# College of William & Mary

## WEAVING COLORFUL THREADS TOGETHER:

Exploring themes of eco-feminism and Latinx culture through the artwork of Ana Mendieta,

Minerva Cuevas, and Yreina Cervantez

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Widespread displacement as a result of a warming climate naturally sparks a global diffusion of culture and tradition, disrupting geographical and societal boundaries and collapsing the physical and psychological distance between communities; in other words, the world is not only getting hotter, it is getting smaller, too. This realization surfaces questions of personal adaptation and assimilation, inclusion and isolation. Across borders and into urban centers, migrants travel hundreds of miles in search of safety, shelter, and opportunity, bringing their memories with them wherever they go. For every story of struggle, there is also a story of survival, and these collective narratives weave a vibrant and versatile tapestry of renewed ethnic identity.

Within the broad scope of this tapestry, I am interested in investigating the specific thread of eco-feminism and Latinx heritage through the lens of artistic visual media. This duality demands nothing less than an interdisciplinary approach that mines environmental and art historical discourses that work in tandem to unearth the social and political implications in aesthetic modes of storytelling. The object of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of culture and gender within the context of eco-art by examining creative and expressive manifestations of environmental justice shaped by the imagination of the following Latina artists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Ana Mendieta, Minerva Cuevas, and Yreina D. Cervántez.

#### **Ana Mendieta: The Art of Movement**

The works of Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta cross-connect culture, femininity, and ecology to offer a compelling critique of the "objectifying, male-dominated impulses of modern Western science and colonialism" and its consequences upon the natural world (Braddock and

Kusserow 365). Mendieta's oeuvre, at once corporeal and quite conspicuous, is strongly anchored to themes of identity, place, sensuality, and violence. Mendieta, born to a wealthy and prominent family in Havana, was immersed in the realm of social and environmental politics from early childhood and her upbringing was marked by constant movement; at the young age of twelve, she and her sister were sent to live in the United States through Operation Peter Pan, a controversial program jointly run by the American government and the Catholic Charities to evacuate Cuban children fleeing Fidel Castro's regime ("Ana Mendieta").

Despite her move to the United States, Mendieta's migration did not end there; in the years following her entry, Mendieta was passed from refugee camp to orphanage to foster care to reform school. Her difficult and transient adolescence induced a profound sense of displacement and alienation, two feelings that characterize the emotional transition that any immigrant endures in a new country. But Mendieta's familiarity with the fleeting became the impetus for her artistry, and her firsthand encounter with discrimination and dislocation informed her craft.

Studying Mendieta's famous long-term, multimedia project *Siluetas* (1973-1978), I imagine that the purpose behind the artist's stirring performance art was inspired by the resilience of the human spirit in the midst of environmental hardship—essentially, the artist's *own* body was the vessel that carried her through this trauma, therefore it was chosen to be the artistic medium to communicate her message: "I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence" (Braddock and Kusserow 365).

Mendieta's photographs from the *Silueta* series depict intimate, evanescent interactions between the female mystique and earth's elements: air, water, fire, and soil (see Figure 1). In

many of these images, Mendieta shows imprints of her body embedded in the landscape—ghostly traces of a woman's presence that hint at the artist's own lingering memories of departure. Organic materials such as grass, sea water, and mud eddy around human-shaped concavities; Mendieta allows her "silhouettes" to be gradually overwhelmed by the forces of time and nature (see Figure 2).

Through these sensual portrayals of earth, *Silueta* sanctifies feminine agency in the environmental movement. *Silueta* defies institutional patriarchy by boldly reminding the viewer that femininity pervades the environment, and maternal creation is an entity that invades the interstitial space between rigid dichotomies of man and woman, human and animal (Agustí, 296).

Furthermore, Mendieta argues that womanhood is analogous to Mother Nature by a shared ability to dispense life and death, and she relies on this realization to finally provide her with belonging: "My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth" (Braddock and Kusserow 365).

In addition to *Silueta* celebrating eco-feminism, it can also be regarded as a cultural statement: "By fusing her interests in Afro-Cuban ritual and the pantheistic Santeria religion with contemporary practices such as earthworks, body art, and performance art, she maintained ties with her Cuban heritage" (Trotman). *Silueta* affirmed Mendieta's proclivity for working from the earth and celebrated a return to her Cuban roots—thus, her later exhibition *Esculturas Rupestres* or *Rupestrian Sculptures* showcased limestone carvings that were named after goddesses from the Taíno and Ciboney cultures in Havana (Trotman).

The suspicious circumstances surrounding Mendieta's untimely death in 1985 often overshadow her successful career, and, in the wake of her passing, many feminist groups asserted that the acquittal of her husband Carl Andre (after he was tried as a suspect for Mendieta's murder) was another infuriating instance of gender injustice—an ironic tragedy considering that Mendieta was one of the artists at the forefront of her era's feminist movement ("Ana Mendieta"). But much like her poignant stills of empty "silhouettes" from *Silueta*, Ana Mendieta left an impressive and indelible legacy in the eco-feminist art domain that has withstood the test of time.

### Minerva Cuevas: The Art of Equity

Similar to how Mendieta subsumed femininity and heritage under nature, Mexican conceptual artist Minerva Cuevas integrates political and economic interpretations of ecology into her work to present a stark and nearly sardonic commentary of capitalism and social convention. Cuevas, born 1975 in Mexico City, has been a keen observer of high-density, urban environments, closely examining how site-specific systems impact the behavior and beliefs of its inhabitants. Cities are a living testament to our ability to conquer and capitalize on the land, and as these bustling locales expand in industry and population, these changes are tempered by a mutual contraction of space, security, and resources—testing the tensile strength of our governing institutions to weather these conditions.

Cuevas, in her own words, contrasts and correlates human-assigned value of natural capital to human-caused destruction of ecosystems to acquire them: "Life is overvalued.

Reflecting on this allows me to question the intrinsic moral values that are usually connected to

environmentalist discourse and practice. And this statement also allows me to take the necessary distance to evaluate human civilization" (Press).

Cuevas' graphic exposé of consumerism tackles issues of inequity and anthropocentrism with an environmental bent. In her 2004 installation *Egalité*, Cuevas "transposes the question of social justice" into the exhibition by manipulating the logo for the mineral water supplier Evian to be a symbol of contradiction: the company's failed promise to sustainably distribute water by bottling it in PET plastic, spelling disaster for ocean pollution (Köhler).

"Egalité" supplants "Evian" in Cuevas' transformed image, highlighting the economic disparities between the Global North and the Global South; low-income countries plagued by poverty have little to no access to drinking water (Köhler) (see Figure 3). The scarcity of potable water is a challenge that Cuevas has witnessed in her own native country, making the issue even more personal to the artist. Although equality and justice are at the heart of Cuevas' career, she does not label herself as an activist in pursuit of perfecting the world; rather, she strives, one exhibition at a time, to uncover the ways in which it is imperfect in the hope that these small interventions can provide a meaningful salve to society (Press).

Cuevas' 2005 video performance *Not Impressed by Civilization* marks a departure from her earlier preoccupation with brand design (see Figure 4). In this short film, Cuevas spends a single night outdoors in western Canada, surrounded by trees and mountains, confronting the viewer with the magnitude and majesty of the landscape—this work is meant to humble viewers, putting them in a position of vulnerability where they are completely at the mercy of the wilderness (Press). As much as *Not Impressed by Civilization* relies on visual isolation to unsettle the viewer, the palpable absence of anthropogenic sound (with the exception of distant traffic) only amplifies Cuevas' intent to reduce the spectator to a wild animal lost in the woods.

Furthermore, Cuevas' piece draws parallels between the dominance of Man over Nature and the historic tyranny of "white humans over black humans"; hegemony is a fatal human condition that fuels colonialism, slavery, and war (Press).

Cuevas' views gain even more resonance and relevance when you consider the recent *political* climate of the planet, too. International media is deafened by "inflammatory rhetoric" and a flagrant renunciation of science, as exacerbated by the far-right's ascendancy to power in Brazil; President Jair Bolsanoro has spearheaded a campaign of deforestation and exploitation in the country that puts not only the Amazon rainforest—one of earth's most biodiverse habitats—in jeopardy, but the indigenous communities it houses at terrible risk, too (Press).

As Clayton Press' *Forbes* article aptly explains, "topics and themes of environmental protection are aligned and interwoven with those of social development: reducing poverty, inequality and injustice." This revelation makes the artist's purpose-driven artwork all the more pertinent, environmentally and socio-economically. Cuevas zeroes in on these interconnections and leverages them in her art. She appropriates images of corporate and societal injustice, reimagining them so that they discredit the very same ideas they once endorsed—Minerva Cuevas' collection of evocative media pieces together a flawed culture of ecology in this new Anthropocene epoch.

#### **Yreina Cervantez: The Art of Community**

The cultural kaleidoscope of artistic expression is pivoting yet again, transitioning from psychological and political ecology to an iconographic perspective infused with Chicana tradition: this rerouting leads us to the artwork of Yreina Cervantez, an American artist and Chicana activist renowned for her multimedia work exploring the rich visual vocabulary of

Latina popular culture, Mesoamerican identity, and feminism in the modern world ("Yreina Cervantez). Following her birth in 1952 in Garden City, Kansas, Cervantez's childhood was spent in ethnically polarized and conservative neighborhoods which later prompted her to join the Chicana/o Movement, a crusade in 1970s that advocated social and political empowerment by elevating chicanismo nationalism (Ho).

Cervantez, like Mendieta, tries to locate herself in her work, and her series of earnest portraits and murals navigate the concept of *nepantla*, a Chicano word that translates to "in-between-ness": "... [she] utilize[s] inherently personal images of [herself] to enter into a cultural and political dialogue" (Freese 2). *Nepantla* succinctly captures the essence of immigration amid an evolving landscape. Cervantez invokes the language of her Aztecah ancestors, repurposing ancient glyphs to offer a novel view of contemporary times, especially in regard to highlighting the formidable faculty of women throughout history (Freese 3). The artist is straddling two worlds from two different eras, and she feeds from this imaginative wellspring of multiculturalism to escape the limbo of internal displacement. Moreover, Cervantez transcends liminal states of being by embracing the vastness of her individuality—the artist is greater than the sum of her parts.

One particular piece, *La Ofrenda* (1989), is a prime example of Cervantez's ability to blend time and space to help immigrant communities in America recall their "living" ancestral homeland no matter where they may be (Perez 39) (see Figure 5). The mural, located under a bridge in downtown Los Angeles, honors Dolores Huerta, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America; it is a spirited homage to the resilience and strength of Latina women who persevered through immigration, violence, and injustice to achieve social progress ("City Wide Mural Program"). Ofrenda describes the ritual offering placed in a home altar in observance of

the annual celebration Día de Muertos, and Cervantez's piece reinforces this tradition by presenting the offerings in the form of consequential imagery: candles, calla lilies, a god's eye, worker solidarity, and open hands 'carrying' a poem written by Gloria Alvarez ("City Wide Mural Program").

Similar to the barriers Latina women surmounted, *La Ofrenda* survived years of abuse and neglect. After its completion in 1989, the mural was defaced with graffiti and was even painted over by another mural, a terrible occurrence that exemplifies the tough reality of cultural erosion and urban entropy (see Figure 6). Thankfully, the CityWide Mural Program's efforts to conserve this significant piece (deemed "historically significant" by Department of Cultural Affairs) in 2016 were successful, ensuring that Cervantez's gift could be enjoyed by generations of onlookers to come ("City Wide Mural Program"). CWMP's project manager Carlos Rogel, a second generation Salvadoran-American, fondly reflects on the impact Cervantez's mural had on his life:

I grew up in the neighborhood and I was able to enjoy the mural in its original condition
... I remember relating to the artwork and being attracted to the content of the work
because it integrated familiar imagery and narratives of Central American refugees.

[Cervantez's mural] provided an early example of how artists work with social and
political content that is derived from the experiences of immigrant and refugee
communities. ("City Wide Mural Program")

Rogel's account demonstrates the capacity of art to touch the minds of the community and evoke feelings of empathy and togetherness. Visions of opportunity and harmony, and memories of the motherland project from *La Ofrenda*, and, though osmosis, inspire cultural appreciation and learning in the viewer. Art rooted in advocacy is a didactic tool that can foster

authentic dialogue between groups and reconcile the cultural gaps that splinter environments.

The attitudes represented in Cervantez's creation impugn and undermine the myopic government policies that only seem to exacerbate the challenges shared by immigration and ecology:

In light of ethnic and religious intolerance, and in light of the global environmental crisis, immigration policy would do well to shift to reflect a humane ethics of respect rather than fear, of recognized interrelationship rather than false belief in essential difference, and of creative aperture rather than ethnocentric and nationalist closure. (Perez 40)

In short, Yreina Cervantez's *La Ofrenda* proves that collaborative artwork that engages both the viewer and the artist can be a possible antidote to social stagnancy and environmental inertia; as the artist herself stated, "the creative process is a combination of intellectual and visceral responses" (Ho).

## **Conclusion: A Tapestry of Latinx Eco-feminism**

Sea swells creep up the coastline, meter by meter, herding flocks of coastal residents deeper into the city; thousands of bark beetles feed on a graveyard of tree stumps and broken branches, the ravaged remains of a forest stripped and starved of life; cracked earth bakes in the hot sun, and fragments of dried-up soil form a haggard mosaic of desolation. These flatlining vital signs show a planet succumbing to the injuries of anthropo-generated climate change. Equally cataclysmic is the mass exodus of climate refugees that these disasters trigger, shifting the global dynamics of population and power and straining the bandwidth of countries to accommodate them.

By recognizing the ability to promote social and environmental justice through innovative, visual storytelling, we can begin to combat the "slow violence" described above. As

author Rob Nixon explains, slow violence is a "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all ..." (Nixon 2). Furthermore, Nixon contends that one remedy to the casualties of this "slow death" is to give shape to the enemy:

... A central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters ... that are anonymous and that star nobody ... How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (Nixon 3)

Parsing the artistic vistas of this trio of women encourages us to envision a living fabric that entwines nodes of history, heritage, and humanity together—a multicultural mosaic that can bestow knowledge, enshrine memory, and captivate consciousness. Mendieta, Cuevas, and Cervantez have used their artwork as an intermediary between social systems and the public, exposing us to the sad truth that not all environmental realities are created equal. These artists and their respective vertices of aesthetic messaging—feminism, socio-economic justice, and cultural ceremony—triangulate a common frame of ecology while invigorating the narratives of marginalized and underrepresented communities across America; Ana Mendieta, Minerva Cuevas, and Yreina Cervantez hold the ancestral fabric of their worlds together with their art, preventing threads of the past from unraveling and expelling the stories of their forefathers to the void.

Word Count: 2737



Fig. 1. Mendieta, Ana. Untitled (from the Silueta Series). 1973.



Fig. 2. Mendieta, Ana. Untitled (from the Silueta Series). 1976.



Fig. 3. Allgeier, Neven. Égalité. 2017.



Fig. 4. Cuevas, Minerva. Not Impressed by Civilization. 2005.

78.7 x 157.5 in, acrylic on wall and color video transferred to DVD



Fig. 5. Cervantez, Yreina. "La Ofrenda". 1990.36 x 20 in, acrylic paint on cement ground



Fig. 6. Unknown. "La Ofrenda", Tagged Several Times before Being Completely Painted over.

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