

THE BODY AS VOICE, VISUAL CULTURE EPISTEMOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

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This project explores the ways Black and Latinx women of color artists express identity through the body in visual art. It is two parts in nature, consisting of written research and an entire curated art exhibition. For the purposes of this thesis, I present four works from artists within the exhibition, namely Ari Brielle, Tiara Unique Francois, Tina Medina, and Eliana Miranda. The theme of the project and exhibition centers around the concept of intersectionality and the ways these women use the site of the body to reflect interconnected, social, and personal issues women of color face and the ways they contribute to social justice. Each artwork is accompanied by a visual analysis that connects elements within the work to Black and Chicana feminist theory on intersectionality and the creative process as tools of resistance and resilience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Visual art and creative practice have the power to express the deepest parts of human experience. For centuries, humans have visually captured the spaces, objects, and reflections that matter the most to them. These forms of expression inherently carry varied perspectives and share vital stories that shape the way we see the world. Voices and experiences across time, particularly those from women of color, have been marginalized and underrepresented due to the overarching rule of the dominating white patriarchal society that has shaped Western history. However, the twenty-first century in particular has seen a rise in both personal and social exposure of the experiences of people from diverse and intersecting backgrounds, particularly surrounding issues of gender, sexual orientation, race, and class. There has also been public interest in addressing issues surrounding social justice like racial injustice and immigration as many have called for greater support and visibility through the Chicano, #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements. Art is a powerful and accessible tool that represents social and cultural experiences that reflect communities' current needs and concerns. In a fervent effort to support women of color within the art world, I aimed to create space for an art exhibition that amplifies their voices. This thesis explores the ways contemporary Black and Latinx women artists are discussing and critiquing social and cultural forms of racial, gendered, and classist oppression that affects bodies of color in order to celebrate the power of visual art as a tool in social activism. This project consists of two parts: a research paper and a curated art exhibition. The exhibition features nine local, either emerging or established female artists of color from the Dallas/Fort Worth area. For the exhibition, Deyjah Stewart, Tiara Unique Francois, Nitashia Johnson, Missy Burton, Ari Brielle, Eliana Miranda, Tina Medina, Magaly Cantu, and Karla Ramirez-Santin's work centers either the Black

or Latinx experience of the body and identity. In the pages to follow, I draw connections between a selection of the artists' work with Black and Latinx feminist's theorizing about identity and the power of creativity as a tool of resistance and reformation. The analysis considers four artworks selected from the exhibition and links visual elements of that work with intersectional theory. My research draws important relationships between Black and Latinx feminist of color's theorizing that support the discussion and analysis of women of color's work. In conclusion, *The Body as Voice, Visual Culture* exhibition and thesis was generated to fill a gap in museum representation by centering the work by women of color and to create a bridge between the discipline of art history and women's studies. The exhibition will be installed at the East|West Galleries at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas from June 1 to June 18, 2023.

Significance to Art History

For most of Western art history, white men have dominated gallery and museum spaces as well as occupied the majority of the art historical canon. Because of this, there is an incredible need for more diverse and inclusive representation and visibility of women, especially women of color, within the art world. As women have fought to have equal representation, women of color have struggled the most to have their work recognized and shown. Women have been excluded from art institutions due to social and cultural attitudes towards women's roles and abilities, as well as institutional policies that reinforce gender norms to keep women from certain educational and professional opportunities.¹ In the early history of art, women were not given the same educational access to the art practices as men, which limited their ability to develop their artistic

¹ Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTNews* (January 1971): 31.

skills and gain recognition for their work.² In addition to gender-based discrimination, women of color have faced even greater barriers and obstacles in the art world due to racism and lack of financial access to art institutions.³ In turn, women of color artists have suffered a greater lack of opportunities for representation and recognition of their work in the mainstream art world. They have had to navigate not only the challenges of being women in a male-dominated field, but also they have been challenged by the intersectional aspects of being a person of color working in a predominantly white-dominated industry. Despite these challenges, women of color artists have made significant contributions to the art world, challenging dominant narratives, and representations through their work.

A similar case has been made concerning the subject of women's bodies within art across Western history. Traditionally, women's bodies have been shown and valued only in the context of objectification and sexualization. Being heavily exploited and censored by a white male-dominated society, women in art have lacked their own agency and authority over their bodies. Even worse, women of color's bodies have been regarded as exotic imagery and placed as even less important than those of white women's bodies.⁴ Exploited through the practice of Orientalism and othering, many European male artists such as Gérôme, Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso, just to name a few, perpetuated the eroticism and exoticization of women of color and their bodies in art through their Polynesian paintings.⁵ This pejorative contribution to women of color's bodies in art must be countered by allowing women of color to represent themselves,

² Ibid, 33.

³ Bonnie Claudia Harrison, "Diasporadas: Black Women and the Fine Art of Activism," *Meridians* 2, no. 2 (2002): 164.

⁴ Roger Benjamin, "Matisse in Morocco: A Colonizing Esthetic?" *Art in America* (November 1990): 161.

⁵ Ibid, 164. For more information on Orientalism, see: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).

their experiences, and their voices through their own work. To address the gap of women of color's presence within art and to center their voices and experiences, my project offers a space and opportunity where women of color can show work about the female body of color to express autonomous, powerful narratives about themselves and one another.

Another epistemic shortcoming is that the field of art history and art institutions have only favored white, Western male perspectives, knowledges, and philosophies. Traditionally, women scholars and artists have not been granted the same intellectual authority or autonomy as their male counterparts. Because of this history, there is also a clear need for more diverse artists and scholars whose identities and theories add to institutional knowledge within the art world and art historical canon. By including women of color's theorizing in art history, museums, and academies can promote diversity and inclusivity in their collections, exhibitions, and scholarship. This can help to create a more inclusive and equitable art world that reflects the full range of human experiences and perspectives. Even more so, women of color have unique experiences and perspectives that can share an enriching, more diverse understanding of art and art history. By including their theorizing to the canon, art institutions can advance knowledge and understanding of art history and contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the field. My project aims to do this by analyzing women of color's artwork through the lens of intersectionality and the ways women of color approach the creative process as a tool of social and interpersonal resistance/reformation. Expanded in greater detail in the theory section, intersectionality is the idea that multiple social identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability interact and intersect with one another to create unique experiences of oppression and

privilege.⁶ Lastly, when women of color see their perspectives and contributions valued and celebrated in art institutions, it can inspire and empower future generations of women of color to pursue careers in the arts and to make their own contributions to the field.

⁶ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1245. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Located within contemporary art history's discussion of Black and Latinx artists' work, this project explores the ways contemporary Black and Latinx women artists are expressing the body and identity in visual art. Within the last twenty years (2002-2022) there has been a major increase in Black photographers, filmmakers, painters, installation, and mixed-media artists "confronting their histories: the documentation of truth; the status of the black female body; the relationship between art and cultural contact and change; and the relationship between art and black girlhood."⁷ Some scholars have focused on Blackness and performance, as their studies are situated at the intersections of performance studies, feminist discourse, queer theory, and sexuality studies, and they pursue ontologies of Blackness.⁸ Others have explored the ways Black female artists have used female bodily form to open "much-needed conversations about black feminist aesthetics and the centrality of African diasporic female bodies to avant-garde innovation."⁹ This burgeoning interest in bringing together Black feminist discourse with the expression of visual art through the body is an area I wish to add to in the context of art history through my research by connecting the analysis of artwork by women of color with feminist of color's theorizing. *The Body as Voice* art exhibition offers both contemporary Black and Latinx women an opportunity to showcase their work in conversation with one another across intersections in an empowering and communal space.

⁷ Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 23.

⁸ Stephanie Sparling Williams, "Artful Embodiment: Genealogies of the Impossible," *Art Journal* 77, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 122. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2018.1530017>.

⁹ Huey Copeland, "Making Black Feminist Art Histories" *American Art* 31, no.2 (Summer 2017): 27. <https://doi-org.ezp.twu.edu/10.1086/694053>.

Another avenue of my research examines contemporary curation of women of color's artwork and ways in which the curator's practice has been informed by feminists of color's theorizing. For example, a nonconventional archival repository for the Colored Girls Museum in Germantown, Philadelphia became a radical love site through its curation of social relationships, spatial capacities, and navigation of time.¹⁰ Based on the curator's intimate research and knowledge on early Black feminist freedom seeking methodology, she connected the act of curating specific artwork within the Black community to W.E.B. DuBois's influence on Black feminist theory. Similarly, in my project I connect Black and Latinx feminist theories to the process of developing and curating exhibitions through space making informed by feminist of color's ideology.

My research also examines scholarship on critical arts-based practice and the importance of this practice when creating and expressing one's personal experiences and perspectives. Critical arts-based practice is a research methodology that allows for evocative and critical engagement with and through intersections of aesthetics and historicized legacies of legalized, social and cultural oppressions.¹¹ A group of scholars share about critical arts-based practice/inquiry/research and how it has helped multicultural female artists find ways they can make sense of Black and Brown subjectivities in/through the act of making:

As practicing artists and art educators, our critical arts-based practices are grounded in intersectional feminisms like Womanism, Black Feminist Theory, and Chicana Feminist

¹⁰ Loren S. Cahill, "Memoirs of the Colored Girls Museum: For Blackgirls Everywhere to Remember That Our Love Is Enuf" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 50, no. 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2022): 230. <https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2022.0019>.

¹¹ Gloria J. Wilson, Joni Boyd Acuff, and Vanessa López, "Conjuring Hands: The Art of Curious Women of Color," *Hypatia* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2021): 567. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2021.38>.

Theory. It has helped us find our center, our periphery, and our in-between spaces where we exist within and also beyond our earthly bodies that are policed day in and day out. Further, engaging in critical artmaking as a collective has allowed us to spiritually reconnect with lost experiences of consciousness, and hold each other down in the process. Further, with intersectional feminisms undergirding our work, we recognize the ways in which we theorize through our artmaking, thus countering ‘academic hegemony.’¹²

This lengthy quote demonstrates that women of color practice feminist theorizing through the creation of art, and how important it is when thinking about women of color’s work to study, analyze, and curate it with these feminist perspectives in mind. Critical arts-based research is also a fitting methodology for my approach to research for this project as I work to connect curation and art analysis with new ways of understanding the intersections of identity and visual culture.

¹² Ibid, 566.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of my research is centered around the theory of intersectionality, and further, is supplemented by Black and Latinx feminist theories on love, healing, and creativity as tools of resistance and reclamation of the body. The theories discussed in this section will be referenced later in the visual analysis. Kimberle Crenshaw, a twenty-first century lawyer and Black feminist, first coined the theory of intersectionality in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”¹³ In her essay, Crenshaw explores the limitations of traditional feminist and anti-racist approaches to understanding the experiences of marginalized women, such as women of color. From this, she offers intersectionality as a tool to better represent those marginalized experiences.

Intersectionality can be understood as the concept that social identities and systems of oppression intersect and interact in complex ways.

In her critique, Crenshaw illustrates that the theory of intersectionality includes both individual and institutional components. The individual component recognizes that individuals hold multiple intersecting identities, and that these identities shape their experiences of oppression and privilege. The institutional component acknowledges that systemic forms of oppression and discrimination are embedded in social structures and institutions, and that these structures must be challenged and transformed to create more equitable and just societies. These components are expanded upon in the three types of intersectionality that occur: structural, political, and representational.

¹³ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 1241.

The first type of intersectionality is referred to as "structural Intersectionality," which recognizes how social structures, such as legal and economic systems, create and perpetuate intersecting forms of oppression. For example, Crenshaw's research on the experiences of Black women in the legal system revealed how their experiences of both racism and sexism led to unique forms of discrimination that were not adequately addressed by either anti-racist or feminist movements alone.¹⁴ This is because feminist movements primarily focus on the experiences of white, middle-class women and anti-racist movements focus primarily on the experiences of Black men, which leaves women of color out completely. By failing to recognize the unique experiences of women of color, both movements are limited in their ability to address the intersectional experiences of women of color.

The second type of intersectionality is "political Intersectionality," which recognizes how different social movements and political struggles can intersect and impact each other. For example, Crenshaw notes how the struggles for racial justice and LGBTQ rights intersect, and how the experiences of LGBTQ people of color may differ from those of white LGBTQ individuals.¹⁵ The third type of intersectionality is "representational Intersectionality," which recognizes how popular media and cultural representations shape our understanding of social identities and their intersections. For example, representations of Asian women as submissive and exotic, or Black men as dangerous and hyper-masculine, can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to experiences of discrimination.¹⁶

In summary, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality offers a nuanced framework for understanding the ways in which social identities intersect and impact experiences of oppression

¹⁴ Ibid, 1246.

¹⁵ Ibid, 1275.

¹⁶ Ibid, 1287.

and privilege. By recognizing the individual and institutional components of this theory, we can better understand and challenge systemic forms of discrimination and work towards creating more equitable societies. Within the field of art history, intersectionality theory allows us to consider the ways artists of color challenge these colonial power structures that enforce racism, sexism and classism. Further, in doing so, we can better understand how artists from diverse backgrounds navigate social forms of oppression through the creation of art as a tool for resistance and reformation.

Because of intersectionality's roots within Black feminist thought and activism, it is important to acknowledge the theory's recent critique from scholars within the field, and to reaffirm intersectionality's relevance as a tool for social reformation. In her book *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*,¹⁷ Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash examines the ways in which intersectionality has been called into question. In the text, Nash argues that the concept of intersectionality has been both overused and undertheorized, leading to what she calls the "Intersectionality Wars."¹⁸ The debates around intersectionality have centered on the question of whether it is a theory or a methodology,¹⁹ and whether it is applicable to all forms of oppression or only those related to gender, race, and class.²⁰ She argues that these debates have overshadowed important questions about the relationship between intersectionality and power, and how intersectionality can be used as a tool for social change. Furthermore, Nash critiques the ways in which intersectionality has been co-opted and depoliticized in mainstream discourse,

¹⁷ Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 74.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 100.

arguing that its incorporation into corporate diversity initiatives and multiculturalism has obscured its radical roots in Black feminist activism.²¹

From here, Nash makes two important calls: 1) to return to intersectionality's roots in law and its commitment to remaking law in unfamiliar and productive ways²² and 2) to remember and practice the ways Black feminist activism includes "self-care, self-love, and self-regard [that are used] as strategies of resistance and radical refusal."²³ This emphasizes the importance of self-care and self-love as a means of resistance and survival in the face of systemic oppression. She argues that self-care practices, such as rest, therapy, and community care, can help Black women to heal from trauma and build resilience in the face of ongoing struggles.²⁴ Further, Nash suggests that a loving approach to intersectionality can help to move beyond the "Intersectionality Wars" by emphasizing collaboration and solidarity among Black women. Rather than focusing on individualistic approaches to activism and theorizing, a loving approach centers the collective needs and experiences of Black women and seeks to build alliances across differences. With this in mind, I will argue in the analysis section that this push for social change through a creative and loving approach to the body is present in both Black and Latinx women's artwork within the exhibition.

In the spirit of reimagining intersectionality's call for collaboration with other forms of activism and theorizing, I wish to draw connections between intersectionality and Chicana feminist theories by Gloria Anzaldúa. The lens of intersectionality is particularly relevant to Chicana theory because Latinx communities also often experience multiple forms of oppression

²¹ Ibid, 121.

²² Ibid, 114.

²³ Ibid, 60.

²⁴ Ibid, 115.

and marginalization due to the intersection of their various identities. Known for her texts on Chicana feminist and queer theory, Anzaldúa explores the experiences of those who live in the “borderlands,” or the areas where different cultures, languages and identities intersect. In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa examines the ways these borderlands are constantly navigated by those who live between Mexico and the United States.²⁵ It is in those intersections of identity and self-expression that I wish to explore further here. Border identity is embodied by la mestiza and exists in la frontera. La mestiza can be defined as someone caught between two worlds of Latinx cultural heritage and identity, a “borderlands” that allows them a way of seeing and critiquing the social and cultural structures that fail to fully represent them. Anzaldúa states, “art and la frontera intersect in a liminal space where border people, especially artists, live in a state of ‘nepantla,’ or an in-between state of identity.”²⁶ This in-between space is grounds for profound self-expression and social activism, especially by creatives because of their unique ability to see many sides. La frontera becomes the metaphorical battleground between those two distinct worlds and identities that holds the borderlands space.

In “Border Arte: Nepantla, la Lugar de la Frontera,” Anzaldúa introduces the idea that border art and border artists act as important activists that utilize the creative healing power of art to produce personal and social change.²⁷ A border artist is a term used to describe artists who create work that engages with the cultural, social and political issues of border regions, including but not limited to the US-Mexico border. Border artists use their art to traverse the boundaries between different cultures, languages, and identities. These artists draw on a range of artistic

²⁵ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, the critical edition* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2021), 49.

²⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, “Border Arte: Nepantla, el Lugar de la Frontera,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 180.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 181.

forms and practices, including visual art, performance, music, literature and film, to explore themes such as migration, displacement, cultural identity, and political borders. The works they create reflect their own experiences of living in the borderlands and speak to the experiences of others who share these spaces.

The body is particularly important to Anzaldúa and the experience of border identity. She argues that border artists use their bodies as sites of resistance, reclaiming them from dominant cultural narratives and redefining them in their own terms.²⁸ This happens in two ways—first, Anzaldúa sees the body as a source of knowledge. This notion of the body as epistemological authority is often dismissed in Western academic discourse, and offers powerful restructuring of ontological knowledge as the center of new discourses. By centering the knowledge that comes from the body and from embodied experience, we can gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Second, Anzaldúa sees the body as a site of cultural hybridity, where different cultural and linguistic influences come together.²⁹ The body is a place where these identities interact, creating new forms of identity that challenge traditional categorizations. Finally, she sees the body as a means of resistance against dominant cultural narratives. She argues that by reclaiming the body and defining it in their own terms, marginalized communities can challenge oppressive power structures that seek to control and erase their identities.³⁰

Another important facet of Anzaldúan theory, which bridges mestiza identity, the body, and border art together, is the notion that border identity puts one in a position of shaman, or healer. In her essay “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” Anzaldúa describes the role of

²⁸ *Ibid*, 182.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 184.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 181.

shaman as the poet/artist/creator who is the mediator that balances people and communities.³¹

The shaman understands the power that imagination, spiritual states of consciousness, words, and images have on the psyche and can use that information to heal the self and one another.

Anzaldúa does this by exploring the metaphor of the artist as shaman and imagery as a form of shamanic practice.

Metaphors are not simply literary devices, but powerful tools for accessing and understanding different levels of reality. In shamanic traditions, Anzaldúa says, metaphors are used to access the realm of the spirits and to communicate with other beings.³² They are also used to create a bridge between different cultures and worldviews within the borderlands.

Anzaldúa suggests that in order to navigate these borderlands, we need to develop a new form of art that reflects their hybrid, multicultural identities. This art, established as border art, becomes a way of expressing the complexity of identity and experiences, creating new meanings and understandings. In doing so, border art can be seen as a form of embodied healing practice that border artists undergo to heal communities and bridge new connections between them.

Centering on an embodied experience directly recalls the expressions of the body and how border artists use the body to both practice social activism as well as interpersonal healing. This section of theory will also be applied to the analysis of artworks as I aim to draw connections between embodied experiences of both Latinx and Black artists as they explore the realm of the body through visual imagery.

³¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 121.

³² *Ibid*, 122.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

This project is two-part in nature, consisting of a written portion and a physical art exhibition. From my curated exhibition of Black and Latinx women's work about the body I selected four artworks to analyze using Black and Chicana feminist theories. The written portion of the thesis utilizes textual analysis and description to identify visual aspects of four artworks from within the exhibition that visually embody the overarching theme of intersectionality, as well as connects the ways Black and Latinx women are depicting bodies and identity to modes of feminist theory and activism. The artworks in the analysis are *Living Room Beautician, 2020* by Tiara Unique Francois, *Altar (self), 2020* by Ari Brielle, *Dejar Atrás II (Leave Behind), 2022* by Eliana Miranda, and *Here Before Borders, 2022* by Tina Medina. Textual analysis is a research method used to 'read' a text, either written or visual, to identify patterns, themes and meanings.³³ It involves systematically analyzing a body of work to uncover the underlying messages, assumptions and values expressed by the author or creator. Textual analysis can be used to study a wide range of media in many different fields such as visual art, literature, communication, sociology, and anthropology to gain insight into how people communicate and construct meaning through language. It can also provide valuable information about the social and cultural context in which the work was produced. The field of art history often uses textual analysis to understand the meaning and context of artworks through the pairing of written sources to accompany them. These sources range from artworks titles, artist statements, exhibition catalogs, and critical reviews as well as broader cultural and historical texts that relate to the artwork, such

³³ Catherine Belsey, "Textual Analysis as a Research Method," in *Research Methods for English Studies*, ed. Gabriele Griffin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 160.

as political or philosophical treatises.³⁴ Researchers may analyze the language and imagery used in the artwork itself, such as symbols, motifs, and visual cues to help identify the artist's intended meaning. To put this into practice, I examine imagery within the artworks that involve the body, such as, positioning and gesturing of the figure, objects and materials being used or depicted, the use of space, and choice of scenery and how they relate to and express notions of identity. I connect Black and Latinx feminist theory to the imagery to draw connections between the work and intersectional feminist ways of identifying and expressing identity.

Within the gallery spaces, I utilize curation as a methodology for organizing artworks. Curating as a method involves choosing artworks for the exhibition based on visual and conceptual elements that resonate with the themes of the show, and the arrangement of twenty-two works within the gallery space. The visual elements, or major imagery, center around the Black and Latinx female body, while the conceptual elements refer to the narratives and themes present that include a wide range of interpersonal and societal relationships and spaces. Intersectionality, for example, plays a large role in choosing which artists and artworks fit best for the exhibition and how to curate their work. As previously mentioned, intersectionality does not just belong to the Black identity and experience, but creates room for all expressions of identity and experience. The artists chosen for the exhibition all embody and reflect various perspectives and experiences of being both a woman and a person of color, alongside various other personal facets that make them uniquely who they are. Each one brings their own understanding of self, which manifests through the work they create about aspects of their own identity. This in turn allows them to produce artworks that explore and express unique aspects of their vision not only of themselves but as they relate to one another and the world. Those works

³⁴ Ibid, 164.

chosen for the exhibition are curated within the gallery space through an intersectional lens as they share certain overlapping social and interpersonal themes that reflect the multifaceted experience of the Black and Latinx body and identity. These themes consider the artists' relationship to themselves and the world around them, whether it is through the environment, their families and communities, their physical, mental, and emotional health and the ways these women navigate the social structures placed upon them.

Research, studio visits, and the installation of the art exhibition take place within the DFW area in Texas. I chose to stay local to Denton, Texas and the Dallas/Fort Worth area to gain a deeper insight into our local art community. I also chose to keep the pool for artists within the DFW area to cut down on the transportation/shipping costs of artworks to the exhibition that the artists would be responsible for. Additionally, I offered to cover the cost of shipping or to personally transport the artworks myself to assist artists as thanks for being a part of the exhibition. For this project, I aimed to include a total of no more than ten artists in the exhibition, each artist showing one to two works, due to the available space within the university's galleries. This choice maximized the exhibition's scope in terms of the amount of works and media present. I researched online for artists and asked mentors in the local art community for recommendations of local artists that fit the theme of the exhibition. It was my intent to include both emerging artists from local colleges as well as more established artists from within the DFW community to create further connections among artists within the community and to include varying ages and experience levels for a more diverse reflection of contemporary artwork. I identified ten potential artists through reading interviews and by visiting their personal websites and invited them to be a part of the exhibition. Once the artists accepted, I scheduled individual meetings with them to discuss their work and to choose potential artwork for the

show. Most of the meetings were hosted in person in the artist's studio, where I traveled to meet them across the DFW area. A few of the meetings were hosted online via Zoom in case the artist could not make an in-person meeting. Both traveling to the artists and offering an online meeting was decided out of convenience for the artist's time and resources but also in light of the ongoing global pandemic, as not everyone may have access to transportation, a studio space, or adequate resources for managing healthcare. Women of color in particular face extra obstacles because of capitalistic, sexist, and racist inequalities that bar and limit their access to space, healthcare, and basic resources.

It was also an important part of my process to be able to be in the artist's work space and to see the artwork they had in person. Being face to face, sharing space, and making a genuine connection with the artist was important to me because art is a communal experience and because I wanted to give the artists room to fully express themselves and their work with me. In my selection process, I asked/offered for the artists to make their own suggestions as to which pieces they would like to see in the exhibition because I wanted to be thoughtful about which expressions they were most interested in sharing at this time. Although I was a curator for the exhibition, I aimed to be open and thoughtful about creating a show that truly reflected these artists' interests as well as agency in how they wanted to be represented.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS

As a whole, *The Body as Voice* art exhibition explores the ways Black and Latinx women are expressing intersectional identity through depictions of the body, and the ways they visually address their embodied experiences as a push for personal and social change. This analysis considers four artworks in detail, the first two by Ari Brielle and Tiara Unique Francois and the next two by Eliana Miranda and Tina Medina. I have chosen the first two works and paired them together because of the ways they explore and express notions of self-care, self-love, and community. The following two works are paired together because of the ways they critique borders, recall their ancestry, and address a responsibility to one another and the land. Although each work is analyzed and addressed individually, they all share interconnected interests that come together over community, the environment, visibility, and wellbeing. Within these areas, it is my intent to look at the ways Black female artists are expressing their intersectional experience of identity that particularly regards the body as a radical site for love and resistance.

The first work I would like to consider is *Altar (self)*, 2020 by Ari Brielle. *Altar (self)*, 2020 is a 40 inch by 34 inch gouache and acrylic painting on canvas that features a large self-portrait of Ari on her knees in a side profile position within a room with plants. The figure is wearing simple undergarments as she sensually shows her skin and strong body. Behind her sits a large rubber tree on the left and a smaller cactus on the right. On the floor around her lies a votive Virgin Mary candle and flowers near her feet and knees. Flowers also sit along her shoulder while the top of her head is adorned with an apple. The figure's gaze is intent, direct, and somewhat seductive as she makes eye contact with the viewer. The iconography in this portrait and the figure's positioning suggest a scene of devotion, remembrance, and reclamation

of the self. In placing objects at her feet, head, and shoulders, the figure's body becomes an altar. This can be seen two ways; the first way being an ode to the Black female body in a loving gesture to the self, and second, in calling attention to the violence and sexualization of the Black female body as a site for both mourning and radical love. Traditionally gifted with a sense of reverence and remembrance, the flowers, fruit, and candle symbolize the beautiful, momentary, and fragile qualities of life. Often tokens of love given to the deceased by the living, the objects on the body also suggest the mourning of the site of the Black female body as something that has been lost and which has suffered trauma. The Virgin Mary candle in particular also carries this double meaning as it serves both the context of mourning but also as a sacred beacon for healing and comfort associated with the patron saint. In contrast to the Virgin's image of purity, Brielle has depicted herself in a powerful, seductive pose with direct eye contact that engages the viewer by calling attention to the beauty and power that she holds within herself, because of herself. In this light, her gaze and the adornment of her body is an act of reclaiming her own sense of self and sexuality while honoring her body in a loving, sacred way.

Brielle's radical expression of self-love through the body reminds us that we are all connected through the preciousness of life and that we must continue to protect and support each other's well-being. This sentiment directly recalls the foundation of Crenshaw's intersectionality theory as a need for more visibility and protection against the effects of violence against Black women. *Altar (self)* reflects Brielle's resilience while highlighting the intersections of Black womanhood, physical/sexual violence, and the reclamation of personal power. This notion can also be connected to Nash's call for radical self-love and self-care that continues intersectionality's legacy. By depicting her body against the backdrop of racial, gendered, and sexual violence, Brielle both advocates for her own as well as other Black women's visibility and

safety. This work is a strong example of how intersectionality can be used as a tool for social change by sparking new conversations around women of color's unseen and unheard experiences while also inserting new imagery into art history from the subject's personal perspective.

Another work that brings a loving approach of self-care and community to the Black female body is *Living Room Beautician, 2020* by Tiara Unique Francois. This 48 inch by 48 inch acrylic paint, glitter glue, and marker on canvas features two young Black women in the act of hair braiding within a semi-abstract living room scene. The figure on the left is a self-portrait of the artist who faces the viewer as she reaches for a braid of hair and towards a jar of hair gel labeled "Let's Jam." The second figure is another young Black woman who sits in a kitchen chair facing away from the viewer while having her hair braided by Francois. The seated figure's backside is pressed against the chair as she sits listening to music, and as she holds her phone, texting on a screen with green and gray text bubble conversation. Musical notes and colorful vibrations of blue and pink fill the room between the figures that lend a sense of shared communal space and which nod to the setting of a ritual for self-care. Music and the act of communication, seen through the use of phones in contemporary culture within this painting, are strong tools that bring individuals together to share important experiences that build and support communities alike. Looking closer at the scene, we notice a short end table to the left of the central figure which holds important items that are connected to the practice of hair braiding, such as a large hair comb, a hair separator comb, long metal hair clips, and a dish with small rubber hair bands inside. The artist's phone lies on the table charging, facing up showing the recognizable blue colored text bubbles of a text conversation. At the opposite edge of the table sits a large Whataburger cup, a recognizable symbol of the fast-food chain beloved by many Texans. The Whataburger cup is important in the scene because it represents a specific time and

location that reflects the artist's local community. While these items on the table are used for hair braiding that directly relate to grooming practices, they also further represent communal acts of self-regard and self-expression that carry on communal tradition and which promote acts of self-care. Not always done in a salon, hair braiding is a very common practice that Black women in particular carry within their community to maintain the health of their natural hair. Beyond a sense of haircare maintenance and more than just adhering to beauty standards—Francois also depicts herself and the other woman in the scene with stretchmarks and naturalistic looking bodies.

This authentic approach to the body suggests a radical self-acceptance and celebration of Black women's bodies and the healing, loving side of communal practices that supports the health and well-being of the Black community. Celebrating everyday spaces and practices central to the Black community that center around self-care advocates for their safety as well as reaffirms the interconnected nature of the community itself. In these ways, both Brielle's *Altar (self)* and Francios's *Living Room Beautician* offer a loving approach that centers the collective needs and experiences of Black women through self-care practice and community care that can help Black women to heal from trauma and build resilience in the face of ongoing struggles.

The next two works to consider in this analysis are *Here Before Borders, 2022* by Tina Medina and *Dejar Atrás II (Leave Behind), 2022* by Eliana Miranda. As previously discussed, intersectionality theory extends to other marginalized communities outside of the Black community, which includes Latinx women's experiences and identities. Border art and border identity, however, is a unique embodiment that some women artists from the Latinx community bring to the expression of art that centers particularly around mestiza identity and social justice issues. The following two works were chosen together by the way they center on social issues

around borders, their relationship to the land, and how through creating work on Chicana identity they aim to heal themselves and the community as a whole.

The first work to do this is *Here Before Borders, 2022* by Tina Medina. *Here Before Borders, 2022* is a 30.5 inch by 22 inch mixed media on paper work that features a Chicana woman at the center with a banner across her chest that reads, “Here before borders.” The woman’s dress has hand written text in English and in Spanish upon its surface that describes the made up nature of borders, makes historical references to moments that marked borders between Mexico and the Americas, and expresses that borders are a construct to gain power and control others. The script goes on to say that their people inhabited and cultivated the land from their ancestors who were here before the borders were put into place. Behind the figure is a backdrop of shapes, symbols, and imagery that recall Mesoamerican iconography used by older civilizations that were later incorporated into early Mexican murals. Chicana identity, or border identity, is embodied through the central figure while the work as a whole addresses and critiques borders through visual and textual language.

First, the imagery and the written text act as visual reminders of the art, language, and presence of the people who existed in the region of Mexico before its colonization. Like Anzladúa in some of her writings, Medina includes both the Spanish and English language in the text on the woman’s dress to express the complex identity and experiences of women of Mexican-American heritage. Language can be seen as a powerful tool that can either liberate or oppress people. The U.S. has a history of enforcing English upon non-English-speaking communities, and by incorporating Spanish into her written text, Medina challenges this dominance and asserts the importance and validity of her Mexican-American identity. Further, her use of both languages also reclaims and reshapes Spanish to better reflect the experiences of

Chicana women. The central figure in the work carries this on her as the text is visually written into her dress, emphasizing a history that she carries with her today. The content of the text also discusses the nature of borders as a construct that was used by colonizers to control indigenous peoples of Mexico and to recall particular moments in history where the US enacted political treaties that enforced colonization over time.

Second, the mural in the background of the image visually supports the Chicana through its powerful artistic reference to earlier cultures' aesthetic practices in Mexico. These murals represent a rich cultural heritage that is deeply rooted in the history of Mexico and its indigenous peoples from the tradition of public art that has been central to Mexican art for centuries.³⁵ In referencing the past, Medina recognizes the roots to the Chicana identity in art and continues to make it relevant today. Between the past and the present, the Chicana woman central to this image becomes dichotomized in an in-between state against the contemporary visual, verbal, and metaphorical borders that demonstrate a lack of space and representation in today's cultural landscape. Furthermore, by placing her at the center of the work and as the largest figure, the artist actively creates room for oneself and one's voice around and through the body. Her ability to walk between both worlds in the "borderlands" is Chicanas' way of seeing and critiquing the social and cultural structures that fail to fully represent them. Through her border art, Medina uses the Latina woman's body as a site of resistance, reclaiming Chicana identity from dominant cultural narratives and redefining it in her own terms. In this way, the body remains a cultural source of knowledge that celebrates and fights for social liberation through an embodied experience of identity.

³⁵ Anzaldúa, "Border Arte," 178.

In a similar vein, Eliana Miranda's work also addresses borders and border identity but she does it through a call for environmental justice and through an awareness of the effects of migration on the land. Rather than the subjects having physical identity, the artist makes references to Latinx culture through textiles and objects left behind during the migration process. In her 41 inch by 54 inch acrylic on wood panel painting *Dejar Atrás II (Leave Behind)*, 2022, Miranda depicts a scene of a mother holding her child as they make their way across the land that has been run dry from over producing and mass farming. At the center, the two figures have been washed out completely and their identities erased as they blend into the harsh and toxic background of the image. The mother figure is adorned with various fabrics and textiles that express the cultural roots that she carries with them on her back and in her hands. At the mother's feet sit two vibrant bags that may have been dropped or left behind during the family's journey. The great color and detail of the clothing and large bags express a connection to patterns and embroidery techniques that are unique to Mexico and Mexico's cultural history. Often those who are migrating across the Mexico-US border are unable to carry much if anything at all with them. Therefore, the bags on the ground become a representation of parts of cultural identity and heritage that get left behind when people cross countries and cultures. Through the migration process, Miranda also alludes to the liminal state that Chicana women embody neither fitting into either cultural world as they continue to cross physical and cultural borders.

Although the mother and child are at the center of the work, the underlying driving force of this image is the negative effects of colonization on both the land and indigenous Latinx families. Over farming and large agriculture farms is a major problem as it depletes and harms the environment over a short time, which disrupts the natural balance of the area's ecosystem and has lasting effects on future generation's access to fresh and locally produced food. As the US

colonized more of the Americas, they began to control more and more of the local resources. This has had a direct impact on the indigenous cultures both in the US and in Mexico as they have been forced to seek better quality of living. In raising awareness for both immigrant peoples and the land, Miranda's *Dejar Atrás II (Leave Behind)* is a strong example of social and environmental activism through border art. It is a call to heal the land and to look to the social and cultural forces that have caused such destruction. Through this work, the border artist is a guide to the healing of communities through the earth and one another.

Both Medina's *Here Before Borders* and Miranda's *Dejar Atrás II (Leave Behind)* embody this Chicana mestiza consciousness as the paintings navigate these borderlands to develop a new form that reflects their hybrid, multicultural identities. By reclaiming the body and defining it in their own terms, marginalized communities such as the Latinx community can challenge oppressive power structures that seek to control and erase their identities.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Each of the four artworks explored in this thesis project are testaments to the beauty, brilliance, and resilience of Black and Latinx women who navigate the past and present of intersectional identity. They provide distinct instances of reclamation of the body, self, and agency through artistic expression. Through their work, the artists are re-asserting rightful ownership of their bodies and autonomy. The ways they use the body to call forth more space and more representation for their experiences is both profound and steeped in the desire for a better future for themselves and their communities. Community and cultural heritage are important to the ways art is still being used as a powerful tool to represent and discuss these social and cultural experiences that reflect communities' current interests. Furthermore, in discussing and critiquing social and cultural forms of racial, gendered, and classist oppression that affects bodies of color, intersectional artists practice social activism that can be connected to feminist of color theorizing in a way that bridges the realm of thought to the visual. This is important to the future of art history, as we make room and relook at the ways we discuss and analyze works of art from non-Western/white European perspectives. Additionally, the field of women's and gender studies (WGS) has had a profound impact on my research, and I advocate for more cross disciplinary teaching and research for the field of art history. Cross-disciplinary research in this way offers greater accessibility to ideas, concepts, and theories that are being written about in WGS through the arts. It also further bridges underrepresented group's epistemologies around identity in particular that can reground the study of visual culture through embodied experiences which lie outside of the traditional art historical canon. By pairing WGS theory with the analysis of art and the ways it is used as a tool for social change, we can bridge

the less accessible realm of academia to a broader range of people who are making and sharing art. In this, art becomes the bridge between people in diverse communities that brings us closer. This notion of community building is at the heart of my research and *The Body as Voice* curated exhibition as I bring together more parts of the local DFW art community to celebrate just a few of the many incredible women of color artists in our area.

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