

Cultural Materialism and the Art of Latinas in New York: Creating a Revolutionary Visual Arts Discourse on Ethnicity, Women's Rights, Exile and the Latino/a Diaspora

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to discuss the aesthetic visual discourse of hybridity developed by contemporary socially-engaged Latina artists of the New York diaspora. The objective is to highlight the common discursive elements deployed by these artists with the purpose of addressing the social and political issues that affect them as women of color in the United States. Based on the fundamentals of Cultural Materialism, the artists integrate Third World feminism and a consciousness of hybridity. This theoretical approach has served as a basis for the development of the “bilingual” discourse that has come to characterize the NY Latina artists’ distinct aesthetic.

For Latin America and the Caribbean, the arts have historically provided a formidable venue for addressing social concerns and a creative way for artists to interpret them. The symbiotic bond created between art and politics has become a cultural force and tradition in the history of struggle within the constituent countries of these regions, and would later provide the basis for the visual discourse manifested in the works by the socially-committed Latin American and Caribbean women artists residing in the United States. Since the 1960s, the struggle for gender, cultural and ethnic recognition in U.S.

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society became crucial on both the social and political fronts. U.S. Latina visual artists, who came of age in the mid-1980s, are among the representatives of the subaltern groups within the arts, who have continued to be at the forefront of these struggles and have merged socio-political issues with their subaltern diasporic experiences to create a unique discourse of hybridity.

To illustrate this point, we discuss the work produced by five contemporary socially-engaged Latina artists of the New York diaspora who hail from different Latin American and Caribbean national cultures. The discussion is based on personal interviews conducted by the author and the analysis of the works produced by these artists.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, U.S. Latina artists, discourse of hybridity, third space of enunciation, visual bilingualism, diaspora, faultlines, Latin American art theory, criteria of plausibility, subaltern.

RESUMEN

Este artículo trata la temática del discurso estético visual de hibridez que ha evolucionado dentro de la labor de las artistas latinas de compromiso social que integran la diáspora neoyorquina. La meta es destacar los elementos discursivos que estas artistas despliegan en común para abordar temas de actualidad, tanto sociales como políticos, que les conciernen como mujeres subalternas que residen en los Estados Unidos. Al integrar los conceptos feministas de tercer mundo con una conciencia de hibridez, las artistas reflejan en sus obras un enfoque basado en los postulados del Materialismo Cultural, que sirve como fundamento para el discurso “bilingüe” que ahora concreta la estética particular de las artistas latinas neoyorquinas.

En América Latina y en el Caribe, el arte siempre ha ofrecido una plataforma formidable para tratar inquietudes sociales y ha sido el medio creativo en el que los artistas plásticos pueden plasmarlas. El vínculo simbiótico entre el arte y la política ha sido tradición y fuerza cultural en el trayecto histórico de las luchas sociales en los países constituyentes de estas regiones. Este vínculo constituye el tronco del que más adelante brota el discurso visual que se manifestará en la obra de las artistas latinoamericanas y caribeñas de conciencia social que residen en los Estados Unidos. A partir de los años sesenta, las luchas de la sociedad estadounidense por la validación género-sexual, cultural, y étnica fueron trascendentales, tanto en los frentes sociales como en los políticos. Las artistas plásticas latina-estadounidenses que alcanzan madurez estética a mediados de los años ochenta representan los grupos subalternos del campo artístico que han seguido

en la vanguardia de estas luchas y que han casado las inquietudes socio-políticas con sus experiencias como integrantes de una diáspora para crear un discurso estético de hibridez singular.

Para ilustrar este punto, este artículo examina la obra producida por cinco artistas de compromiso social integrantes de la diáspora neoyorquina, procedentes de distintos países latinoamericanos y del Caribe. Las conclusiones propuestas en este trabajo se basaron en las entrevistas personales que la autora sostuvo con las artistas escogidas y en el análisis de sus trabajos plásticos.

Palabras clave: Materialismo Cultural, discurso de hibridez, tercer espacio de enunciación, bilingüismo visual, diáspora, imperfección, teoría del arte latinoamericano, criterio de verosimilitud, subalterno.

1. THE EVOLUTION OF A DISCOURSE OF HIBRIDITY AND THE MAKINGS OF A BILINGUAL VISUAL CULTURE

The tendency to advocate for a visual art that is both aesthetic and didactic is one that has been manifested throughout much of Latin America's and the Caribbean's visual and literary history. The art theory developed within the constituent countries of these regions proposes that, due to their history of colonialism and struggles for autonomy and self-definition, the arts were erected upon a foundation of political consciousness, based mostly on the rudiments of Marxism and dependency theory (Mosquera 11). The underpinnings of this political consciousness consequently espoused an art for the masses. When Latin American / Caribbean artists migrated to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, they brought over this aesthetic tendency, which they melded with the ethnic reaffirmation and anti-war movements going on at the time in the country. These factors germinated the visual discourses that the newer generations of Latina/o artists developed after the civil rights era; and from which the contemporary Latina artist in particular benefited as they sought to revolutionize the U.S. political arts.

Throughout the latter politically tumultuous era in the United States, most socially concerned Latino/a visual artists focused primarily on manifesting cultural reaffirmation. With the advent of the political conservatism of the 1980s, prompted by then president Ronald Reagan, Latina artists realized that the diasporic issues they needed to address had to go beyond cultural reaffirmation. The artists felt they should

reconstruct existent ideological scripts on class, ethnicity, gender and cultural identity as well, because the notions they wanted to put forth could no longer be based solely on the customary binary thinking of the empowered and the colonizers.

Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha theorizes that this restructuring of scripts is feasible by way of a consciousness of otherness that develops within a subaltern individual's internal space. He identified the latter as, a "third space of enunciation," where the formulation of notions go beyond white / black, male / female, us / them concepts, and geared toward the construction of a discourse that can "disarticulate the voice of authority" (2005: 25). This "third" space gives the cultural creator within a diaspora the ability to understand concepts from both sides of the cultural divide, so that it becomes a site of "resistance and negotiation." The artist who is part of a diaspora then, has the power to effectively address colonialism, sexism, heterosexism, or any cultural discourse of contestation.

Armed with this third enunciatory space of discursive resistance, socially conscious and/or politically engaged U.S. Latina artists took it upon themselves to revolutionize the visual arts in the United States; to produce an art discourse that had the power to attempt to destroy all the aforementioned prevailing old myths. As socially engaged women artists of color, many contemporary Latina artists are determined to look for ways to address and change the power structures that repress the voices of the "others" through negative images, stereotypes, and cultural appropriation and "commodification" (Fusco 1995: 68-71). They want to construct a discourse that presents images of themselves within different contexts, precisely because the hierarchies of gender, age, class and race are structured by the dominant order. They are therefore not incidental, neutral, or derived from the individual psyche, but from the social relationships that define our beings.

The different visual genres and the media teach us to assess our plausibility within the criteria of the colonizer, or to see ourselves through the dominant order's form of consciousness. Consequently, politically conscious artists of color realized that their art could serve as a vehicle to correct these myths or faultlines. With a restructured discourse the artists are able to present new plausible scenarios upon which different cultural models can be built, and through which they can construct desired identities (Sinfield 2004: 290), an approach in keeping with the theory of Cultural Materialism as espoused by the cultural theorist Raymond Williams.

Raymond Williams argued that Marxism's greatest flaw was that, although it sought to abolish class and economic inequality engendered by rampant capitalism, its lack of attention towards society's spiritual and social needs, or 'irrational' (non-empirical)

human tendencies with which it fulfills its psychological needs, hindered true social justice (103). The remedy, he proposed, is a cultural materialist approach, in other words, an integration of the historical materialist aspect of Marxism with the human spiritual and emotional evolution. Succinctly stated, a more just and equitable society seeks economic parity, but also acknowledges individual accomplishments and cultural developments to attain social parity. It follows that an efficient discursive revolutionary approach is accomplished via the integration of Marxist and feminist precepts, along with principles on ethnic justice. Subsequently, those writers and artists who are socially committed are perhaps the best individuals indicated to achieve this integration of the material with the spiritual in the most effective manner, by way of the creative arts.

Due to the limited understanding of cultural differences, dominant ideological scripts often affect subaltern cultures, either by co-opting or commodifying the elements of the subaltern group to the extent that the culture is distorted, or is absorbed by the dominant culture. Once the tenets of cultural materialism are applied to the analysis of the discursive constructs within the Latina visual arts, the faultlines can be corrected in a way that spectators outside of a diaspora can understand the concerns of those within it. The different criteria of plausibility presented by the artists employ a strategy that clarifies and rectifies faultlines, and reveals a “resistance through a colonialist context [that] is rarely direct, overt, or literal; rather it articulates itself through semantic reversals” (Fusco, 1995: 35). The artists are then able to keep cultural absorption through appropriation at bay, and keep the manner in which the cultural forms are addressed by dominant discourses, in check, while simultaneously informing the masses.

The new generation of Latina artists in the United States, reminiscent of the previous generation of Latino/a artists, integrated the precepts of a Latin American art theory seeking social transformation, and developed tactical, as opposed to stylistic or thematic, similarities. The tactic is based on the deconstruction and reconstruction of the existing prevalent discourses. It evolved from a confrontational, accusatory discourse to a dialogical or mediatory aesthetic that changes the colonialist context. This tactical approach, regardless of differences in the artists’ style and techniques, is founded upon a common denominator — the hybrid consciousness formed within said “third space of enunciation,” where the distinct forms of the artists’ politics of identity are constructed and revealed (Bhabha 2005: 25). We understand this restructured discourse to be a sort of *bilingual* visual language, in the sense that it translates diasporic realities so that viewers both inside and outside of the diaspora can understand these.

The following Latina visual artists: Elia Alba, Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, Jessica Lagunas, Esperanza Mayobre, and Yasmín Hernández, of Dominican, Colombian,

Guatemalan, Venezuelan, and Puerto Rican heritages respectively, were among those interviewed by the author for this study. There were three main points addressed in the interviews. These were posed as open-ended questions to which the interviewees could elaborate in an informal conversational manner. Follow-up questions were particular to each interviewee. They were asked to discuss their feelings regarding their relationship with the dominant order in the U.S. as women, as artists, and as immigrants; their position on the prevailing role and / or condition of Latinas and other immigrant women within the United States and on the global stage. Lastly, they were asked to discuss their current work, specifically what constituted their main social and / or political concerns as manifested in their works. The interviews were conducted at the artists' studios for two to three hours each. Upon discussing the works viewed, the author found that the artists all employed a common tactical approach upon creating their artworks. These artists stand out as prime examples of how an aesthetic discourse of hybridity can be revolutionary, while functioning as a dialogical vehicle, to expose their sociopolitical concerns specifically towards issues of gender identity, women's rights, and exile.

2. ELIA ALBA

The Dominican Elia Alba promotes the idea that identities are not innate but constructed. In her patchwork constructions, Alba explained that she cut and meshed photographic images of individuals of different colors and races at random, to the point that the subjects become unidentifiable, neither based upon a single definition nor ascribed to one single identifier. Through these visual distortions, Alba subverts prevalent discourses on gender, ethnic, and racial identity, and challenges and / or destroys traditional biases and dominant myths, defying all notions that we, as viewers and social participants, have regarding what we believe gender and race to be. Alba makes us visualize the argument of "fictive" identities that operate through exclusion. The artist challenges the notion of "superficial or artificially imposed selves" that guarantee 'oneness' with others of a shared history and ancestry (Hall 4). Since the body is subjected to all these elements of discursive formations, it is logical for identities to be misrepresented, or misconstrued.

Alba contends that the search for a Latina/o unity, or any other subaltern unity for that matter, is mostly a result of a specific group's desire to acquire power within the dominant order. The aim of her work is to make the viewer ponder upon the veracity of identity construction and cultural / racial / gender identification. Her remedy for misrecognition of identities is to offer, through her constructions, other possible scenarios, other subjectivities to correct the existent racial, cultural or gender signifiers imposed by the dominant order, making way for desired identities.



Elia Alba, *If I Were A...*, 2003. Photographic images on fabric, Patchwork.
Reproduction in <http://eliaalba.com/>.



Elia Alba, *Masks and Girls (Christina, Edith, Liz)* 2007. Photographic images on rubber and vinyl constructions. Reproduction in <http://eliaalba.com/>.

3. NANCY FRIEDEMANN-SÁNCHEZ

Colombian-born Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez's goal is to break down stereotypes and traditional concepts. Her concern focuses on cultures steeped in machismo, which glorify men in juxtaposition to the lack of recognition for women's achievements and struggles. Friedemann-Sánchez's intention is to inform people of the contradictions between the prevalent discourses and the reality of women's roles. The realization that there is a rift between those in power and women, particularly women of subaltern groups in the United States, and around the world, drove the artist to explore the possibilities of creating an aesthetic discourse that can better address the imbalances of power.

Once established in the United States, Friedemann-Sánchez observed that even in this country that prides itself in being a paragon of equality for all, the glass ceiling for women still exists. She concluded that there is an endemic misogyny that is not exclusive of Colombia or Latin America, but is a phenomenon found globally at some level. Seeking for cultural nuances in meanings of hybridity and femininity as an immigrant woman and member of a NY diaspora, Friedemann-Sánchez immersed herself in the experimentation of art forms and mediums. She then solidified a stylistic approach with which she breaks standard patriarchal molds with ambiguous subtleties, to inscribe the feminine into the masculine — integrate the delicate with the strongest mediums available, manipulating clashing or contradictory materials, presenting mediums and techniques as visual paradoxes, or traditional concepts of femininity, such as, crochet or lace making vis-à-vis masculine elements of modern, minimalist art of the United States.

The artist also likes to create a bilingual aesthetic that addresses the loss of meaning in translation in regards to hybridity. The artist favors forming delicate lace-like patterns integrating words from different languages. In many of her pieces, for example, she merges and blurs words in Spanish and English taken from poetic texts, intertwines them into delicate patterns, gradually making the words indistinguishable. The idea behind these “translations” is to convey transformation, such as the experience of the immigrant evolving into a new life.

The biggest misconception in need of correction, according to the artist, is the myth of the fragile, unassertive feminine woman. Consequently, the artist construes a discourse that highlights gender role contradictions. The artist unravels and corrects contradictions by “creat[ing] a new mythos,” changing how women are perceived (Anzaldúa 1990: 379). Friedemann-Sánchez stated that to counter ideological constructions of femininity, her intent is to simultaneously present these constructions

as modes of resistance to patriarchal orders. She explained that she wants them to be reminiscent of the scenarios in which mythological heroines, such as Arachne and Penelope, won personal battles, and forged their fates through needlework. Thus, the viewer beholds the image of submission that these chores evoke, contradicted by the strength that they provided the heroines, leading them to successfully overcome the obstacles they faced.

The artist further expressed that she also employs this approach to construct parallels between the history of women vis-à-vis the patriarchal order, and the history of “power relations between North and South” - the colonization of Latin America - contrasting past with the present. The artist again employs the weaving technique and chooses a figure that captures both, the feminine and Latin America’s image in the history of the New World, Colombia’s national flower, *Pasiflora Mutis*, a delicate but sturdy plant, as witnessed by its continuous presence throughout the country’s history; the flower was present during the conquest, and continues to thrive in the present. The image of this flower becomes emblematic of the neo-colonial processes and the power relations between North and South, because flowers have always been used to symbolize femininity and fragility. The artist’s innovative strategy then is to capture the image of the flower with her weaving since “historically, lace and knitting have been tools in the resistance to patriarchal order, but paradoxically they represent conformity and submission to traditional standards.” Friedemann-Sanchez tells us that she manifests these polarities in order to “explore both visually and conceptually the efforts of many women in previous generations and invites viewers to experience the simultaneity of what could be deceptively perceived as decorative and old, but which is in fact a contemporary aesthetic tool of political critique.”



Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez, *The Skin Tight as a Straight Jacket, My Native Language*, 2005. Enamel on mylar. Private collection.

4. JESSICA LAGUNAS

Guatemalan artist Jessica Lagunas produces a dissident perspective by relating the historical conditions that have rendered an environment of violence against women and issues of gender inequality in her country and abroad, and brings them to the present. Lagunas' art production gives validity to the argument that institutions and formations organize and are organized by specific historical conditions and must be addressed (Williams 49).

Just as in most countries, women living in and outside of the Latina/o diaspora of New York are constantly obsessed with physical appearance. In the United States this obsession crosses all social classes and ethnic backgrounds - it transcends racial, cultural, and economic divides. The problem is that this standard of beauty may not always be

attainable since it is not compatible with all women, or all ethnicities. As a canon construed by a patriarchal system, the standard of beauty leaves no room for different cultural physical nuances and hues. This allows for intolerance toward other types of beauty, reinforces women's subservient role in a patriarchal society, as well as, women of color's compliant role in an Anglo society.

Lagunas tells us that she is of course, not blaming the United States exclusively for creating this obsession. Lagunas argues that "the system of beliefs" has been imposed upon U.S. women as effectively as it has upon women of any given society; they are just as exposed to a psychological violence that attacks self-esteem, that makes them fall prey to almost impossible societal demands of beauty, and furthermore alienates them from what goes on outside of their bodies, and in extension, outside of the United States.

The point of Lagunas' works is to permit the viewer to question this obsession without lecturing viewers or pointing the finger at any one culprit. It enlightens the audience by inviting it into the intimate world of women; into a world with which most women can relate. Through the images the artist can question how alienated we are; how acquiescent are we to this culture of psychological violence against women? In regards to immigrant women specifically, do they change their beauty standards as a way to adjust to the new country? Do they buy into the "rhetoric of supremacy," the language of Northern or Anglo superiority, to such a degree that they allow themselves to be pulled into the grips of Western consumption (Barthes in Sandoval 116-120)? Does this obsessive concern with physical beauty distance Latinas from their cultural past; literally eradicating their histories from their minds just as many claim that it alienates Anglo women from imminent native social issues?

Lagunas tells us that her object of her works is only to reflect and observe. She reflects upon these questions, thus she wants viewers to ponder as well. In the video installations, "The Better to See You..." (2003), for example, a title that evokes the children's story of "Little Red Riding Hood (in which the protagonist falls prey to deception), the artist uses her body as symbol and text. The videos are run on a constant loop. The images show the artist subjecting herself, parts of her body - eyes, lips, nails, pubis - to tedious, repetitive, at times painful, beautifying rituals for hours on end; she plucks her pubic hair, one by one, applies clumps of mascara, irritating her eyes, and applies gobs of lipstick until it smudges her teeth and tongue. The viewers, now voyeurs, gain insight as to the levels of tolerance toward passive violence that we either, impose upon women as a society, or that we as women inflict upon our own bodies.

With the piece "In Memoriam" (2007) Lagunas' creativity is spurred on by the historical events and conditions that surround her. She reveals that the work honors 572

women who were murdered in Guatemala in 2006. The hand crafted wooden jewelry box contains 572 bullet shells—one for each woman murdered. Although the theme of the work alludes to a specific incident that occurred in Guatemala, it transcends borders; it is a universal metaphor because violence against women occurs around the world. The powerful image lets the spectators grasp a sad and profound universal historical truth about how women have been, and continue to be, brutally victimized and exploited in every society.

Lagunas says that her work is not meant to “judge or offer answers, but to throw questions out in the open, to arouse doubts.” We saw in these works a denouncement of victimization; understanding that victimization can come in many forms. While most women will perhaps elude victimization through warfare and direct violence, many will not avoid the violence perpetrated by “commodification” and commercialization.



Jessica Lagunas, *The Better to See You...*, Video #1-Para Besarte Mejor (*The Better to Kiss You...*), 2003. Video Installation. Reproduction in <http://www.jessicalagunas.com/>.

Lagunas also invites us to ponder on the significance of language for the immigrant within the U.S. Latino/a diaspora, highlighting their “strategies of hybridization” in which discourse is negotiated, not with the goal of assimilating, but to find their own voice (Bhabha 2008: 58). The artist tries to capture this evolution of a hybrid visual language, via works such as “Ái Spik Ínglish” (2008). Here the artist presents dialogical transformations that emerge as a result of the cultural clash immigrants experience within the United States. The artist creates a visual “code switching,” parodying the *Spanglish*

created by U.S. Latinas/os immigrants, the linguistic construction used to accommodate English and Spanish into one discourse with the goal of facilitating communication between dominant and subordinate cultures.

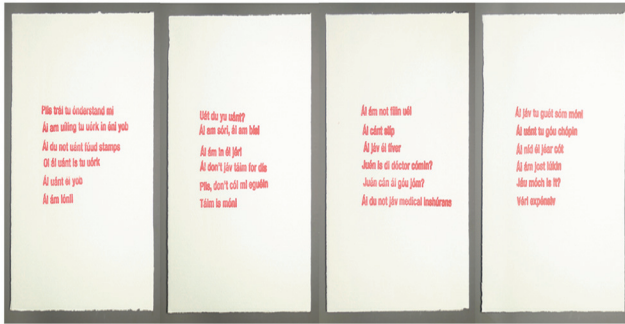
In this series of prints, the artist composed seven short fictional dialogues using phonetic English. Lagunas uses these imaginary dialogues, rubber-stamped on 8”x 6” white paper to illustrate the level of difficulty that recently arrived immigrants who lack adequate English communication skills to express themselves need to overcome. The linguistic play between English and Spanish, its reading of *Spanglish* pronunciation is an ingenious way of illustrating how immigrants hear and interpret the other language, demonstrating how the immigrant’s discursive negotiation strategy can on one hand empower him / her, or, on the other, convey the feeling of how communication or the lack thereof can create a sense of urgency, particularly when survival is on the line.

A final point that Lagunas elucidates is the fact that dominance of a language skill can facilitate the reproduction of hierarchical systems. The class issue is highlighted when the viewer realizes that non-native English speakers, are not required to learn proper English; at least not the one spoken by the dominant class. The immigrant worker needs only to learn key terms, sufficient enough to communicate with the “master,” to understand the most basic commands, so he or she can obtain, at the very least, the most menial employment.



Jessica Lagunas, *In Memoriam*, 2007. Wooden jewelry box, metal bullet shells.

Reproduction in <http://www.jessicalagunas.com/>.



Jessica Lagunas, *Ai Spik English*, 2008. Rubber stamped ink on paper.

Reproduction in <http://www.jessicalagunas.com/>.

5. ESPERANZA MAYOBRE

As linguistics major in college, Venezuelan-born Esperanza Mayobre’s aesthetic methodology is produced from a unique perspective, integrating the literal sense with the visual to exemplify social concerns. For Mayobre, language is of utmost importance in her work because “the challenge is being able to find a way to get the message across without losing meaning, since 90% of the meaning is always lost in translation.”

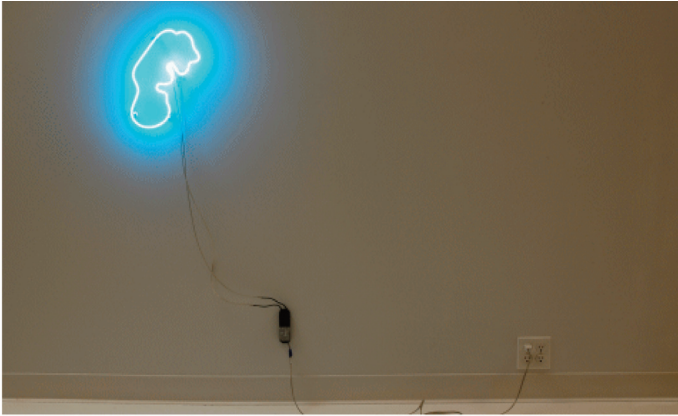
In our interview with the artist, she stated that her main concern is that the people within U.S. society do not seem to see, or do not wish to see the social ills that plague the country, or the rest of the world; the population in general is usually in the dark regarding international and domestic economical and political issues. She believes that this may be the main reason why many members of U.S. society are so hostile toward immigrants and reject any form of immigration reform. Mayobre believes that perhaps because of the fact that the United States has been a leading economic and military power in the world for so long; it has become too easy for many Anglo-Americans to ignore or to be oblivious to the existence of illness, poverty, racism, and sexism. It is then of prime importance for the artist to make sure that the American public sees what she understands are urgent social / political concerns through her art. In Mayobre’s opinion, the responsibility of artists and writers to use their creativity to connect with the public, and make their artistic endeavors understood. The artist wants us “to see what we do not wish to look at.”

Mayobre’s concurs with the point that Bhabha makes the “difference in the process of language that is crucial to the production of meaning” (2005: 36). This point

comes across when the artist explained that the obstacle she has encountered most frequently, is being able to deliver her messages creatively, without seeming condescending or preachy, but without losing their effectiveness in the translation. Her dilemma consisted of how to visually translate what she wants to convey. She feared that, since as is, art is viewed at times as elitist, being a foreigner, she could be seen especially unapproachable. How then could she connect with the viewing audience while conveying her message, and find the best way to reach these goals without falling into exclusivism and/or reductionism?

Mayobre found the answer to these challenges employing a language that is either universally understood, or could be translated in a way the messages are better conveyed. She found that manipulating the language she uses is the ideal vehicle to get social messages across without losing meaning or her public. Visually integrating a metaphoric language would then be the best way to connect with her viewers, identify better as a Latina, and a woman of color, and translate her feelings and beliefs. Mayobre acknowledges that elements used within the restructuring of a visual discourse are essential in “the dialogue between the ‘old world’ and the ‘new’...to highlight the culturally specific meanings in the power relations within the tradition of the metaphor” (Baddeley 2002: 590). As a linguist, managing language as allegory in art is especially significant to Mayobre because as a non-native English speaker, she needed to feel she could effectively communicate with U.S. society.

In the “S” Files exhibition in the Spring of 2008, Mayobre’s installation, “Y dio a luz” (literal translation: “And she gave light”), is an expression in Spanish referring to the moment in which a woman gives birth. In Latin American and the Caribbean vernacular when a woman gives birth she is said to be passing on the light of life. Mayobre created several neon light sculptures to “illuminate” the significance of light as a symbol of birth.



Esperanza Mayobre, *Y dio a luz... (She Gave Light...)*, 2005. Neon light, electric power cord. Reproduction in <http://www.facebook.com/people/Esperanza-Mayobre/687483437>.

In the piece depicted here, the light sculpture is a figure that is representative of a fetus in the womb. The power cord takes on the role of the umbilical cord, and it is attached to the transformer, which represents the placenta. The outlet is the life source. The pieces should be understood as literal translations so that the viewer can fully grasp the significance of the expression used to describe birth in the Spanish-speaking world. Mayobre takes a universal concept such as birthing and leads the viewer toward an understanding of a concept's significance in another culture. As a result, the artist tells us that she is inviting the public into a "discussion on connections and similarities between cultures without homogenizing or appropriating subjects" in a nuanced manner (Kaplan 141).

There is another possible message that can be extrapolated from this piece. The cold neon light is also reminiscent of a possible systematic social and cultural disintegration that occurs in the name of modernization and progress. Subaltern cultures oftentimes let their desire to be embraced by the dominant culture, push them into engaging in mimicry and assimilation, and permit the dominant order to appropriate their culture. In this context, Mayobre presents the "Other" as a depersonalized object — the neon child — whose identity is negated, alienated, or sacrificed, rather than negotiated and mediated. Subaltern peoples are sometimes pushed to reject traditional ways in the mistaken belief that assimilation implies modernity, technology, and progress. The lack of technology is associated with retrogression. Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval argues that because "[t]echnology asserts authority...We create 'white' forms of

consciousness in the colonizing class” (123-126). The fact that an act as natural as childbirth is depicted as a modern electrical contraption makes viewers disturbingly aware of the oftentimes dehumanizing quality of technology; it demonstrates the progression of cultural disintegration as subaltern groups increasingly absorb the “white form of consciousness,” leading to the development of the infamous “*complejo latinoamericano*”, or Latin American inferiority complex, in which they believe everything autochthonous is backward and everything in the “North” is progress.

In other works Mayobre also delivers social messages by way of word play. Using the translation of her name *Esperanza* (Hope), she addresses the U.S. / Latin/a issue, specifically, the United State’s immigration policies. As a true discursive revolutionary of the visual, Mayobre tells us that she uses her own image to translate for the immigrant and takes on the role of heroine, bringing them truth and “Hope.” Her image on devotional candles and prayer cards transforms her into a patroness of the immigrant. Her body becomes text through which the Latina/o immigrant can “read” and gain understanding of what awaits them in their relationship with the United States.

The prayer cards include small packets contain “Legitimate Dust of Saint Esperanza: A Balsam for Immigrants, Exterminator of Illegals” and instructions on how to perform the ritual and prayers to obtain U.S. citizenship and protection. Mayobre explains that she places the image of her face on these objects of veneration as a symbol, alluding to the need for immigrant empowerment. As a viewer, one takes away that this is the artist’s way of saying that the power and strength to survive as an immigrant in this country must be mustered from within.

In Mayobre’s works, language is a tool of translation for social messages; a weapon through which, the artist believes, immigrants can understand what to expect once in the states, and for U.S. spectators to understand the plight of the immigrant and the reality of the diaspora. As Mayobre insists, her intention is for her art to help enlighten Latinos/as as to what they contribute to U.S. society, and perhaps use this power to successfully mediate between both cultures without permitting the disintegration of their own.



Virgen de la Esperanza

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

Virgin of Hope

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



**BALSAMO PARA INMIGRANTES
EXTERMINADOR DE ILEGALES**

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

Da muy buen resultado

(NOTA)

Use también el agua Espiritual de Santa Esperanza o el aceite

Protector de los inmigrantes desahuciados

Esperanza Mayobre, Virgen of Hope (Virgen de la Esperanza), 2006. Private Collection.

6. YASMÍN HERNÁNDEZ

Yasmín Hernández is a prolific painter and lecturer. Hernández inherits from the previous generation of Puerto Rican artists of the diaspora the stylistic tendency of depicting, “the social political theme [that] stems from the Puerto Rican colonial status with the United States since 1898...” (Ballester 2). Hernández merges the salient characteristics found in the works of the mainland Puerto Rican political artists of *La Generación del 50* movement, the New York Boricua art movement of the 1970s, and the feminist discourses of the 1970s and 1980s into a contemporary visual discourse of hybridity. Hence, her works present an illustrative fusion of social and spiritual concerns, and political commentary, with nativist symbols and icons, through which she deconstructs and reconstructs the old male, Anglo-centered discourse. Hernández also makes use of the female body in a way that is very reminiscent of the bodies in the works

of Puerto Rican artist Myrna Báez, where the woman's body is a realistic depiction, but symbol and text at the same time.

In her painting of the Puerto Rican Nationalist poet, Julia de Burgos (1917-1952), for example, Hernández refuses to depict the bard in the customary image as a romantic dainty woman, and instead highlights the poet's firm political convictions. Hernández redresses the bard's role, painting de Burgos in a warrior stance with wild unruly hair, dressed in pants, emphasizing her rebellious spirit (women were not allowed to wear pants in the 1930s). De Burgos seems defiant, ready to defend the agricultural worker, and to fight for national independence, as reflected by the machete in her hand — the symbol of the Puerto Rican separatist movement.



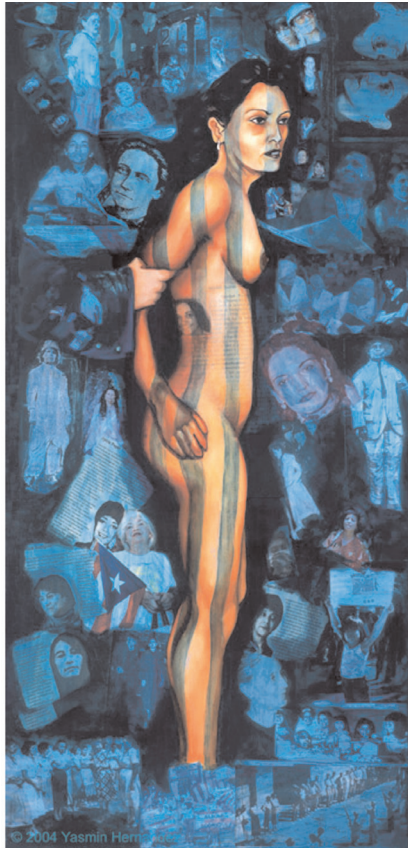
Yasmin Hernández, *Julia de Burgos, Soul Rebel Series*, 2006. Oil Painting.

Reproduction in <http://www.yasminhernandez.com/main.html>.

In another painting, the artist depicts the Nationalist revolutionary, Lolita Lebrón, who along with three other Nationalist Party members, was incarcerated in 1954, for over 25 years for shooting off their guns in the lobby of the U.S. House of Representatives, to protest U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico. Hernández captures the famous photographic image of Lolita taken at the moment she is being apprehended and arrested. The artist places emphasis on Lolita's pose, highlighting the defiant stance, the proud stare, and the calm demeanor. She presents the viewer, not with an image of a crazed terrorist, as Lebrón was portrayed by the media, but that of a brave woman who stood up and acted upon her beliefs.

Although Lebrón's body is posed as it appears in the photo, she is nude. Hernández suggests that Lebrón's body transcends the image of the woman prisoner. Through Lebrón, the artist informs us of the plight of the Puerto Rican woman in her ongoing relationship with the dominant order. By extension, we understand the woman's body as representative of the island and its relationship with the imperial power of the United States. It is the denunciation of the Island's colonial status represented by the freedom fighter's body. The artist paints vertical lines over the image's body referring to Lebrón's imprisonment, and at the same time, the image references how the female body can become a holding cell. Hernández tells us that this "cell" we have created is one, "within which we [women] are contained and upon which violence is inflicted." Furthermore, the artist explains, Lebrón's body is an allusion to Puerto Rico's captive status with the U.S.

Behind the cell bars, the artist includes images of famous Puerto Rican women from both the Puerto Rican mainland and the United States. Some images are of current or past female political prisoners and freedom fighters in Puerto Rico's long history of struggle against its colonizers, Spain and the U.S.; there are also famous feminists, labor leaders, and still others depict women who have become tragic symbols of violence and brutality.



Yasmin Hernández, *El pesar y orgullo de la revolucionaria* (*The Revolutionary's Burden and Pride*), 2004. Mixed media on canvas. Reproduction in <http://www.yasminhernandez.com/main.html>.

The concept behind this painting is to elevate the image of this symbol of political struggle to the metaphorical; to symbolize women who throughout the island's history have been jailed, victimized, ostracized, or subjugated because of their political beliefs, standing up against colonialism, and / or gender discrimination.

Hernández is a bit suspicious of the over zealousness given to the multicultural trend that emerged in the 1980s. She believes that this trend may have been largely responsible for the practices of assimilation and the amalgamation of cultures of color that flourished as a result. She also believes that the increased visibility of people of color in the media and in the arts does not assume racial and cultural parity in U.S. society (Fusco 2001: xiv). As Hernández expresses, and her works reveal, she seeks to unveil

what racism and colonialism have suppressed, creating art that documents the post-colonial and neo-colonial experience-art that challenges and empowers. Hernández favors the use of the female body as textual site. She seeks to use the female body as “a personal link to a very political history of colonialism,” because it has a history that has shaped a very “specific relationship between mind and body for colonized and enslaved peoples and their descendants” (Fusco 2001: xiv). She wants her work to be part of a new form of liberation art, a new Boricua political art movement. She joins the ranks of a growing generation of New York Puerto Rican artists who since 1998 (the centennial anniversary of U.S. domination over Puerto Rico) have decided to go beyond the identity-seeking trend to denounce colonialism through art. Her visual discourse is provocative but it is also mediatory, and above all educational; it is a social and political denouncement and criticism, but it is also a language of empowerment and offers new plausible scenarios for a colonized people.

7. CONCLUSIONS

After the wave of civil rights struggles, ethnic pride movements, and cultural reaffirmation battles of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, socially engaged Latina artists of New York solidified a discourse of hybridity that has become an essential part of the contemporary Third World ideological visual culture of the city. The five Latina artists presented in this article are a sampling of Latin American and Caribbean women artists within the NY diaspora who address their specific relationship with the dominant discourse, and their positions and ideas on feminism, as well as ethnic and cultural awareness.

Politically inclined Latina artists in the United States have been partial to incorporating neo-Marxist and feminist elements into their art work as an effective means of addressing the issues that they felt most affected women of color and their communities. This concurs with the basic tenets of Cultural Materialism, as espoused by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, as opposed to the strict Marxist-based social realist art discourse embraced by many artists of the 1960s. The confrontational, collective, class consciousness-raising discourse popular during the civil rights era, was transformed into an approach that offered what Homi Bhabha described as an articulation of negotiation, a dialogical aesthetic (“Interview”). When applied to the arts, the approach seeks to revolutionize predominant discourses by deconstructing and reconstructing them, with the purpose of seeking social and political equity for the most underrepresented or marginalized sectors of society. Socially committed and politically active Latina cultural creators, which also includes gay and lesbian artists, produced a

discourse that highlighted, denounced, and confronted patriarchal discourses, and as conditions and environments changed, so did the need to modify these discourses.

Drawing upon Homi Bhabha's theoretical views on cultural identity and resistance we observed that the aesthetic discourse of Latina visual artists is constructed within a third space of enunciation that stems from a consciousness of hybridity. The latter is a product of similar diasporic experiences and cultural history; it is a merging or "suturing," as Raymond Hall called it, which does not essentialize their identities, but has aided the artists in constructing these identities with which they wanted to represent themselves and other subaltern peoples (4). Since the 1980s, and up until the present, socially engaged U.S. Latina, based on their unique diasporic experiences, employ a cultural materialist approach, in that they revolutionize the prevalent discourses that have maintained minorities within minorities, specifically, women, people of color, and gays and lesbians, in a subordinate state.

Regardless of the differences in style and technique from artist to artist, through the tactical similarities and cultural meanings found in the works discussed here, we found that Latina artists can attempt to destroy old myths based on gender roles, class, culture, and race, and build different cultural models (Sinfield 2004: 290). The discourse created permits these artists to use art as a way to recover and reconstruct the past; of recuperating a diminished or denied cultural identity and giving it coherence. Whether these identities are articulated as a reconstruction conducted via mutual appropriation and an exchange of a common ground to benefit both the particular culture of origin and the patriarchal order, a byproduct of hybrid, border, or mestiza consciousness, or one that comes from neither the space occupied by the dominant culture's articulation, nor from the language of the subaltern or the colonized.

Subsequently, the elements manifested in this tactical aesthetic discourse developed by these artists can be summed up as follows:

- It is "dialogical," in other words, it mediates between the Anglo-American and Latina/o cultures, inviting viewers to question or discuss issues that affect Latina/os in the U.S. diaspora; issues such as colonialism, racial and cultural discrimination, gender inequalities, and different sexualities;
- The mediation between the respective cultures and U.S. society is accomplished via a type of visual code switching, or bilingualism that reveals an integration of linguistic and visual codes or bilingual imaging that translates, interprets;
- The artists demonstrate an awareness of their hybridity, and of their diasporic condition, manifested through this code-switching;
- The discourse serves as site of resistance and negotiation. It confronts established cultural models and stereotypes historically imposed upon Latinas and other women of color by the Anglo dominant order, thus offers cultural models as an alternative to the

dominant paradigms on gender identity, women's rights, cultural reaffirmation, race relations, offering women of color new roles within the diaspora;

- Woman's body image is shown in the capacity of site of resistance and negotiation, and simultaneously presented as symbol and text.

As part of a marginalized diaspora, these socially-engaged Latina artists produce a visual art that reveals a visceral oppositional discourse solidified by a specific dual cultural perspective, a specific hybrid space that does not emerge solely from the space occupied by the colonizer, nor by the subaltern. It is a "third" space that in turn affirms a consciousness of hybridity, through which the artists are able to speak to both sides of the border.

The alternatives to the dominant paradigms that the artists offer the spectators are elements of self-representation, "articulation of the female agency and power, cultural formations and social negotiations of the collected self" (Bhabha 2005: 25). These points were addressed time and time again by each artist interviewed for this study.

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

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