*:

“As part of a stratification system, gender ranks men above women of the same race and class. Women and men could be different but equal. In practice, the process of creating difference depends to a great extent on differential evaluation. As Nancy Jay (1981) says: ‘that which is defined, separated out, isolated from all else is A and pure. Not-A is necessarily impure, random catchall, to which nothing is external except A and the principle of order that separates it from Not-A’ (45). From the individual’s point of view, whichever gender is A, the other is Not-A; gender boundaries tell the individual who is like him or her, and all the rest are unlike. From society’s point of view, however, one gender is usually the touchstone, the normal, the dominant, and the other is different, deviant, and subordinate. In Western society, ‘man’ is A, ‘woman’ is Not-A...The further dichotomization by race and class constructs the gradations of a heterogeneous society’s stratification scheme... The dominant categories are the hegemonic ideals, taken so for granted as the way things should be that white is not considered a race, middle class a class, or men a gender. The characteristics of these categories define the Other as that which lacks the valuable qualities the dominants exhibit.”

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<sup>81</sup> Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, (McGraw Hill, 2013): G-3

Through this example, that of the A and Not-A or the dominant and the “other,” the gender dichotomy becomes evident, and it is because of the permeation of ancient and Enlightenment philosophies that this extremity of thinking occurs. It originates with the desire to have one of two extremes, and for these extremes to remain as exclusive and independent as possible. Neither mind nor body could be reconciled by dualistic philosophers as having mutually related elements, resulting in polarity between the two concepts. It is from this polarity that a dominant culture and a non-dominant culture, an A and a non-A, are created. Hegemony, and subsequently the dominant culture as well as marginalized groups, exist as a result of dualism, which makes it necessary to think about concepts as being directly opposed to each other or essentially different from one another. In relation specifically to ecofeminism, “this tendency of traditional development schemes to elevate men while further marginalizing women depends on a familiar set of normative categories. These prioritize mind over body, reason over feeling and theory over practice...the most powerful tool for marginalization is the nature/culture distinction.”<sup>82</sup> A dualistic distinction is made not only between mind and body, but between man and woman (a distinction that completely ignores the presence other genders as well as the absence of gender), culture and nature, and modern and primitive. Because of Western philosophy’s preoccupation with distinction for the sake of simplicity, and the insistence of the presence of directly opposing dichotomies, these concepts are now viewed by Western society as being polar and oppositional in nature.

It is these dualistic principles and the resulting ways in which they have shaped Western society that impact ecofeminist theory and criticism. While there is no evidence suggesting that

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<sup>82</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 87.

Ana Mendieta herself would have been explicitly aware of the history of dualistic thought, the philosophy's enduring influence in shaping the very foundation of our Western society is all but inescapable and, as someone possessing a reverence and knowledge of pre-colonial, non-Western cultures and religions, these influences would have been, by comparison, very visible to Mendieta. One could assert that ecofeminism, and subsequently Mendieta's artwork, directly counter and thereby challenge philosophical principles relating to dualism. Under dualistic philosophies, there are two categories in any given domain relating to thing or principle (i.e., good/evil, black/white, positive/negative, etc.) The exclusivity of each dual set of principles or things inevitably results in psychological splitting, more commonly referred to as black-and-white or all-or-nothing thinking, and an extremity of marginalization of certain aspects within each individual dualist domain.

“Descartes's metaphysics achieved the hyperseparation of human mind from the ‘mechanism’ of nature, not only in the form of nonhuman animals but in that of the human body as well. Bodily nature simultaneously became thoroughly backgrounded, all dependency of the ‘master’ on it denied through Descartes's proclamation that mind or soul ‘can exist without it’ (*Meditations*, VI). Defining material nature relationally in terms of its lack of consciousness and agency opened the door to construing all things other than the human mind as homogeneously passive, inert matter ready to be stamped into the instruments for meeting the master's ends. Furthermore, as Plumwood notes (paraphrasing Boyle), the move to a mechanistic account of the natural world effectively ‘removes the basis for an ethical response to that world’ (Plumwood 1993, 118). Cartesian epistemology at the same time laid the groundwork for what many feminists and others have criticized in the version of scientific ‘objectivity’ still prevalent today: hyperseparation of knower from known and subject from object, leaving the free-floating ‘understanding’ ideally uncontaminated by bodily particulars of sensation or emotion (Plumwood 1993, 114-17). Descartes's scientific methodology, as is well known, made full use of these moves to cut nature off from us and strip it bare of agency; his position with respect to animal experimentation, for example, illustrates very well where the pattern of thinking leads.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ronnie Zoe Hawkins, “Ecofeminism and Nonhumans: Continuity, Difference, Dualism, and Domination,” *Hypatia* (1998): 162.

Here in lies the correlation between the domination of women and nature, in that they are both considered “other” in the Western dualist equation. “In nature/culture dualism, man was seen as representing culture, and needing to be unconstrained by and to have domination over natural processes, both of a human and nonhuman nature and of human embodiment.”<sup>84</sup> Femininity in the West has historically signified a more corporeal, bodily aspect, while thinking, logic, reason, and transcendent knowledge has been attributed to Western masculinity, due to Cartesian construction and the supremacy of the Enlightenment period. “Men were identified with disembodied characteristics such as order, freedom, light, and reason, which were seen as better than, and in opposition to, women’s allegedly more ‘natural’ and/or embodied characteristics such as disorder, physical necessity, darkness, and passion... the subtext is the association of women with nature, as women’s embodiment generally, given its reproductive capacity, is harder to deny than men’s.”<sup>85</sup>

Because Descartes made it impossible for dual aspects to reach mutuality, the acceptance of a superior aspect and an inferior aspect was inevitable, especially when considering other developments occurring at the time of the Enlightenment. Colonization of “primitive” peoples, a focus on objectivity, the emergence of the scientific method and “hard science”, less emphasis on humanitarianism and more focus on capitalism, industry, expansion, and the domination of nature and indigenous peoples for the sake of “progress”, all contributed to the development of superior culture versus inferior nature. It is what Karen Warren refers to as “logic of domination,” and conceptual framework; “...the existence of value hierarchical dualism alone

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<sup>84</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, “Third-Wave Feminism and the need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality,” *NWSA Journal* (2004): 155.

<sup>85</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, “Third-Wave Feminism and the need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality,” *NWSA Journal* (2004): 155.

does not create an oppressive conceptual framework. The characteristic must be combined with a second distinguishing feature, a logic of domination – an argumentation structure which supplies the moral justification that sanctions subordination.”<sup>86</sup> Warren’s logic of domination is the moral or logical justification of the seemingly unmerited desire to dominate marginalized human and nonhuman groups. The immense and far-reaching influence of these philosophies has undoubtedly shaped, not only science and spirituality in the Western world, but almost every aspect of culture and social construction. Perceptions regarding language, acceptable behavior, gender roles, and social "norms" have all been influenced by standards set in antiquity that have continued to mold Western culture throughout the ages.<sup>87</sup>

## **Essentialism**

It was because of this logic of domination, justified through dualist conceptual framework, that ecofeminist activists and theorists concluded that, “the preservation of the Earth will require a profound shift in consciousness, a recovery of a more ancient and traditional view that reveres the profound connection of all beings in the web of life and a rethinking of the relation of both humanity and divinity in nature.”<sup>88</sup> These ideas about a new spirituality that acknowledged the interconnections of domination and strived to shift the focus to a renewal of peace and equality was pioneered by ecofeminists such as Starhawk, Charlene Spertnak, Carol Christ, and many others, and came to be known as women’s spirituality or Goddess spirituality, as the notion of the goddess came to be, “...invoked by many spiritual ecofeminist to express the

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<sup>86</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 196.

<sup>87</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, “Third-Wave Feminism and the need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality,” *NWSA Journal* (2004): 156.

<sup>88</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, “Third-Wave Feminism,” 172.

veneration both nonhuman nature and the human both merit.”<sup>89</sup> Ecofeminists such as Karen Warren advocated feminist spirituality as a means through which women could be empowered to reconnect to their non-patriarchal roots and bond with other women attempting to find a balance with nature.

“Warren argued in 1993 that ecofeminist spiritualities provide a place to heal from the wounds patriarchy has inflicted on women and nature. In 2000, she argues further that ecofeminist spiritualities are tool for surviving and overcoming patriarchy. They have a potential ‘to intervene in and creatively change patriarchal (and other) systems of oppression’ (Warren 2000, 195). Spiritualities involve power, in particular the power to move from ‘unhealthy, life-denying systems and relationships to healthy, life-affirming’ (200) ones, and they provide a basis for nonviolent action. Thus Warren's support of ecofeminist spiritualities is strategic in its suggestion of recuperative and alternative space. Yet it leaves Warren open to two complaints: such spiritualities are essentialist; and they are irrational.”<sup>90</sup>

Feminist spirituality has been one of the most highly criticized areas of ecofeminism, and essentialism is often cited as being prevalent within the practice. “Some academic feminists discredited ecofeminism on the grounds of essentialism – that in their essence women are closer to nature than men...ecofeminism was tainted by this charge.”<sup>91</sup> Some critics felt that ecofeminists believed that the corporeal, bodily aspect attributed to women made them closer to the Earth which was considered inferior by dualistic conceptual frameworks. It also was perceived by some that ecofeminists felt that women were more connected to nature because of things such as menstruation, which has historically been closely associated with the moon and tides, and child-birth, which recalls nurturing language relating to Mother Earth. While most ecofeminist theorists did not agree with these beliefs, as the activist movement became more

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<sup>89</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, “Third-Wave,” 172.

<sup>90</sup> Trish Glazebrook, “Karen warren’s Ecofeminism,” *Ethics and the Environment* (2002): 19.

<sup>91</sup> Gwyn Kirk and Margo Okazawa-Rey, *Women’s Lives: Multicultural Perspectives*, (McGraw Hill, 2013): 104.

wide-spread, the more frequently ecofeminist ideologies were misrepresented by groups, individuals, or media. Ecofeminist spirituality was seen as being highly essentialist because it seemingly gave women an elevated natural status due to divinely spiritual attributions and characteristics.

Essentialism also contributes the gendered use of the concept of “woman” within ecofeminist ideology. Many, especially those involved with third wave feminism, believed the fires of social constructions of gender should not be stoked by feminist teachings or practices, and the ecofeminist emphasis on the dualistic nature of genders as polar extremes contradicted feminist attitudes regarding gender as a non-binary spectrum, or even as a completely constructed fallacy all together. In this respect, essentialism became associated with ecofeminism when it was believed that trans\*, gender queer, non-binary, gender fluid, and agender people would be automatically excluded from ecofeminist circles due to the movement’s essentialist interpretation of “woman” as only meaning extreme opposite of “man,” which would not be true for individuals operating outside of the gender binary.<sup>92</sup>

The lack of diverse standpoints is also a major essentialist criticism within ecofeminism, especially as it relates to race and class. The ecofeminists movement within the United States consisted primarily of white, middle-class women, and was based on the theories of white middle- class French women (those of Simone de Beauvoir and François d’Eaubonne.) While the modern feminist movement has made stronger efforts toward intersectionality and diversity, it remains a predominantly white, middle-class movement. Vandana Shiva championed the Asian Indian Chipko movement, which, “...first occurred in 1973 in Chamoli district, Uttar

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<sup>92</sup> Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997),429.



Pradesh, and [has] since been replicated in other parts of India such as Karnataka where the Appiko Movement has taken on the fight to save the forests of the Western Ghats region. Shiva argues that Chipko is a response by people, especially women, within Garhwal District to the invasion of commercial forestry.”<sup>93</sup> The WomenEarth initiative was, “a multicultural network of women who wanted to link spirituality and politics, with a focus on health, ecology, and peace... also adopted the principle of racial parity, meaning there should always be equal numbers of women of color and white women.”<sup>94</sup> WomenEarth attempted to bridge the gap between gender and race and class through equal representation, but the group was dispersed in only a couple of years due to decentralization and lack of organization. Shiva’s activism and the work of WomenEarth and groups like it promote an ecofeminism that is global and intersectional, but ultimately they did little to promote better representation of race and class variety in American ecofeminism. “In addition, crucial connections between militarism and the oppression of women were emphasized while racism and class oppression were downplayed or ignored. Women of color critiqued white feminist peace groups as racist, and this issue ultimately divided [the movement].”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Melissa Leach and Cathy Green, “Gender and Environmental History: From Representation of Women and nature to Gender Analysis of Ecology and Politics,” *Environment and History* (1997): 348.

<sup>94</sup> Gwyn Kirk, “Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice: Bridge across Gender, Race, and Class,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* (1997): 11.

<sup>95</sup> Gwyn Kirk, “Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice,” 11.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

The research thus far has discussed various aspects of Mendieta's life and art, analyzing Mendieta's early life, career, and death, as well as ecofeminist history and theory. The question of to what extent Ana Mendieta's work was impacted and shaped by the movement remains complex and dimensional.

Mendieta worked to avoid labeling herself in anyway. She refused to call herself an Earth artist despite her use of the land as canvas for many of her works and despite adhering to many similar stylistic and contextual elements as Earth artists contemporary to Mendieta, such as Robert Smithson and Richard Long. She refused to categorize her work as performative despite the fact that her time-based, ephemeral works were acted and captured on Super 8 mm film and 35 mm still photography, and focused on the movements or traces of her own body and its interaction with nature. Mendieta refused to truly call herself a feminist, despite being a member for four years at the all-women A.I.R. Gallery, contributing to feminist publications such as *Ms.* and *Heresies* [Figure 11], and created work that spoke out against violence against women [Figure 7,8,9,10].<sup>96</sup> The range of Mendieta's works, from serene to tumultuous, reflected her complex feelings regarding her even more complex identity.

Mendieta's resistance to these categories likely stemmed from her active opposition to colonialism, the Western political canon and art institution, and "white feminism".<sup>97</sup> This is evidenced in almost every aspect of her work; from the symbolism borrowed from a religion that was developed by a group of peoples resisting Western imperialism and enslavement, to her

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<sup>96</sup> Jane Blocker, "Ana Mendieta and the Politics of the Venus," *Cultural Studies* (1998):31-50.

<sup>97</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999), 62.

celebration of the archetypal “other” in every sense, to her references to primitive and pre-colonial imagery, Mendieta’s views inundate her work and influence her life. Her use of universal motifs and *Santería* imagery alludes to her concept of an art that reflects a prehistoric cultural purity that was extinguished by colonization and the introduction of Western slavery, prejudice, and exploitation. For these reasons, Mendieta refused to conform to popular categories regarding her art or socio-political stances, in a refusal to take part in a cultural tradition that was founded on oppression.

Instead of adhering to political categories, Mendieta focused on advancing the artistic careers of women of color and of fellow Cuban expatriates. Her A.I.R. Gallery curated show, “Dialectics of Isolation: An Exhibition of Third World Women Artists of the United States” exhibited women of color representing non-Western, “Third World” countries. Mendieta stood in solidarity with these women and promoted their messages regarding racism, poverty, and the perseverance of culture and identity despite hardship.<sup>98</sup> She worked as a member of the *Círculo de Cubana* (Cuban Cultural Circle) in an effort to help promote Cuban artists and culture and support Cuban creativity and expression [Figure 13]. Mendieta’s racial and ethnic identity greatly impacted both her life and work, and the displacement she felt from having left Cuba, as well as her experiences with prejudice and marginalization in the U.S. are characteristically reflected in her work. Mendieta experienced feelings of isolation and attitudes of intolerance because of her race upon immigrating to the U.S. The mainstream feminist discourse of the 1970s, or what many have deemed the Second Wave of feminism, saw a lack of representation of

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<sup>98</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999), 63.

women of color, poor women, and immigrant women, despite the fact that people of color were making headway at the time in terms of visibility and acceptance thanks to efforts by the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. For this reason, Mendieta would likely have felt isolated from mainstream feminist movements, which catered predominantly to middle-class, white women, and for this reason, despite all her efforts to promote an agenda involving women's equality and liberation, Mendieta would not come to call herself a feminist.

Though Mendieta's personal identity was not reliant on a feminist label, her artwork and the imagery used was nevertheless impacted by the political and social environment in which she lived and worked; art is, after all, a reflection of the culture which produces it. Although Mendieta's goal was not to allow limiting qualifiers to pigeon-hole her politics or her art, she was not immune to the influence of the socio-political atmosphere of New York, one of the most progressive cities in the U.S., in the 1970s, one of the most progressive eras in U.S. history. Mendieta would have been exposed to politicized messages encouraging involvement with popular movements involving women's liberation and environmental justice. Though it is not my belief that Mendieta necessarily encountered overtly ecofeminist content during her life time – there is no documentation of Mendieta ever having gone to an ecofeminist convention, or corresponding with a leader of the movement – it is absolutely possible that Mendieta's views regarding the importance of nature and her connection to it as a human being is the less of a product of explicit exposure to the discourse, and more a view developed as a result of indirect exposure through the general atmosphere and popular political attitudes of the time.<sup>99</sup> For this reason, and because ecofeminist discourse was an important aspect of socio-political culture at

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<sup>99</sup> Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 1999), 62.

the time of the creation of the works, Mendieta's works may be viewed using an ecofeminist lens.

Mendieta's work reinforces ecofeminist principles while simultaneously challenging essentialism and dualism. While mainstream feminism focused primarily on hegemonic social structures and gaining equality for women within these structures, ecofeminism focused on deconstructing these very institutions, believing that they were inherently unequal and therefore could not be assimilated or adapted to, an idea that parallels Mendieta's personal beliefs regarding the Western, postcolonial establishment and her rejection of it. The ecofeminist discourse highlights ways in which women and nature have been similarly oppressed throughout history as a result of dualist attitudes adopted by Western culture that place certain aspects in an elevated state in direct comparison with other, dual, aspects. A primary justification for patriarchal culture is the dualistic principle of the "masculine/feminine" or "man/woman", dichotomy, where by "man" represents a logical, industrious, cultural, intellectually supreme aspect while "woman" represents a sensitive, natural, base, intuitively feeling aspect. Essentialism also hinges on dualistic thinking, as it claims that women are inherently closer to the nature than men, because according to the dualistic model, femininity and nature are both associated with each other as being in direct contrast to the cultural masculine aspect. Ecofeminism faced harsh criticism for supposedly promoting essentialism, which clearly advances the dualistic patriarchal model of marginalization and constrictive stereotypes regarding women and their roles in society.<sup>100</sup> Essentialism is also a point of criticism within the

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<sup>100</sup> Colleen Mack-Canty, "Third-Wave Feminism and the need to Reweave the Nature/Culture Duality," *NWSA Journal* (2004): 172

ecofeminist discourse for simplifying a concept as complex and diverse as gender to a binary construction, excluding transgender, gender-nonconforming or gender fluid individuals from the movement. It was due to this criticism that ecofeminism began to become less popular in the 1990s onward.

Mendieta's work, however, challenges these dichotomies, both through content and context. Her use of "primitive" or pre-colonial imagery acts as a direct reference to a time when current social and political classifiers were nonexistent and inane, as is evidenced in both the similarities between Mendieta's figural shapes and the prehistoric woman figurines being created by Paleolithic peoples of northern Europe, and also by the indigenous Caribbean Arawak people, specifically the Taíno. The Taíno had used the Jaruco caves, the same caves Mendieta used to create her Rupestrian Sculptures [Figure 20], which recalled direct elements from Taíno imagery, including circular and spiral motifs seen in much of Mendieta's later work [Figure 22, 23].<sup>101</sup> These circular and spiral motifs were particularly powerful for Mendieta because round or curvaceous forms are typically seen as being both feminine and organic, again reinforcing the dualistic connection between nature and the feminine. In the future, I hope to commit more scholarship to both the impact of Taíno culture on Mendieta's artwork, as well as to Mendieta's interpretation of Jungian archetypes and the concept of the collective subconscious.

Prehistoric, or Paleolithic, female figurines, which Western archeologists inappropriately termed "Venuses" [Figures 24, 25] also impact Mendieta's imagery and work. Because of the attention paid to depicting their pronounced reproductive anatomy and because of the lack of attention paid to other details such as faces, hands and feet, these Venuses are thought by many

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<sup>101</sup> Veerle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 154-156.

art historians as quintessentially representative of fertility deities, or as charms for abundance and fecundity. Many have gone so far as to assert that these images acted as early forms of pornography, created for the enjoyment of men. This view, however, is firmly rooted in Western archetypes, and it is not realistic to project modern perceptions and beliefs onto a culture that likely operated under a completely different social construction than ones that we know today. Mendieta used similarly shaped motifs [Figures 20,21,22,23] including spirals, circles, organic curves, triangles, and almond or yoni shapes, especially later in her career when she veered away from representations of her own shape and began using more nonspecific, archetypal figural symbols and motifs to represent the female form. Like the prehistoric Venuses, Mendieta's figures abandon anatomical accuracy for the sake of simplification and reduction of the image to its most important elements. For this reason, Mendieta foregoes depicting faces, hands, feet, etc., and instead focuses on the bodies of the figures, accentuating breasts, waists, hips, and pubic areas, much in the same way as the Paleolithic Venuses. In the very latest point in her career, Mendieta will forego even more features and reduce her figures to more and more basic geometric shapes. In the modern context, it becomes clear through Mendieta's imagery that these figures are meant to symbolize an unapologetic and unabashed power.

By depicting nude, accentuated representations of figural feminine forms, Mendieta takes a taboo image, gives it agency and allows it to take up space and become a symbol of autonomy, refusing to be hidden or silenced. She was challenging the postcolonial perceptions of representations of the concept of femaleness and its interaction with, and in, nature by reclaiming an image originally created by and for the male gaze, and making the woman the subject, object, and creator of her own image. This is why Mendieta, for the bulk of her career, used her own

five foot form to outline or trace the figures in her artwork. She is taking ownership both the depiction of women and the depiction of people of color, and reclaiming the image that has, for so long, been manipulated and exploited by the dominant culture. She does this, not by depicting women who have achieved equality by successfully navigating the institutions that have for so long oppressed them, but by facilitating an ownership of her marginalized image, and celebrating the characteristics of it that make it an outsider; in other words, she is curating her own image in her own context under her own terms, and embracing her differences instead of validating oppressive systems by adapting to them. Mendieta is challenging socially constructed ideas that reinforce the belief that women must be the same as men in order to be equal to them, as opposed to different from men and still equal to them. The reliance on nature in Mendieta's work also supports this attitude in other aspects of the dualist model as well; that nature can be inherently different from culture, but not lesser than, or that the body could be inherently different from the mind, but not less than. Ultimately, what characterizes Mendieta's work as ecofeminist is her representation and advocacy for the archetypal "other" in every sense, whether it be the other gender, the other race, the other religion, the other means of survival.

Ultimately, Mendieta was an independent, brave child of Cuba, who would not allow social constructs or political trends to influence her passions or her activism. She refused to conform to the labels of a society built on colonialism, slavery, and oppression, and instead followed her own social and political insight to achieve her own personal goals, aspirations and desires. Even in death, she inspired people to get involved, think critically, and act in defense of their beliefs. Ana Mendieta was a woman who refused live any other way but truly unfettered.



## Figures



Figure 1: *Grass on Woman*

1972 (Iowa), Lifetime color photograph



Figure 2: *Imagen de Yagul* (Image from Yagul)  
from *Silueta Series*, 1973 (Mexico), 35 mm color slide



Figure 3: *Untitled*

from *Siluetas Series*, 1976 (Basilica of Cuilapán de Guerrero, Mexico), 35 mm color slide





Figure 4: *Untitled*

From the *Siluetas* Series, 1980 (La Ventosa, Mexico), 35 mm color slide



Figure 5: *Untitled*

from Silueta Series, 1976 (La Ventosa, Mexico), 35 mm color slide



Figure 6: *Ánima, silueta de cohetes* (Soul, Silhouette of Fireworks)

1976 (Oaxaca, Mexico), 35 mm color slide





Figure 7: *Rape Scene*

1973 (Iowa), 35mm color slide



Figure 8: *Rape Scene*

1973 (Iowa), 35mm color slide





Figure 9: *Rape Scene*

1973 (Iowa), 35mm color slide

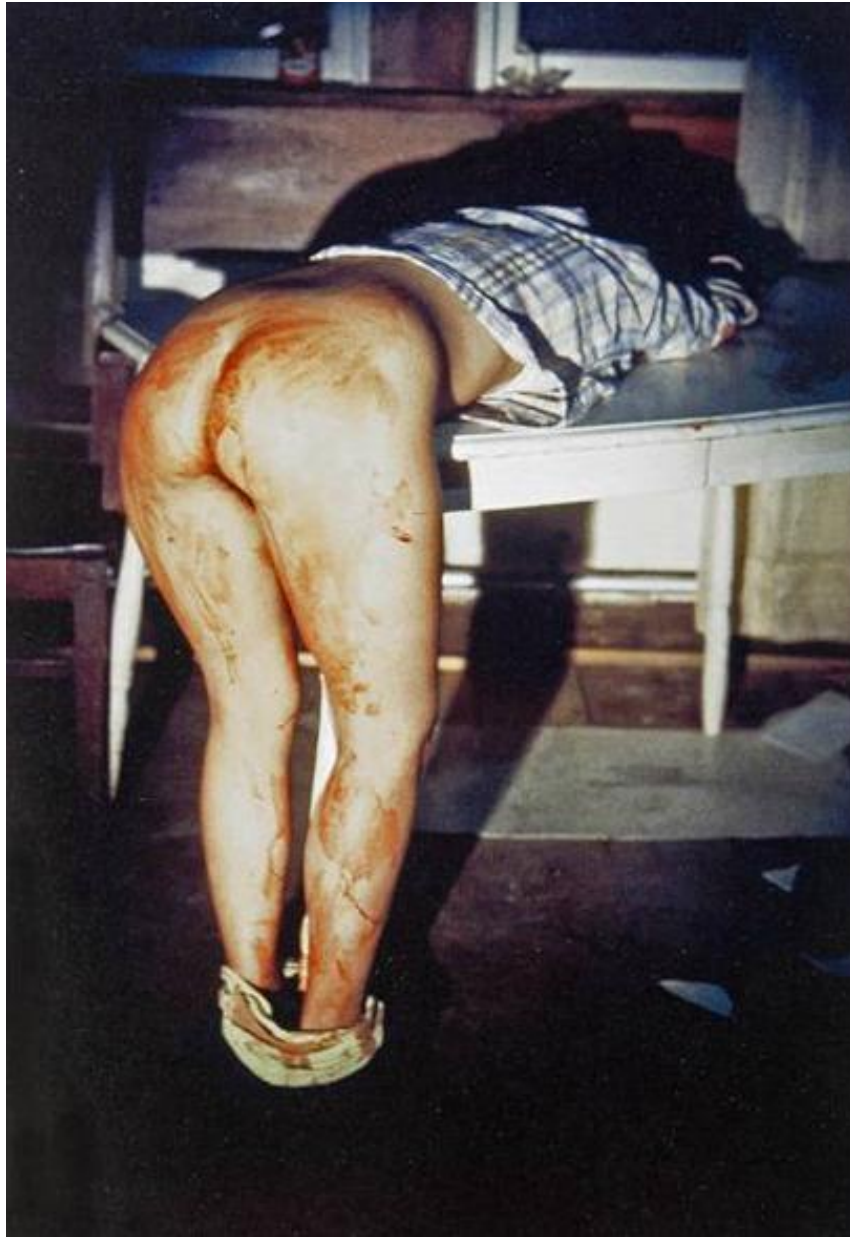


Figure 10: *Rape Scene*

1973 (Iowa), 35mm color slide

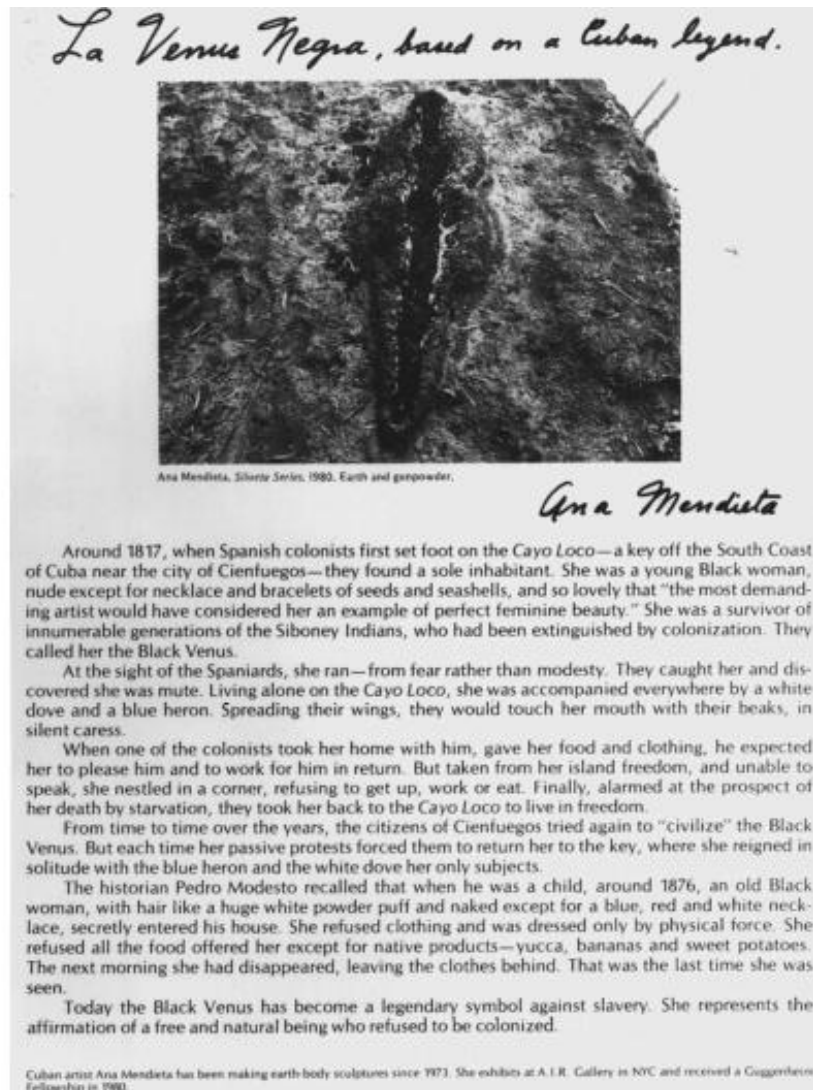


Figure 11: *La Venus Negra* based on a Cuban legend

1981, *Heresies*, 4 (1): 22

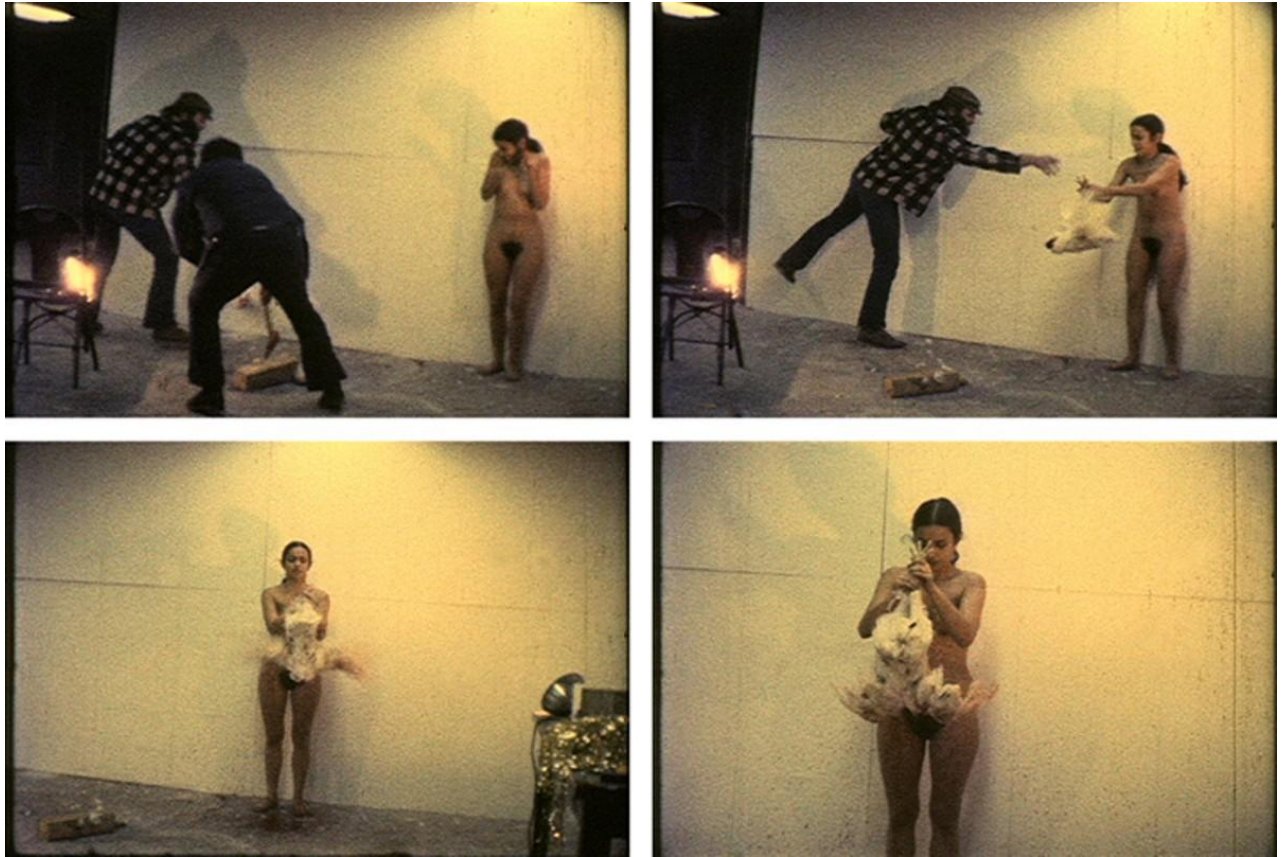


Figure 12: *Death of a Chicken*

assisted by Hans Breder, 1972 (Intermedia studio, University of Iowa), 35 mm color slides



Figure 13: Group photograph of Mendieta with Cuban artists and Lucy Lippard  
Havana Cuba, 1981





Figure 14: *Feathers on Woman*

1972 (Iowa), 35 mm color slide



Figure 15: *Blood and Feathers*

1974 (Old Man's Creek, Sharon Center, Iowa), Lifetime color photography from 35 mm color slides



Figure 16: *Rastros Corporales* (Body Tracks)  
one of three works, 1982, blood and tempera on paper



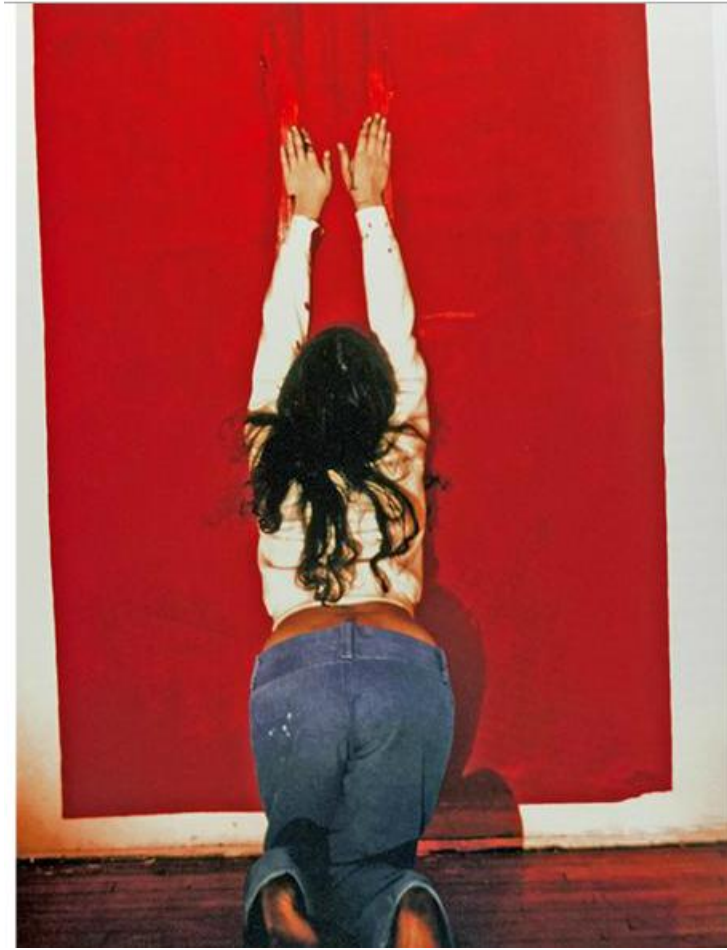


Figure 17: *Body Tracks*

1974 (Intermedia Studio, University of Iowa), Lifetime color photograph from 35 mm color slide



Figure 18: *Untitled* (Self Portrait with Blood)

1973, 35 mm color slide



Figure 19: *Guanaroca* (First Woman)

from Esculturas Rupestres (Rupestrian Sculptures), 1981(Jaruco Park, Cuba), color photograph



Figure 20: *Untitled* (Totem Groves series)

1984-85, wood and gunpowder





Figure 21: *Untitled* (Serie Mujer de Arena) (Sandwoman Series)

1983, sand and binder on wood



Figure 22: *La concha de Venus* (Shell of Venus)

1982, Lifetime black-and-white photograph



Figure 23: *Venus of Willendorf*

c. 28,000 – 25,000 BCE, discovered in 1908 near Willendorf by Josef Szombathy, oolitic limestone



Figure 24: *Venus of Laussel*

c. 25,000 BCE, discovered in 1911 by Jean-Gaston Lalanne in south-western France, limestone



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