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Divine Reflections: Embodying Erzulie, Yemayá and Black Womanhood

Jordan Mayfield
jmayfiel@wellesley.edu

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Divine Reflections: Embodying Erzulie, Yemayá and Black Womanhood

Jordan Mason Mayfield

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of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in Art History
under the advisement of Dr. Nikki A. Greene

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INTRODUCTION

The art of Renée Stout and María Magdalena Campos-Pons both blur the boundary between the religious, the spiritual and the secular. They also center Black womanhood and Black female divine spirits in their artistic practices. This thesis analyzes how Stout and Campos-Pons employ the Black female body in their artworks to the Haitian loa, or deity, Erzulie and the Afro-Cuban oricha Yemayá. I will use Stout’s sculptural assemblage *Erzulie Dreams* and an untitled photograph from Campos-Pons’s Polaroid series *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá* as case studies for this visual investigation. I assert that both Stout’s and Campos-Pons’s artworks act as “secular altars,” evoking the presence of these Afro-Atlantic deities as archetypes of Black womanhood, venerating Black female identity.

This thesis explores Stout’s and Campos-Pons’s signification of Afro-Atlantic deities in their artworks because these diasporic belief systems offer definitions of womanhood and femininity outside of the Euro-Christian paradigm of female identity. The Haitian loa Erzulie and the Afro-Cuban oricha Yemayá are both national symbols of Black womanhood in their respective countries. The mythology surrounding these two deified women reflect the same hypersexual stereotypes forced onto women of African descent in the Americas. Having said that, Erzulie and Yemayá also embody the same principles of resistance and self-definition employed by Black women during their captivity in the Americas.

Both Stout and Campos-Pons view the Black female body as a site of embedded histories and diasporic memories. In *Erzulie Dreams* and *Breast and Bottle Feeding* from the *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá* series, Stout and Campos-Pons employ their own bodies in the formation of these works. This reflects a deeply feminist tradition of incorporating the body in art, visually
embodying the slogan “the personal is political.” Instead of referring to the realm of political science, this phrase embodies the politics of representation. Feminist artists employ the female form in art as acts of reclamation. In a male-dominated art world, the female body has been appropriated and mishandled by male artists without regard for female agency. By employing their own bodies in their artworks, female artists regain agency over their own body and personhood.

The potency of this reclamation is heightened in the works of Black female artists, who work against the history of the racialized body in art, in addition to the gendered and sexed body.¹ The very fabric of Black female identity has been formed and re-articulated by the experience of enslaved women of African descent. As a result, the visual representation of women of African descent is also connected to these trans-Atlantic legacies. In Euro-Western art, the Black female body, specifically the nude, has been either ignored or used to denote hyper-sexuality. This iconographic legacy results from the rape of enslaved Black women in the America. However, Stout and Campos-Pons depict their own nude forms in their artworks to celebrate the Black female body and the history archived within it.

¹ I am grateful to Professor Patricia Berman for introducing these theories regarding the body and feminist art in her seminar on the Arts of Dissent. Patricia Berman, “Performance, Body Art, and Social Sculpture” (class lecture, Arts of Dissent at Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA, April 11, 2018).
CHAPTER ONE

Altars to Black Womanhood in Renee Stout’s Erzulie Dreams

Renee Stout’s Erzulie Dreams doubles as both a secular assemblage and altar to the Haitian Vodou loa, or deity, Erzulie. Erzulie embodies love, sensuality, and womanhood in the Haitian Vodou pantheon. Resulting from the integration of West African religions in Haitian Vodou, Erzulie’s identity originates from deities in Kongo, Fon, and Yoruba belief systems. She has roots in Minona, a Fon deity associated with sorcery, motherhood, and sexuality, in addition to the Yoruba orisha Oshun who represents love and sensuality. Erzulie is also similar to Azili, the Dahomey water spirit from whom the alternate spelling of Erzulie’s name, Ezili, derives from. Erzulie is represented by a stylized heart (Fig. 1); this acts as her vèvé sign, or a drawing used to summon spirits in Vodou rituals.

Delving further into Erzulie’s identity becomes extremely complicated due to her different incarnations, Erzulie Freda and Erzulie Dantó. Erzulie Freda is viewed as a pure and innocent ‘mulatta,’ obsessed with love and vanity. Despite tales of her virginal purity, she is also rumored to be simultaneously lustful. Freda belongs to the Rada group of cool and temperate loa in the Haitian Vodou Pantheon. Her sister Erzulie Dantó is the exact opposite. She belongs to the Petwo group in the pantheon, consisting of loas perceived as fiery and malevolent.

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4 ‘Mulatta’ is an antiquated term from slavery in the Americas that refers to a biracial woman of African descent.
spirits. Motherhood is key to Dantò’s identity. Dantò is also unmarried and known to have multiple sexual partners. She only recognizes the merits of sexual intercourse as a means to reproduce. The multiplexity of Erzulie’s identity, as exemplified by her incarnations, is connected to the construction of different stereotypical depictions of enslaved Black women, from the sexual mistress to the fertile wet nurse.

As a deity that encompasses all of these diverse attributes, Erzulie is often compared to the contemporary Black woman. Due to this, Stout embodies Erzulie in her assemblages in order to celebrate Black womanhood. In this chapter, I investigate how Renee Stout’s *Erzulie’s Dreams* acts as an altar to the deity and to Black womanhood. I am specifically interested in how Stout employs the female body to both venerate Erzulie and Black female identity. I will first provide a biography of Stout’s life, interest in Afro-Atlantic belief systems, and feminist art-making practice. Afterwards, I will analyze how *Erzulie Dreams* signifies the Haitian loa and examine the visual methods Stout utilizes to celebrate Erzulie, Black womanhood, and the Black female body.

**Biography**

Renée Stout was born in 1958 in Junction City, Kansas, but was raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania with her parents and younger sister. Stout was constantly surrounded and supported by artists in her family. She inherited a sense of artistry and creativity from her father, who desired to pursue a career in art but became a craftsman in the family hauling business; her father had a habit of collecting found objects. From this, Stout developed a “creative spirit and
risk-taking personality.”

Her brother was a self-taught artist, and the both of them used any found material to create art. Her artist uncle was also a source of inspiration.

Stout’s artistic potential was recognized when she was in elementary school; she was chosen to participate in a young artists’ group made up of grade-schoolers from all around the Pittsburgh school district. She and the other children attended arts lectures and visual arts classes at the Carnegie Museum. This program forever changed Stout’s artistic career when she went on a field trip to the natural history section of the Carnegie Museum where she saw an *nkisi nkondi*, a sculpture from the Kongo peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The figure fascinated her. She was one of few people who saw its real beauty as art rather than as an ethnographic object.

Stout studied studio art at Carnegie-Mellon University in 1976 and graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1980. Her art mostly followed the realist tradition while at school due to an early interest in artist Edward Hopper and his contemporaries. Stout was interested in the everyday objects of peoples’ lives and the visual information about human interaction that can be expressed through realistic still-life paintings. However, after learning about the works of Betye Saar, Stout began to incorporate three-dimensional sculptural elements into her art-making practice. She also experimented with assemblage while participating in a residency program at the African-American Masters Artist in Residence Program at Northeastern University. Her

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6 Ibid.
7 Betye Saar is a Los Angeles based African American artist. Saar is well-known for her three-dimension works that explore Afro-Atlantic belief systems and deconstruct racial imagery in American history, specifically the Mammy figure. For information on Betye Saar see James Christen Steward, *Betye Saar: Extending the Frozen Moment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2005).
fascination with realism translates to her current sculptures and assemblages that explore Vodou in modern society. Stout began to employ a sense of material realism in her work by incorporating three-dimensional found objects in her assemblages.

When she moved to Washington DC in 1985, Stout often visited the National Museum of African Art and researched the arts of the African Diaspora. She was especially interested in the integration of West African cultural traditions into the cultures of African Diasporic communities in the Americas and the Caribbean. Stout’s familial connection to Catholicism and her interest in African culture led her to her investigation of Haitian Vodou and American Voodoo in her art. Her experiences with the nkisi nkondi at the Carnegie Museum and her time spent at the National Museum of African Art made Renée Stout curious about her own family’s connections with Hoodoo and Voodoo. Her mother told Stout that she once had a great aunt who was a minister as well as someone who practiced folk medicine and root work. At the beginning of the exhibition catalogue, *Readers, Advisors, and Storefront Churches: Renée Stout, A Mid-Career Retrospective*, is a piece of Stout’s that recounts an experience where she tried to learn more about Hoodoo in her family. Her mother told her about her father’s two sisters and the twin “Indian Head” tattoos on their backs; according to a Cajun man from New Orleans, this tattoo was called the “Rose of Sharon” and was a “healer’s mark” and signified a root worker. These clues made Renée Stout more curious about conjuring and the influence of West African culture

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in the African American community, and this curiosity is the dominant subject matter of her works.

Stout’s move to Washington DC and the shift in her art-making practice also marked an exploration of spirituality and Black feminism in her work. In 1988 Stout created a life-size cast of her body, declaring the nude sculpture as *Fetish #2* (Fig. 2). Although Stout depicts herself as a nude, she still has agency in her self-representation. This mixed media sculpture portrays Stout as an *nkisi nkondi*, a sculptural form from the Kongo peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. *Nkisi nkondi* are power figures employed by *nganga*, spiritual specialists and diviners, to mediate the powers of *nkisi* (plural: *minkisi*). *Nkisi* were believed to be the essence of the spirit and essentially “medicines of God” that were gifted to the Kongo peoples by divine spirits. By attaching these numerous bundles, or *minkisi*, onto her cast, Stout has empowered the Black female form. Stout also subverts the white male gaze in *Fetish #2* by openly inviting the viewer’s gaze. Due to this, Stout controls the gaze in her sculpture. Art historian Nikki Greene deems this Freudian strategy as “self-fetishism,” which “invites the viewer to transfer his or her yearning, sexual or religious, into the hollow shell.” The creation of this sculpture signals Stout’s initial visual examinations of Afro-Atlantic religion, African art forms, the female body, and Black feminism in her work.

Her familial connection to Catholicism and Christianity also influenced Stout’s Black feminist strategy of re-appropriating religious art in her 1992 assemblage *Trinity* (Fig. 3). This assemblage takes on the form of a fourteenth or fifteenth century Christian triptych altarpiece.

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from the intricate gold leaf inscriptions and motifs, to the shape and format of the altar’s wooden panels. However, instead of depicting the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit in this triptych, Stout has replaced the holy trinity with female subjects. Stout positions her own image in the center while the side panels depict her mother and sister. The opened triptych also includes the birthdates of Stout, her sister, and mother as well as “pictorial and written references to Christian and African religions, and a combination of encrypted and legible narratives that describe the personalities of each woman and their relationships to each other.”\(^\text{12}\) Annette Stott asserts that Stout employs feminist strategies in this assemblage by “transgressing the patriarchal and racial underpinnings of Western Christian devotional art.”\(^\text{13}\) Stout also complicates Euro-Christian notions of spirituality by embedding elements from African belief systems within the assemblage. When the triptych is closed, the front of *Trinity* is characterized by a “mirror-sealed abdominal container of Kongo power figures,” such as the *nkisi nkondi* that originally fascinated Stout as a young child.\(^\text{14}\)

**Embodying Erzulie in *Erzulie Dreams***

Renée Stout’s 1992 *Erzulie Dreams* experiments with the hybridity of the Black female body and the Afro-diasporic tradition of assemblage (Fig. 4). The top portion of this mixed media assemblage is composed of a nude Black female body. Stout utilized a cast of her own face for the head of this assemblage. She is armless and amputated at the torso. The body is attached to a rectangular base and a wooden cabinet table. The cabinet is left wide open, inviting

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\(^\text{14}\) Farrington, 261.
the viewer’s gaze and curiosity. Inside of this chamber lies a pelvic bone positioned on top of a thick square platform and two thinner rectangular bases. Below the wooden cabinet is an open table drawer, revealing a raised relief of a red stylized heart. The heart visually alludes to Erzulie’s vévé sign, a drawing used to evoke loas during Vodou rites (Fig. 1). With the inclusion of this vévé sign, Erzulie is called to watch upon this assemblage. At first glance this strange amalgamation of parts seems awkward and disparate. Although not anatomically correct, this hybrid form still composes a human body. The figure’s lower body is replaced by a cabinet, revealing her pelvic bone, and her legs are transmuted into the legs of a wooden table. This synthesis of Erzulie’s body and the cabinet reinforces Stout influence of Afro-Atlantic assemblage in her art-making practice.

The title of Stout’s assemblage, *Erzulie Dreams*, identifies this female figure as Erzulie, the Haitian Vodou loa of love and sensuality. Stout adorns Erzulie with brown, black, green and orange feathers on her shoulders. Her neck is also emblazoned with golden bands, while small brown pouches hang from her ears. A single braid, or cornrow, horizontally spans her forehead. At the top of the head is a miniscule tuff of hair surrounded by bands circumventing her crown. Stout’s preoccupation with adornment on this figure suggests that the sculpture embodies Freda, an incarnation of Erzulie. Erzulie Freda is often associated with the contradictory attributes of purity, innocence, luxury, and sensuality. Erzulie Freda belongs to the Rada group in the Haitian loa pantheon, which is “characterized by sweetness and even tempers.”

Erzulie Freda has a taste for the exquisite, from jewelry to clothing. Devotees tend to gift her with jewelry and perfume by placing these items on her Rada altar. During possession rituals, Erzulie is often

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given perfumes, jewelry, soaps, and creams; the possessed in these rituals always wear outfits of lace and satin. Additionally, in the center of Erzulie’s chest in *Erzulie Dreams* is an embossed rendering of a mirror, one of the loa’s favorite offerings.

Stout’s presentation of a bare-breasted Erzulie Freda also reflects mythology surrounding this incarnation of the Haitian loa. While Erzulie Freda’s love of luxury reflects the naivety of a young girl, she is also depicted as a seductress entranced by lust and sexuality. Stout pays a great deal of attention to Erzulie’s chest, which is covered by intricate lacework, with a rendering of a rose lying in the design’s center. The viewer’s eye is immediately drawn to the figure’s breasts. The roundness of her breasts is also emphasized by golden plates sitting on top of them and a red bead positioned on each nipple. In Euro-Western art historical canon, the portrayal of Black women with bare breasts usually signified their sexual availability. This visual trope correlates with Haitian mythology that portrays Freda as overtly hypersexual. In some interpretations, Erzulie Freda is characterized by uncontrollable sexual appetite, moving from one romantic partner to the next. Some devotees of Erzulie note that she has given birth to a child and hides this fact to appear younger in order to attract men; however, others believe she is barren. A vain spirit obsessed with love and desired by all men, she often “withdraws into herself” when things do not occur in her favor, pouting like a spoiled young girl. However, these hypersexual attributes given to Erzulie Freda exemplify misogynoir in the Haitian community, and in the African diaspora at large.

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16 Brown, 229
17 Ibid., 248.
18 Ibid., 250.
19 “Misogynoir” is a term coined by Dr. Moya Bailey at Northeastern University to describe the unique forms of misogyny faced by women of African descent. For more information, see Moya Bailey and Trudy, “On Misogynoir: Citation erasure, and Plagarism. Feminist Media Studies (March 13, 2018): doi: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1447395.
The one detail that diverges from Haitian iconography of Erzulie is Stout’s portrayal of Freda as a dark-skinned Black woman. This personification of Erzulie as a Black woman is also reinforced by Stout’s use of a cast of her own face to form Erzulie’s head. Some describe Erzulie Freda as a white woman, but her ethnicity differs between the diverse interpretations by devotees and ethnographers of Haitian Vodou. However, others simply use the antiquated colonial term ‘mulatta’ when referring to her, or simply call her a light-skinned woman of African descent. On Rada altars Freda is usually portrayed using a Catholic chromolithograph of Maria Dolorosa del Monte Calvario, a representation of the Virgin Mary (Fig. 5). Stout’s embodiment of the loa aligns more with Erzulie Dantó, who is represented by a chromolithograph of a Black Madonna (Fig. 6). The chromolithograph of the Mater Dolorosa reinforces Freda’s position as the white

20 Maria Dolorosa is also known as the Mater Dolorosa, or ‘mother of sorrows’ in Latin. This chromolithograph depicts a statue of the Mater that adorns the halls of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem in a shrine dedicated to Maria Dolorosa. This specific representation of the Virgin signifies “Mary at the station of the cross,” or Mary as she witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The main component of this image is Mary grasping the bejeweled dagger. The inclusion of the dagger is thought to originate in medieval German iconography. Interpreted as “an expression of compassion,” the sword alludes to the pain Mary felt during the torture of her son. The employment of the chromolithograph of the Mater Dolorosa in altars to Erzulie reflects a comparison between the Virgin Mary and the loa. As a religion that syncretizes West and Central African belief systems with Christianity, it is no surprise that Vodou altars incorporate Catholic iconography. For practitioners of Vodou, Erzulie is a mother figure. The loa is considered a “mother of sorrows” while witnessing the mass enslavement of her Haitian children.


21 This Black Madonna refers to the Mater Salvatoris, which loosely translates to ‘mother savior’ in Latin. She is known as the “Black Madonna of Czestochowa” in Polish tradition. In The Black Madonna in Latin America and Europe: Tradition and Transformation, Dr. Malgorzata Oleszkiewicz-Perabla suggests that the association between Erzulie Dantó and the Black Madonna of Czestochowa originated during the Haitian Revolution. During the peak of fighting during the revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte sent Polish soldiers to Haiti in order to resolve the rebellion after failed campaigns by French forces in 1802. However, after the Polish legions faced the same failure some rebelled against the French and joined the Haitian forces. After the revolution and creation of the independent nation of Haiti, some Polish soldiers remained on the island; this Polish population brought their cultural traditions to the island, including images of
Virgin Mary in Haitian visual culture. However, Stout’s interpretation of Erzulie Freda in *Erzulie Dreams* asserts her identity as a Black woman.

**Deifying the Black Female Nude in *Erzulie Dreams***

In *Erzulie Dreams*, Renée Stout works against a legacy of hyper-sexuality associated with the Black female nude. Both assemblages feature nude Black women, emphasizing their bare breasts. Iconography surrounding the Black female nude was originally employed by Euro-Western artists to suggest that these women had beast-like sexuality. The French painter François Malepart de Beaucourt’s 1786 oil painting *Portrait of a Negro Slave* exemplifies this visual trope (Fig. 7). Beaucourt renders the enslaved Black woman with her exposed left breast next to a platter of tropical fruit. This positioning suggests that, similar to the fruit, the enslaved Black female’s breasts are readily available to all that wish to partake. This visual relationship also suggests the reproductive qualities and fertility of enslaved Black women.

22 For more examples of this iconography please refer back to chapter two’s discussion on the art of Agostino Brunius and illustrations from John Stedmen’s *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revoluted Negroes of Surinam*.

23 In the chapter “Racing Childhood,” Charmaine A. Nelson investigates the exploitation of the reproductive capacities of enslaved women of African descent. After the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 there was a need to sustain the population of enslaved peoples throughout the Americas. Due to this reproduction became a form of labor for enslaved women of African descent. This also reduced Black womanhood to her re-productive organs also contributed to the hyper-sexualization of the Black female body. See Charmaine A. Nelson,
Black women in art was employed as a marker of their “primitive” status and hyper-sexuality. Stout’s presentation of a bare breasted Black woman in *Erzulie Dreams* alludes to a greater history of the representation of enslaved women of African descent in the Americas. In these artworks, bare breasts signaled the sexual availability of these women created by a legacy of rape of enslaved Black women by white slave masters on American plantations.

However, Stout shatters this history of the sexually available Black female nude in her assemblage. This voyeuristic view of the Black female body is also a deliberate strategy employed by Stout in *Erzulie Dreams*. As discussed previously in this chapter, Stout’s work is defined by what art historian Nikki Greene calls “self-fetishism.”

By using a cast of her own head in this assemblage, and by employing Black womanhood as the subject matter of her work, Stout “casts herself as subject and object.” In the case of *Erzulie Dreams*, the fetishization of the Black female body is emphasized by the dismembering of the figure’s arms and lower body. Due to this, the Black female form is reduced to a sexually charged portion of the female body.

However, this was intentional on Stout’s part. By boldly presenting the nude Black female body, Stout is able to challenge the power of the male gaze. The nude Black female body is usually available to the male gaze because these images were created by male artists for a predominantly male viewership. However, Stout’s *Erzulie Dreams* reimagines the Black female nude created in the eyes of a Black woman. The Black female nude torso is not employed in *Erzulie Dreams* at

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“Racing Childhood: Representations of Black Girls in Canadian Art,” in *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 40-43.


the mercy of white male artists, but by a Black female artist who personally has to reconcile with her own personhood in the creation of this assemblage.

The Black Female Body as a Ritual Object

Renée Stout also empowers Black womanhood by incorporating aspects of power figures from Kongo and Fon cultures in Central and West Africa in *Erzulie Dreams*. Although Erzulie Dantó and Erzulie Freda are represented by chromolithographs of Maria Dolorosa del Monte Calvario and the Mater Salvatoris/Black Madonna of Czestochowa on Vodou altars, Stout’s assemblages break from traditional representations of the loa (Figs. 5-6). Rather than incorporate the chromolithographs to evoke Erzulie, Stout sought inspiration from Fon and Kongo artistic traditions in *Erzulie Dreams*. The Fon, of present-day Nigeria and Togo, and the Kongo, of present-day Democratic Republic of the Kongo, peoples were stolen from their homelands and taken to Haitian, and other locations in the Americas, during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Due to this, Fon and Kongo art forms influenced both art and culture in Haiti, and throughout the Caribbean. In both of these assemblages, Stout aesthetically borrows from Kongo *nkisi nkondi* and Fon *bocio*, power figures commissioned as protectorate objects.

*Nkisi Nkondi* are anthropomorphic wooden sculptures characterized by medicinal bundles called *bilango* filled with *minkisi* (Fig. 8). *Minkisi*, the plural of *nkisi*, refers to an intangible spiritual energy, or life force, that governs Kongo belief systems. Since they were believed to have been gifted to the Kongo peoples by divine spirits these bundles act as “medicines of

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God.” Minkisi could be used to heal and protect, as well as demonstrate vast destructive energies. The word nkondi translates to “hunter” in the Kongo language. Although these objects have been misinterpreted as “Voodoo dolls” in the Euro-Western imagination, nkisi nkondi are primarily used for healing and protection. The nkisi nkondi would serve as a means to protect those who commission them. Attached to these figures are bilongo, or bags filled with medicinal herbs and properties, that would empower the object. In Erzulie Dreams, the bilongo hanging from the goddess’s ears help to visually located the assemblage in this Kongo and Haitian aesthetic tradition.

Additionally, the top half of Erzulie Dreams is reminiscent of Fon bocio figures (Fig. 9). These sculptures are carved from wood and portray male and female figures. Bocio are accessorized by multiple objects ranging from handmade beads, ropes, chains, etc. Bocio figures are commissioned for purposes similar to nkisi nkondi: for protection and health. These sculptures mediate the power of bo, what the Fon people believe is the essence of life. Kongo Bilango and Fon bo are also the African predecessors to the Haitian pakèt kongo, highly decorated pouches of medicinal herbs (Fig. 10). By depicting Erzulie as either an nkisi nkondi or a bocio figure, Stout is able to empower the deity. As an archetype for Black women, this empowerment also conjures the strength and resiliency of Black womanhood throughout transatlantic history.

The influence of the anthropomorphic quality of West and Central African ritual objects and altars on Stout’s Erzulie Dreams also reinforces the paramount role that the body has in the

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29 MacGaffey, 46-47.
empowerment of Black womanhood. Both these Kongo and Fon sculptural, as well as other West and Central African ritual art forms, rely on employing the body as a site of spiritual invocation. Yoruba altars stress the function of an altar as the face of a deity, in order to become a “threshold for communications with the other world.”\(^{30}\) Representing the human body is paramount to the construction of Fon Vodun altars as well. Vodun altars are created by sculpting mud mounds into anthropomorphic forms.\(^{31}\) Art historian Suzanne Preston Blier also notes that these mounds would “incorporate distinguishing physical” features in accordance with the deity they embody. For example, an altar mound dedicated to Minona would have breasts, similar to Stout’s embodiment of Erzulie in *Erzulie Dreams*.\(^{32}\) By incorporating these aesthetic traditions which rely upon the human body in her assemblages, Stout created life within these anthropomorphic figures. While the vévé signs in this assemblage invokes the presence of Erzulie, the sculpted human figures provide a vessel for the loa and for Black womanhood. There is a palpable sense of potency resulting from this altar to Black womanhood being created from an existing Black body.

**Fragmentation and Hybridity**

In *Erzulie Dreams* Renée Stout presents a fragmented Black female body. Stout amputates Erzulie’s arms and lower body, leaving only her torso and head. In *The Body in


\(^{32}\) Minona is a Fon deity associated with sorcery, motherhood and sexuality. It is believed that Erzulie originates from this goddess in addition to the Yoruba orisha Oshun. Ibid, 67.
Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity, art historian Linda Nochlin suggests that fragmented body parts can “function metonymically, as synecdoches or part images of the body as a whole.”33 If this statement is then applied to the forms in Stout’s assemblages, then the Black female body is signified simply by torso. However, this defines and reduces the Black female form to her bare breasted torso. Nochlin complicates this even further by asserting that the “ambiguous sexual domination” of the female torso “is both castrated and phallic at once,” referring to both the shape and amputated quality of the fragmented form.34 The sexualized visual reading of the female torso is accentuated by the legacy of hyper-sexuality forced onto Black womanhood and the visual tradition of depicting enslaved women of African descent with exposed bare breasts.

In addition to presenting simply a fragmented form to the viewer in Erzulie Dreams, Stout introduces a hybrid form of Black womanhood that reflects stereotypes forced onto Black womanhood during slavery in the Americas. Although she is still devoid of arms, the upper body of Erzulie in Erzulie Dreams is attached to a cabinet table. Resulting from this hybridity, Erzulie’s lower body is composed of an open cabinet while her legs are embodied by the wooden table legs. Stout’s choice of materiality is quite curious for this new embodiment of Black womanhood. Inside of the open cabinet lies a bare pelvic bone. Underneath this open cavity is the heart of Erzulie, lying inside of the slightly open table drawer. Why is Erzulie’s pelvic bone available to all that view this assemblage? And why does her heart lie in the same region as her pelvic bone? Stout’s transmutation of Erzulie’s body charts the reception of Black womanhood during and after the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The open cavity that reveals Erzulie’s pelvic bone...

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34 Nochlin, 49.
reflects the presumed sexual availability of enslaved Black women in trans-Atlantic history. The placement of the heart below the pelvic bone signifies this shift in the understanding of Black female identity. With regards to Erzulie, the heart serves as the loa’s vèvé sign, a drawing that evokes her presence in this assemblage and in all Vodou rituals. Resulting from Erzulie’s role as an archetype for Black womanhood, this heart can also serve as the core of Black female identity. The positioning of the pelvic bone above this heart represents the eclipsing of Black female identity by this legacy of hyper-sexuality.

By crafting Erzulie’s lower body with a table and cabinet Stout also archives the legacies of slavery inscribed on the Black female body. In French Caribbean colonies, enslaved peoples of African descent were referred to as “bien meubles,” or personal property.35 While this phrase was repurposed in the French colonial context to signify chattel slavery, the French word “meubles” denotes movable furniture.36 In the French Caribbean, the Black body was reduced to an object that could be controlled at the will of their slave master. This objectification was heightened in the case of enslaved Black women. A the “personal property” of these slave masters, enslaved Black women reduced to objects of sexual desires in the eyes of white slave masters. Stout’s assemblage recounts this linguistic history through physically embedding it within the female form.37

37 I am grateful to Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson for making me aware of the linguistic history behind “bien meubles” and to the connection between this term and the iconography of furniture found in Erzulie Dreams.
Charmaine A. Nelson, conversation with the author, April 11, 2018.
Although Stout’s hybrid assemblage archives stereotypes of Black female sexuality from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, *Erzulie Dreams* also presented Stout with the opportunity to assemble Black womanhood in her own image. As an assemblage, *Erzulie Dreams* is composed of seemingly disparate objects, from the Kongo *bilango* medicinal bundles to the wooden cabinet and table. However, this amalgamation of diverse materials reflects the Diasporic condition of communities of African descent in the Americas. The medium of assemblage is nothing more than a three-dimensional form of collage, the art of layering contrasting elements together until something novel and unique is formed. Art historian Kobena Mercer asserts that collage’s potency lies in its “unexpected juxtapositions to create something new that exists as an independent form in its own right.”

As a dimensional form of collage, assemblage also reflects this Diasporic quality of West and Central African culture transmuting into the infinite cultures that characterize Black communities in the Americas and the Caribbean. Stout employs this dynamic quality of assemblage in her works in order to fully explore the infinite scope of Black womanhood.

Stout’s employment of fragments in *Erzulie Dreams* in order to create hybrid visual forms of Black female identity reflects her own quest to reconstruct Black diasporic identity. In the exhibition catalogue *Readers, Advisors, and Storefront Churches: Renée Stout, A Mid-Career Retrospective*, Stout contemplates her art-making practice:

> I am trying to create art that helps me put together what are only fragments, to try and create a whole, so that I can gain a better understanding of my own existence.

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These “fragments” that Stout works with are the intangible elements of diasporic memory that connect peoples of African descent across the globe. In *Erzulie Dreams*, Stout is wrestling with fragments of Black womanhood, from stereotypes of hyper-sexuality to expressions of Black female identity. She visually appends these conflicting elements of the Black female trans-Atlantic past by fashioning the Black female body out of a plaster cast of Stout’s own head, an armless sculpture of a Black female’s torso, a miniature cabinet, a pelvic bone, and a table. *Erzulie Dreams* is not an attempt to replicate the aesthetic forms, or the identities, of Central and West African cultures. Instead, Stout provides a new visual definition of the Black female body, one shaped by the hybridity of the experience of peoples of African descent in the Americas.

**Erzulie’s Mirror: The Loa and Embodying Black Womanhood**

Perhaps the fragments that Renée Stout employed in her assemblages are also the infinite particles that compose the whole of Black womanhood, manifested in the different incarnations of Erzulie. As a visual metaphor for Black womanhood, Erzulie’s existence mirrors the pain and trauma of centuries of slavery in the Caribbean. In “Erzulie: A Woman’s History of Haiti,” humanist Joan Dayan states that “Erzulie continues to articulate and embody a memory of slavery, intimacy, and revenge.”40 Specifically, Erzulie acts as the collective memory of the rape of enslaved Black women by their white slave owners. And from this memory, a long-lasting legacy of hyper-sexuality was forced onto Black womanhood. Although one cannot recount the history of Erzulie without including the objectification of the Black female body by white slave masters, her presence also invokes the resiliency of Black women and the infinite scope of Black

female identity. The incarnations of Erzulie Freda and Dantó reveal diverse aspects of Black womanhood and exemplify the infinite scope of Black female identity. In *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, Joan Dayan asserts that Erzulie “dramatizes the cult of mystification: the splitting of women into objects to be desired or feared.”⁴¹ By combining the different personalities associated with different incarnations of Erzulie, one may be able to piece together a fuller picture of Black womanhood.

Erzulie Dantò acts as an archive of the survival skills demonstrated by enslaved Black women. She embodies the mature Black woman, freed from stereotypes formed during the height of slavery. Erzulie Dantò is often seen as unfeminine in comparison to her fairer sister, Erzulie Freda. As an unmarried mother, Erzulie Dantò also gives a voice to single Black mothers. In *Mama Lola*, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown accurately states that Erzulie Dantò “does not imitate the socially empowered woman,” rather she champions the perspective of “poor women’s stories.”⁴² As a Black woman who freely expresses her sexuality, Erzulie Dantò also disrupts the connotation of shame that is associated with sexuality. Erzulie Freda’s embrace of her sexuality also disrupts the usual hypersexual image forced onto women of African descent. Erzulie Freda is the most contradictory incarnation of the loa. She is simultaneously described as virginal and pure, yet is also claimed to be a seductress. These contradictions are rooted in misogynoir within the Afro-diasporic community and its sexist projections onto Erzulie. In “Erzulie: A Woman’s History of Haiti,” Joan Dayan explains that, “the discourse on Ezili has most often perpetuated masculine fantasies of women.”⁴³ However, Freda also exemplifies Black women’s right to self-define their sexuality and identity. Stout

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⁴² Brown, 255.  
meticulously chose Erzulie because she “resonates more for” Stout “as a contemporary woman.”

Stout meticulously chose Erzulie because she “resonates more for” Stout “as a contemporary woman” than other female deities from Afro-Atlantic religions such as Ochún, Yemeyá, or Oya. Erzulie specifically is an important deity to the women of African descent in the Americas due to the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Erzulie is the result of “Ochun morph[ing] into all that she had to become in order to help Haitian women of African descent navigate and combat the circumstances they found themselves in the early colonialism of the diaspora.” Erzulie personifies all of the suffering and simultaneous strength of women of African descent and their will to persevere during Slavery. Erzulie belongs to a unique class of deities that arose out of the Afro-Caribbean community, “were born out of the slaves’ awareness of the demands and accouterments of their masters” and “were able to evolve to meet the spiritual needs of the people.” This evolution allowed people of the African Diaspora, especially Black women, to overcome oppression and tragedy in the Americas. Erzulie embodies all of the “complexities and contradictions” of being a contemporary Black woman, vulnerable, yet strong. According to Stout, Erzulie embodies:

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44 Renée Stout, personal communication, May 2016.
45 Ochún, Yemayá, and Oya are all Yoruba orichas that are venerated throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. Ochún is a river goddess associated with love and sensuality. Yemayá is the Great Mother of all bodies of water and regulates the fertility of all women throughout the world. Lastly, Oya is the oricha of the winds and storms.
Renée Stout, email interview with the author, May 2016.
46 Ibid.
48 Renée Stout, email interview with the author (Jordan Mason Mayfield), May 2016.
“love, beauty, wealth, justice, mother, seductress, the avenger who will fight back when wronged,” and infinitely more possibilities.

Stout visually encodes Erzulie’s role as a reflection of Black Womanhood in *Erzulie Dreams* by incorporating one of the loa’s favorite offerings: a mirror. In the sculpted female form of *Erzulie Dreams* lies an intricate embossed design on the figure’s chest. The design resembles the back of an antique metal mirror; Stout re-incorporates the front of this mirror in her 2008 drawing *Erzulie’s Mirror* (Fig. 11). The presence of this mirror in *Erzulie Dreams* simulates a metaphysical moment of possession and rapture of the viewer by the loa. Stout literally positions this mirror in the center of the figure’s chest in *Erzulie Dreams*, signaling that Erzulie is deeply embedded in the core of Black womanhood. The mirror also presents the idea of the double and the double-consciousness of being a Black woman. Black women must constantly reconcile what they see of themselves in the mirror and what the world perceives of them as the “Other.” The placement of the mirror in *Erzulie Dreams* also reinforces the complexities and infinite dimensions of Black womanhood.

**Conclusion**

Renée Stout’s assemblage *Erzulie Dreams* revolutionizes the way in which Erzulie is visually represented. As a true assemblage in both physical and metaphysical form, this “secular altar” employs Haitian Vodou ideology while looking back to the aesthetics of the Fon and Kongo, the cultural origins of Vodou. Stout’s assemblages exemplify her attempt to envision novel visual codes to evoke Erzulie. The employment of hybridity and found objects in *Erzulie Dreams* reflects

\[49\text{ Ibid.}\]
the fragments that compose Black womanhood and the Black experience in the Americas. Her use of Fon and Kongo religious arts also support her embodiment of Erzulie and Black womanhood in *Erzulie Dreams*. The human figures in both of these power objects reflect the importance of employing anthropomorphic forms as embodiments of deities in Afro-Atlantic altars. Stout’s assemblages reflect back on this Afro-Diasporic aesthetic tradition by creating these hybrid forms of Erzulie. Stout also elevates the Black female nude by liberating it from hypersexual depictions of female nudes by male artists. Renée Stout’s secular altar envisions the female form of Erzulie as an archetype for Black women and to venerate Black womanhood.
CHAPTER TWO

Embodying Yemayá in *When I am Not Here Estoy Allá*

In *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá*, María Magdalena Campos-Pons embodies the Afro-Cuban oricha Yemayá in order to both venerate Black womanhood across the diaspora and to chronicle the histories of enslaved women of African descent during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As a national symbol throughout Cuba, Yemayá represents widely celebrated definition of Black female identity. The mythology surrounding Yemayá in Cuba reflect the same legacies of survival and stereotyping left by enslaved African women on the island. This chapter will examine the visual codes employed by Campos-Pons to evoke the presence of Yemayá. I will first explore Campos-Pons’s biography, paying close attention to her employment of feminist art-making strategies and her exploration of photographic installation. The remainder of this chapter will analyze Campos-Pons’s use of her own body in *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá*, focusing on her reclamation of the Black female nude and on fragmentation as a feminist compositional tool.

**Biography**

María Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in 1959 in the town of La Vega, in the province of Matanzas, a former sugar plantation. She was raised by her mother, Estervina Pons Leon, an elementary school teacher, and by her father, Sotero Arcadio Campos Suri, a farmer. As a young child, Campos-Pons’s artistic expression was nurtured growing up under Fidel Castro’s rule of Cuba. After the 26th of July Movement, Castro stressed the power of art to elevate Cuba in the modern world. Due to this, artistic education and literacy became a main component in
Cuban schools. At only thirteen years old she was accepted into the Escuela Provincial de Arte’s fine arts department. As a teenager, Campos-Pons moved to Havana to study at the prestigious Escuela Nacionale de Arte where notable artists such as Wilfredo Lam were once employed as instructors. While attending the Escuela Nacionale de Arte from 1976 to 1979 she began developing deeply feminist art-making practices. Campos-Pons centered motherhood in her early works which depicted mothers and their children. Her style during this time was characterized by expressionist and figurative tendencies, but evolved after she came under the tutelage of Cuban abstract artist Antonio Vidal. From this point on she was interested in disrupting the art historical canon’s representation of form using abstraction. In 1980, Campos-Pons’s enrolled in the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), where her artwork continued to explore womanhood, with a focused investigation on sexuality and womanhood.

Her first solo exhibition Acoplamientos, or Couplings, at the University of Havana’s Gallery L investigated issues of policing the female body in Cuba. Her two mixed media paintings Cinturón de castidad (Chastity Belt) and Anticonceptivo (Contraception) are large-scale paintings, confronting the viewer with female sexuality and notions regarding reproductive rights in Cuba (Fig.12-13). These paintings include imagery that symbolize vaginal and phallic

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forms, representing the unequal power dynamics between men and women in Cuban society. Campos-Pons further explored womanhood and sensuality when she studied abroad at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in 1980 while pursuing her master’s degree at ISA. Her installation *Jardín Erótico (Erotic Garden)*, featured large wall paintings of fleshy vegetation interacting with phallic wooden staffs inter-dispersed throughout a room. Campos-Pons also became interested in the intersections of ethnicity, race, and gender while and after studying at Massachusetts College of Art. In 1988, she collaborated with Neil Leonard, an interdisciplinary artist and musician, to create a performance recorded on Super-8 film called *Rito de iniciación*, or *Rite of Initiation* (fig. 14). The pair would later marry in 1990. The video depicted Campos-Pons re-enacting and re-imagining a cleansing ritual during a Santería rite of initiation, marking her entry into womanhood as an Afro-Cuban woman. This ritual serves as a metaphor for Campos-Pons’s life as an Afro-Cuban woman and a celebration of these intersecting identities.

Campos-Pons also began to experiment with other forms of media, namely photography, during and after her time in Massachusetts, after learning more about Black female photographer Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. Both Weems and Simpson use their own bodies in their photographs, a trait that Campos-Pons would share later in her career. Carrie Mae Weems was a visiting professor at Hampshire College during the same time that Campos-Pons was studying at the Massachusetts College of Art in 1988. During that time, Weems’s practice mostly consisted of grid installations of black and white photographs that question Black female subjectivity in the midst of the white male gaze in Western art history. The two met after Weems gave a presentation at the Massachusetts College of Art. After their first meeting, Weems invited Campos-Pons to give a lecture for her class at Hampshire College. They have been friends ever
since. Campos-Pons was specifically captivated by Weem’s 1987-1988 *Ain’t Jokin’* series, which consisted of photographs of African Americans paired with captions of racist stereotypes and jokes. The photograph *Mirror, Mirror* from this series considers a racial re-telling of the tale of Snow White, and depicts a Black woman peering into a mirror while a mysterious woman cloaked in white glares back at her (Fig. 15). The text underneath the photograph reads:

Looking into the mirror, the Black woman asked, “mirror, mirror on the wall, who’s the finest of them all? / The mirror says, “Snow White, you Black bitch, and don’t you forget it!!!”

This photograph comments on the Eurocentric beauty standards, asserting that whiteness will always be a criterion for defining “who’s the finest of them all,” excluding women of African descent.

Lorna Simpson’s work continuously considers the identity, double consciousness, and Black female body in the face of the white male body. Similar to Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson had been creating photographs organized in a grid. Campos-Pons first encountered the photographs of Lorna Simpson in an exhibition catalogue that Neil Leonard brought with him to Cuba during the late 1980s. Campos-Pons remembers three examples from the catalogue, *Portrait* (1988), *Stereo Styles* (1988) and *Gestures/Reenactments* (1985). Both *Stereo Styles* and *Gestures/Reenactments* are composed of multiple framed photographs arranged in a grid. These photographs analyze the performative aspect of everyday life. Simpson captures the fragmented posturing of a Black man in the six photographs that make-up *Gestures/Reenactments* (Fig. 16). Below these images are short captions of truncated dialogue

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52 Freiman, 30.  
53 Ibid, 29.
and narration from the subject’s everyday life. *Stereo Styles* presents two rows of five photographs of Simpson with the back of her head facing the viewer (Fig. 17). In each photograph Simpson’s hair is fashioned in different braided styles. In between the two rows is text reading “Daring / Sensible / Severe / Long&Silly / Boyish / Ageless / Silly / Magnetic / Country Fresh / Sweet.” The text works in dialogue with the photographs to suggest the act of categorizing Black women into different types. The title *Stereo Styles* helps to reinforce these stereotypical pairings between the different descriptors and hairstyles. Simpson continues her examination of Black female subjectivity and the gaze in *Portrait* (Fig. 18). *Portrait* is an intimate view of a Black woman’s profile. Rather than depicting the woman’s face, the photograph crops the profile so the ear is the center of the composition. Below the photograph is a caption that reads “they tried to whisper sweet nothings.” While this phrase refers to words of affection shared between loved ones, it also has a sexual connotation. Campos-Pons’s introduction to the work of Weems and Simpson encouraged her to create her own photographic installations exploring Blackness, womanness, and Cubaness.

Undoubtedly affected by Weems and Simpson, Campos-Pons has employed the grid in painting and photography in order to formulate visual treatises on exile, displacement, identity, race, and gender. After marrying Neil Leonard in 1990, Campos-Pons went on to complete a painting fellowship at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. While there, she completed the 1990 painting *Everything Is Separated By Water, Including My Brain, My Heart, My Sex, My House*, from which the title for her notable mid-career retrospective at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2007 originates (Fig. 19). When she continued her fellowship at the Banff Centre in 1991 she created *Umbilical Cord* and *Birth Certificate*. In both of these works, Campos-Pons employs the grid spatially to explore her family ties and identity in the
midst of her displacement from Cuba and the mother continent. This employment of the intersections of a grid to parallel the intersectionality of Afro-Cuban identity became a key formal element in Campos-Pons’s artistic practice.

Campos-Pons’s 2007 mid-career retrospective at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water* exhibited photographic installations concerning Afro-Cuban female identity and spirituality, including her first notable Polaroid series *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá* series, from 1994 and 1997. The series presents different polyptych groupings of Polaroids that portray fragmented images of Campos-Pons. *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá, Identity Could Be a Tragedy* is composed of two rows of three photographs, each depicting slightly altered images of Campos-Pons from above her breasts to her head (Fig. 20). Her body is covered in a translucent coating with the text “identity could be a tragedy” scrawled across her chest. In the second row of photographs, the coating on Campos-Pons becomes whiter and whiter. Eventually Campos-Pons body fades into the background. These photographs comment on the liminality of Campos-Pons life as an Afro-Cuban ex-patriot living in Boston, MA. Not only has Campos-Pons been displaced from Cuba, but also from Africa as a person of Nigerian descent. This series is most reminiscent of Lorna Simpson’s and Carrie Mae Weems’s artistic practice of utilizing their own bodies in grid formations. Regarding this work, Campos-Pons explained the following:

In this project I want to reflect on the components of the African traditions (that somehow was and still is part of my life), and at the same time those traditions pertaining to the new country that I now inhabit. Where do I belong and what belongs to me? I want to analyze the formal spaces between photography and

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54 Freiman, 35.
painting (when I place my body and my skin as a painting surface), between two-dimensional and three dimensional, between rite and performance. The person that I am and the others that I was, or wish I were.\(^{55}\)

In addition to her exploration of identity and displacement, Campos-Pons also mediates between diasporic and contemporary notions of Black womanhood. Two untitled editions in this series specifically reference Yoruba orichas Yemayá and Ochún in order to personify Black female identity in her Polaroids. Campos-Pons continued this formal and ideological exploration in her other photographic installations, such as *Susurro (Whispers)*, *Replenishing*, *Elevata*, and *The Calling* (Figs. 21-24).

**Reflecting Black womanhood and trans-Atlantic History in Breast and Bottle Feeding**

In María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s 1994 untitled large-scale Polaroid,\(^{56}\) commonly referred to as *Breast and Bottle Feeding*, from the *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá* series, the combined imagery of Campos-Pons’s nipples (representing motherhood), and the wooden boat on Campos-Pons’s oceanic form (archiving the trans-Atlantic slave trade) evoke the presence of the Afro-Cuban oricha Yemayá (Fig. 25).\(^{57}\) Yemayá is guardian of the world’s oceans and seas. The blue paint on Campos-Pons’s body is one of the most important signifiers of Yemayá in

\(^{55}\) María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Artist Statement: When I am not here. Estoy allá*, undated, as quoted in Freiman, 52.

\(^{56}\) Campos-Pons’s large scale 20 x 24 inch Polaroids are created by a 5 feet tall camera, weighing 235 pounds. Polaroid started producing these cameras in 1977 and 1978. However, these large-scale cameras are no longer produced due to the demise of the Polaroid company. Only five of these cameras are still used in contemporary studios. “20 x 24 Studio FAQs,” 20 x 24 Studio, accessed April 26, [www.20x24studio.com/?page_id=1653](http://www.20x24studio.com/?page_id=1653).

Breast and Bottle Feeding as Campos-Pons’s transformation into the ocean reflects Yemayá’s role as the mother oricha of the oceans. She originates from the Yoruba orisha, Yemoja, which translates to “Mother of Fish.”\textsuperscript{58} In the Yoruba tradition, Yemoja’s association with water directly correlates to her role as a mother. As a vital substance for human life, water is associated with creation. The birth of life that water provides to all organic life on Earth relates to the role of a mother. Additionally, in the Yoruba mythology Yemoja literally transforms into water and becomes the Ogun River near Lagos, Nigeria.\textsuperscript{59}

Within the photograph, Campos-Pons’s entire body is covered in blue paint, and only upon closer inspection can one see her dark brown skin underneath. The contours of her body stand apart from the blue background through the intense rendering of shadow on the figure’s arm and lower torso. Rather than painting a flat hue of blue, Campos-Pons renders small white serpentine lines across her body. These white lines signify stylized waves, creating the entire

\textsuperscript{58} Deities in Yoruban Afro-Atlantic religions are referred to as “orishas.” In the Afro-Cuban context, these spiritual beings are referred to by a slightly altered spelling, “orichas.” I will use the word “oricha” when referring to the Afro-Cuban Yemayá throughout this chapter and will employ the spelling “orisha” when referencing the original Yoruban deity, Yemoja. Ibid, 131.

\textsuperscript{59} Yemoja was believed to be a beautiful woman who only had one breast and thought it would prevent her from marrying. However, she soon met the orisha of war and iron, Ògún, who was feared Ògún for his fierce bloodshot eyes. Ògún promised Yemoja that he would marry and protect her so long as she didn’t ridicule his intense eyes. After years of marriage Ògún decides to cook soup for Yemoja. Unfortunately, in the process of doing so he dropped the soup pot, woke Yemoja up, and gravely upset her. As Yemoja shouted at him, Ògún knocked her to the ground. After regretting his actions, Ògún tried to pacify Yemoja by kneeling near her and stroking her breast. When Ògún tried to hold Yemoja she transformed into water, evading his touch. From that point on Yemoja became an orisha and has since been associated with oceans and the Ògun River.


Ibid, 135.
ocean in the Black female form. Two bottles attached by a white cord hang from the figure’s neck. The bottles drip milk onto Campos-Pons breasts, yet her own nipples do not produce their own milk. The white-milky liquids blend into the white waves of the figure, making one question whether these white lines are in fact waves or traces of the leaking bottle milk. Campos-Pons engages the viewer in the image by extending her arms out to the photograph’s foreground. She presents a light brown wooden object to the viewer. This wooden object was carved into the form of a simple boat, devoid of a sail. The boat appears to be wading within the ocean that resides within the Black female form.

Through the wave-like motifs painted onto Campos-Pons’s body, she infers the haunting archive of Black womanhood not only the female form, but also the shared histories of peoples of African descent during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Campos-Pons’s body acts as the background of the image itself, letting the wooden boat occupy the foreground. The wooden boat that she holds in her hands also evokes the memory of commercial ships, jammed with the bonded and chained bodies of enslaved Africans. The boat’s positioning on top of this peculiar ocean reminds emphasizes the diasporic memory of the mammoth-sized ships that operated as floating prisons that roamed the Atlantic, stealing Black bodies from their ancestral homes in West and Central Africa. Enslaved peoples held captive on faced inhumane conditions where they were shackles to one another and subject to a myriad of infectious diseases. It was not uncommon for a deceased enslaved body to still be chained amongst the living on the boat. The wooden boat chronicles this history as it pertains to enslaved women of African descent. Not only did these women face the dangers of inhabiting a ship overtaken by illness, but also the risk of being hypersexualized for their reproductive abilities and as ‘companions’ to the free men
aboard the ships. Campos-Pons poses herself in relation to the boat as an approachable signification of this gendered history of trauma, pain, and death.\footnote{For more information on gendered studies of the experiences of enslaved women during the Middle Passage please refer to Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016).}

The materiality of water is also paramount to consider in *Breast and Bottle Feeding*. The reflective quality of the water signified in *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Allá* is a crucial visual element used in Campos-Pons’s evocation of Yemayá to signify Black womanhood. The sacred waters of the Atlantic Ocean will always reflect Yemayá’s presence and her will. Yemayá is the ocean, the sea, and the water itself. Furthermore, if the waters of the Atlantic Ocean will reflect and manifest the existence of Yemayá, these waters will also mirror Black womanhood. Rather than being a photograph, Campos-Pons’s work becomes a mirror itself. The glossy surface of both the Polaroid and the glazing of the picture frame physically manifest this reflection. Also, the scale of Campos-Pons’s torso is almost life-sized. If a Black woman were to gaze into this image she would be confronted with this manifestation of her own Blackness and womanhood through her reflection on the image’s surface. This is additionally reinforced by the conceptual reflection of Black womanhood through the visual summoning of Yemayá.

The two milk bottles hanging from Campos-Pons’s neck also signify Yemayá’s role as a mother to all orishas and to all across the Diaspora, as motherhood is a marker of fertility, life, and vitality. The ends of the bottles rest just above Campos-Pons’s nipples, leaking milk on to her body and into the wooden boat. The presence of Campos-Pons’s nipples correlates to Yemayá’s nicknames of “Mother-of-Moist-Nipples” and “the World’s Wet Nurse” as mother of all orishas and all life on Earth.\footnote{Pierre Verger; as quoted in Elizabeth Perez, “Nobody’s Mammy: Yemayá as Fierce Foremother in Afro-Cuban Religions,” in *Yemoja: Gender, Sexuality, and Creativity in the*} In Cuba, Yemayá is known as the mother of Sàngó, oricha of...
thunder. It is told that one day Yemayá witnessed the formation of wondrous clouds of thunder and lightning. At the flash of the lightning, a red form descended towards her. When she caught it in her skirt she realized that the red form was Sàngó, the son of the supreme creator Obátálá. From that point on, Yemayá adopted Sàngó, interpreting the event as a “divine gift” from Obátálá.62

While Yemoja’s position as a mother translates to the Cuban iteration as Yemayá, slight characteristics have been transfigured through the process of syncretism during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The hypersexual transformation of Yoruba orisha Yemoja into Afro-Cuba oricha Yemayá reflects sexual stereotypes forced onto enslaved Black women during slavery in the Americas. In Cuban oricha worship, Yemayá’s sexuality is emphasized and she is portrayed as a seductress.63 This role is exemplified by the tale of how Yemayá and her son Sàngó became lovers. As Sàngó grew up, Yemayá realized that she grew attracted to him. One night Yemayá attempted to approach Sàngó, but when he realized what her motivations were, he escaped and climbed up a palm tree. Although he initially refused his mother, her violent pleas caused humiliation for both of the orishas, causing him to finally submit.64 Even as a mother-figure, Yemaya’s sensuality becomes her dominant trait in the Americas. In “Yemoja: An Introduction to the Divine Mother and Water Goddess,” Allison P. Sellers suggests that the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the influence of Western patriarchal societies resulted in this hypersexual persona. She proposes that in Afro-Cuban oricha mythology, Yemayá personifies the Western female stereotypes of the mother, the wife, “the once ‘pure woman’ who is corrupted and

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63 Sellers, 138.
64 Ibid, 138-139.
ultimately suffers as a result,” and the temptress. In the Euro-Western imagination, the nurturing bosom of Yemoja evolved into the sexually available breasts of Yemayá.

Although she is portrayed as a seductress, Yemayá realized the power she held over men using her sexuality. Yemayá employed her sexuality in exchange for secrets and favors amongst the orichas. In “Yemoja: An Introduction to the Divine Mother and Water Goddess,” Allison P. Sellers relays the tale of how Yemayá acquired Obátálá’s ritual drums for Sàngó. Obátálá cultivated sacred yams. Well aware of Yemayá’s methods of employing sexual favors to acquire what she desires, Obátálá hired Orisaoco, a man famous for his chastity, to guard her yam fields. However, Yemayá was able to coerce Orisaoco to divulge the secrets behind the sacred yams to her and Sàngó. Sàngó was eventually able to cultivate his own yams. When Orisaoco abandoned the yam plantation, Sàngó was able to trade his own yams with Obátálá for her ritual drums.66 Yemayá’s employment of this hypersexual stereotype reflects a greater history of survival by enslaved women of African descent in the Caribbean.

**Campos-Pons’s Visual Reclamation of the Black Female Nude**

In Cuba, Yemayá is associated with Black womanhood. As a result of the syncretization of Yoruba religion and Catholicism in Cuba, Yemayá is connected with the Virgin of Regla, a Black Madonna figure and the patroness of Havana and the port town of Regla.67 The story of her inception traces back to medieval legends proclaiming that she was created by Augustine of Hippo, a North African theologian that received a divine revelation from an angel, telling him to

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65 Sellers, 141.
66 Ibid, 139.
67 Ibid, 146.
create an image of the Virgin Mary from local wood in his church. Regla’s black skin is both the result of the dark local wood and of the influence of the appearance of indigenous women surrounding Augustine of Hippo in North Africa. Narratives of La Virgen de Regla in Cuba trace back to travel letters of Spanish Bishop Pedro Augustín Morrell de Santa Cruz. While visiting the island in 1755 he encountered the sanctuary of La Virgen de Regla which was founded in 1692 on a sugar mill. He was quite surprised by the appearance of the Virgin as a Black woman. Morell concluded that her appeal amongst Afro-Cuban lie in her unambiguous Blackness. The sculpture of the Virgin of Regla’s now resides in her sanctuary is located in Chipiona, Spain (Fig. 26). As an unambiguously Black female figure, the Virgin of Regla was widely worshipped by enslaved peoples of African descent.

During the same colonial period in the Caribbean, a heinous legacy of the representation of Black female nudes was incepted in Euro-Western art. In Western art history, the female nude is typically depicted by predominantly white European men. Most commonly, the white female nude is afforded more respect than nude Black women in European art. During the Italian Renaissance, the nude was often employed to evoke allegorical stories and classical mythology. This practice was continued into the seventeenth century when European artists used white female nudes to convey greater societal truths and universal ideals. However, the Black female’s nude form has never been received in such a manner. In fact, the Black female body has often been used as a compositional tool to highlight the purity of white womanhood in European

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68 Elizabeth Pérez, “The Virgin in the Mirror: Reading Images of a Black Madonna through the Lens of Afro-Cuban Women’s Experiences,” The Journal of African American History 95, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 204.
painting. Lisa Gail Collins suggests that the act of representing the nude Black female body was frequently avoided by European artists because it “evokes a racialized, sexualized, and exploitative history.”

When European artists did use Black women as subject matter, they were usually imagined as hypersexual and scantily dressed beings in their artworks. The image of the Black woman with a bare breast is common in art created by European artists during the height of colonialism in the Caribbean and South America. This imagery is deeply rooted in the history of the enslaved women of African descent at the mercy of their white slave masters in the Caribbean. Due to what Joan Dayan declares as “forced intimacies,” Black women are assumed to be sexually available objects of desire. In order to visually convey this hyper-sexuality, the motherly bosom of Black women became markers of their debased sexual appetite. The unclothed breasts of Black women allowed for the white male gaze to penetrate their bodies, reflecting the physical invasion of these women. The rendering of Black women with bare breasts became embedded in the white colonial visual imagination.

Agostino Burnias’s paintings and illustrations from John Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* employed these sexualized tropes of depicting enslaved Black women. Brunias was an Italian artist well known for his genre paintings of society in Dominica and St. Vincent, two smaller islands in the West Indies. His 1779 painting *West India Washerwoman* depicts a scene of five figures gathered by a stream in

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some picturesque locale in the Caribbean (Fig. 27). A light-skinned woman of African descent is the center of the image while three darker skinned women and a child surround her. From 1775 to 1784 Brunias sold paintings such as *West India Washer-woman* in London, most likely to well to do white men. Brunias’s hypersexual images of Black women were produced for and consumed by the white male gaze.

In addition to Brunias’s paintings, one of the most recognizable images of Black womanhood made from the Euro-Western imagination are found in John Stedman’s *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition, Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* published in 1796. Stedman’s writings chronicle his journey in Suriname and feature print illustrations by P.F. Tardieu, after watercolors by Stedman. This particular volume of travel writing is infamous for its images of enslaved Black women. Tardieu’s print, after a watercolor by Stedman, of the “Flagellation of a Female Samboe Slave” employ the same tropes of the Black female nude to suggest the state of captivity and sexual availability (Fig. 28). The 1793 engraving depicts a scene of an enslaved Black woman bound by her hands and hanging from a tree. Surrounding the female figure are two white men that occupy the landscape in the engraving’s background. Two other Black figures also inhabit the background. With whips in hand, they run away from a house in the right-hand corner and towards the two white men. Similar to Brunias’s paintings, the Black woman is rendered with her chest completely expose and only with a torn white cloth barely covering her pelvic region. The enslaved Black woman is not only the victim of the gaze of the white men in the engraving, but also of the white male viewers who purchased Stedman’s book.

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74 Bindman, 7.
The most notorious of illustrations from *Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition* is P.F. Tardieu’s engraving of Joanna, an enslaved biracial woman of African descent who Stedman forcibly declared as his “wife” (Fig. 29). Joanna is portrayed elegantly in a classical contrapposto pose, clothed in a patterned skirt, anklets, bracelets, necklaces, earrings, and a hat. As Stedman’s supposed “mistress,” she is afforded some respect in this engraving. However, her status as an enslaved woman of African descent is still delineated by her attire. Tardieu only renders her left-breast barely covered by a white shawl, leaving her right breast open to the gaze of all that peruse through the book. Although her torso is not completely nude, she is still made sexually available by the visibility of right breast. The visual representation of Black womanhood in Western art is a constant negotiation between the invisibility of the Black woman’s humanity and the hypervisibility of the Black female body.

Campos-Pons overturns these negative connotations with Black womanhood through employing her own body in *Breast and Bottle Feeding* from *When I am Not Here / Estoy Allá*. In Barbara Thompson’s *Black Womanhood*, Campos-Pons muses that:

I don’t know if I am a writer who detoured to visual arts because I am a storyteller, but [my work] is more about a collective story that I try to tell using my body as a device [to be] anybody.  

*Breast and Bottle Feeding* is more than just a self-portrait, but rather an embodiment of Black womanhood itself through the evocation of Yemayá—and ultimately through the image of the Virgin of Regla. Although Campos-Pons does not incorporate imagery of the Virgin of Regla,

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this iconographic history is embedded in Afro-Cuban representations of Yemayá. The Virgin of Regla was also widely venerated Matanzas, Campos-Pons’s home and former sugar plantation.\textsuperscript{76} As a dark-skinned Afro-Cuban woman, Campos-Pons’s personification of Yemayá celebrates and deifies Black women of similar complexions. Although her body is painted blue, Campos-Pons’s brown skin is still slightly visible underneath the paint. Campos-Pons’s employment of her own body in this polaroid is key to asserting the existence of dark-skinned people of African descent in Cuba. As Elizabeth Pérez explains, this marker of Blackness is crucial because lighter skinned Cubans have “served as the emblem of cultural hybridity for the Cuban nation,” leaving darker-skinned Cuban’s to be ignored in the construction of Cubanness.\textsuperscript{77} However, by employing her own body in this photograph to represent Yemayá, Campos-Pons makes visible the identities of darker-skinned Cuban women. Campos-Pons’s personhood as a dark-skinned woman combined with the Cuban iconography of Yemayá and the Black Madonna contribute to the deification of Black womanhood in \textit{When I Am Not Here / Esto Allá}.

Campos-Pons completely subverts the Euro-western conventions of portraying the bare breasted Black female nude in \textit{Breast and Bottle Feeding}. In this Polaroid, Campos-Pons is completely exposed from her chin down to right above her pelvis. Her breasts and nipples confront the viewer, simultaneously questioning and inviting the gaze. The difference between Campos-Pons’s photograph and paintings of nude Black women fashioned by European men is that she has the freedom and complete artistic authority over her image. Borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins writings on Black female sexuality in \textit{Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment}, I assert that Campos-Pons’s employment of

\textsuperscript{76} Miguel A. Bretos, \textit{Matanzas: The Cuba Nobody Knows} (Gainsville: University of Florida, 2010), 128.
\textsuperscript{77} Perez, 10.
her body in “Breast and Bottle Feeding” is an act of visual self-definition.\textsuperscript{78} Unfortunately, due to the forced legacy of hyper-sexuality on Black womanhood, a strategy of hyper-invisibility has been employed by women across the diaspora regarding the Black female body in order to avert the white male gaze.\textsuperscript{79} However, Campos-Pons rejects this strategy in her photograph. Instead of using the Black female nude to mark sexual availability, Campos-Pons employs her nudity as a marker of empowerment. Campos-Pons notes:

\begin{quote}
. . . the view that I wanted to propose to my audience [was] to really reconsider the idea of the female body as a martyr, but a martyr to whom, of what, and representing what? [It was] important to me, to really propose some idea of representing femininity, blackness, and womanhood, of Africanness, Cubanness, and Latin Americaness.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

For Campos-Pons, it was vital to include the nude Black female body in \textit{Breast and Bottle Feeding}, and she continues to do so in her art-making practice today. The inclusion of her nude torso was not to recall the toxic history of hyper-sexuality forced onto Black women, but to celebrate both womanhood and Blackness. Campos-Pons reinforces the breasts signification of creation and motherhood by positioning bottles dripping with milk over her nipples. Lisa Freiman suggests that the entire polaroid’s composition is reminiscent of wooden Yoruba sculptures of Yemoja, or Yemayá, “which accentuate the figures’ large breasts as a means of

connoting maternal generosity, love, tenderness, and protection.” Campos-Pons’s presentation of her bare breasts in *Breast and Bottle Feeding* was an act of self-reclamation for Black womanhood. During a performance at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in 2018, Campos-Pons declared that “there is always possibility of new birth in the garden.” In this case, “the garden” is the Black female form and the “new birth” is Campos-Pons’s radical act of re-appropriation of the Black female nude. Campos-Pons also reflected that “flowers [that] blossom in the most unexpected place[s].” These unexpected gifts of life and vitality are expressed through this celebration of Black womanhood that resulted from Campos-Pons’s radical reclamation of the Black female body.

**Fragmentation and Confronting the White Male Gaze**

Campos-Pons also subverts the negative iconographic legacy of Black women in Euro-Western art by filling the picture frame in *Breast and Bottle Feeding* with a fragmented image of her bare breast. She boldly presents her body, challenging the power dynamics between the subject and the viewer’s gaze. Campos-Pons has often incorporated the fragmentation of her own form in her photographic practice. This imagery is first found in Campos-Pons’s art-making practice in an untitled photograph of her bare chest holding two statues of the Virgin of Regla and the Virgin of Charity (Fig. 30). Campos-Pons took this photograph after she moved back to Cuba in 1989, marking an incorporation of Afro-Cuban religious beliefs in her work. In the photograph Campos-Pons presents her bare torso as a fragmented self-portrait of her chest. She

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81 Freiman, 53.
83 Campos-Pons, “A Conversation with Fra Angelico in the Garden.”
holds up two Catholic statuettes over both of her breasts. In her left hand, she holds a statue of the Virgin of Regla, a representation of a Black Madonna associated with Yemayá and who watches over the Bay of Havana. In her right hand, she grasps a statue of the Virgin of Charity, who is hailed as the patron saint of Cuba. Portrayed as a lighter-skinned woman of color, or “mulatta,” she is associated with the oricha, Ochún, river goddess of love and sensuality. The Virgin of Regla (Yemayá) and the Virgin of Charity (Ochún) are both representations of Black womanhood. Campos-Pons reinforces the importance of the Black female body and Black womanhood in this photograph by placing each of these figures in front of her breasts.

In a diptych from her When I Am Not Here / Estoy Allá series Campos-Pons photographs her nude torso, painted yellow against a golden background (Fig. 31). In front of her is a wooden box with two rows of three cavities, filled with oranges and a wooden duck. On top of the box is a bowl filled with honey. The yellow paint, honey, and offerings of oranges and ducks evoke the presence of the oricha Ochún. In this diptych, Campos-Pons also employs the presence of an Afro-Atlantic deity, Ochún, as an archetype of Black womanhood. This diptych employs the same imagery from Breast and Bottle Feeding, except Campos-Pons’s bare chest is not completely exposed. Barbara Thompson articulates that “Campos-Pons centrally locates her body, fragmented and then reconstructed” in her photographs.84 Her larger photographic installations, such as Replenishing, feature photographs that individually depict Campos-Pons’s fragmented form, but manifest her complete figure when displayed together (Fig 22.). However, Campos-Pons’s Breast and Bottle Feeding does not offer the viewer with her body in entirety. The fragmentation is a deliberate act. The viewer cannot avert their eyes from Campos-Pons’s breast. This act of self-fragmentation on the part of Campos-Pons creates tension between her

84 Thompson, 306.
own artistic agenda and the voyeuristic white male gaze. However, Campos-Pons’s agenda will always prevail because she has agency and control over her own image in *Breast and Bottle Feeding*. The photograph becomes a plane for the confrontation between the white male gaze and Campos-Pons’s own gaze and artistic intentions.

**Conclusion**

In María Magdalena Campos-Pons’s *Breast and Bottle Feeding* from the *When I Am Not Here / Estoy Allá* series, Yemayá serves as an archetype for Black womanhood and chronicles the experiences of enslaved women of African descent during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Alan West-Durán explains this relationship between orichas and their personification of people across the African Diaspora:

> Still others see the orishas as a metaphysical principle or as an archetype. As archetypes they are viewed as people, like ancestral spirits, but more powerful. They are described as personifications of certain personalities.⁸⁵

By evoking this oricha in her photograph, Campos-Pons liberates Black womanhood from stereotypical notions of female identity based in Euro-Christian principles. The presentation of the Black female nude in *Breast and Bottle Feeding* subverts hypersexual traditions of portraying the female body. Campos-Pons’s employment of her own torso to embodiment Yemayá imbues the photograph with a deeply feminist force, resulting from this assertion of the agency of the Black female body.

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CHAPTER THREE

Reflections of Black Womanhood in Simone Leigh’s *Mami Wata*

While Renée Stout and María Magdalena Campos-Pons both physically incorporate the Black female body into their artwork, Simone Leigh’s art-making practice involves an exploration of materiality and form in order to chronicle the trans-Atlantic memories of enslaved women of African descent. Leigh does not incorporate the physical body into her art. Instead, she composes installations of different ceramics and objects that reflect an aspect of Black female subjectivity in the history of the Euro-Western world. In this short coda, I will analyze Simone Leigh’s 2001 installation *Mami Wata*. After looking at Leigh’s biography, I will examine her investigation of Black female subjectivity through her sculptural practice. The rest of this coda will explore Leigh’s invocation of the Afro-Atlantic deity Mami Wata in order to both embody Black womanhood and to record the legacies left on the Black female body by the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

**Biography and Black Feminist Art-Making Practice**

Simone Leigh was born to Jamaican parents on in Chicago, Illinois where she raised. She attended Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana where she studied philosophy. While in college, she discovered a Japanese ceramics studio at Earlham College. Fascinated by its existence on campus, Leigh began to study ceramics and fine art. She received instruction in

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ceramics from artist Mike Theideman, a former apprentice of Warren Mackenzie, a notable American potter. Although she was initially hesitant at the prospect of taking on art as a profession, she accepted passion for the field and continued working as an installation artist. Before graduating, she participated in an artist internship at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art. After receiving her Bachelor of Arts in Art and Philosophy in 1990, Leigh went on to participate in prestigious programs such as the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and the Studio Museum in Harlem Artists-in-Residence Program. She was also awarded the New York Foundation of the Arts Fellowship in Sculpture in 2009 and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Grant for Painters and Sculptors in 2011.

Leigh’s sculptures and installations exemplify her “object-based ongoing exploration of black female subjectivity.” Materiality is a paramount component to Leigh’s art making practice and her object-based allusions to the Black female body. Leigh often sculpts ceramic cowrie shells to abstractly explore histories of enslavement and subjectivity embedded in the Black female body. This is exemplified by Leigh’s 2015 sculptures Cowrie (Sage) and Cowrie (Pannier) (Figs. 32-33). Cowrie (Sage) is comprised of a large ceramic cowrie attached to a wire hoop skirt. Covering the bottom wire structure are multitudes of bundles of sage. In Cowrie (Pannier), Leigh employs a similar composition to the previous sculpture. Cowrie (Pannier), a larger work, is also characterized by a rounded wire structure and a large ceramic cowrie shell situated at the top of the sculpture. Although Leigh does not directly incorporate the Black

89 Ibid.
female body into these sculptures, her choice of materiality and form visually allude to enslaved Black women. Cowrie shells can be interpreted as feminine symbols due to their smooth, rounded shape. The small opening of these shells also resembles the vaginal opening on a woman’s body. Cowries also served as forms of currency in West Africa, alluding to the commodification of enslaved Black women during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Both Cowrie sculptures included wide, rounded wire structures. These forms are reminiscent of the wiring used to wear hoop skirts during the antebellum period in the American South, while slavery was still legal in the United States. Leigh’s Cowrie (Sage) and Cowrie (Pannier) both archive the embedded legacies of slavery on the Black female body.

In her larger installations Cupboard II and Invisible Manish, Leigh provides the viewer with subtle hints regarding Black female subjectivity and resistance during the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Figs 34-35). The large 2014 installation Cupboard II is composed of a rounded wire structure. Leigh provides viewers with an entry-way to observe inside this massive structure. Inside of this wired framework lies a clustered mass of large multicolored cowrie shells. As discussed previously, cowrie shells symbolize the female body. In addition to this, the entire wire framework resembles a breast. Invisible Manish is an installation from 2015 composed of a network of multiple rounded clear forms hanging from the ceiling. These forms resemble breasts and have nipple-like points. These clear objects are also filled with rock salt and coal dust. Due to the rock salt’s creamy coloring, these forms look like clear milk-filled breasts. This imagery recalls the history of wet-nurses, or enslaved Black women forced to feed the children of their masters directly from their own breasts. Leigh’s works exemplify exciting and novel new visual codes to refer to the history of enslaved Black women.
Mami Wata Across the Diasporas

Simone Leigh’s 2001 *Mami Wata* is a sculptural installation crafted of terracotta, steel, and wire (Fig. 36). A large-scale installation, *Mami Wata* is 36 inches wide, 72 inches long, and 36 inches tall. The installation is composed of a brown steel framework of an elliptical form that is supported by two pyramid forms on either side. The elliptical form supports a clustered network of rounded red and white forms held together by wire in the center of the sculpture. This central component of *Mami Wata* is reminiscent of the bare skeleton of a boat. Although the structure is made of steel, the brown color of the material evokes the imagery of old wooden boats. This installation also uses light and shadow to create different visual iterations of the artwork. When gallery lights are slightly angled above the installation, various elliptical masses of shadow are scattered below the installation on the floor.

The title of Simone Leigh’s sculptural installation refers to a female deity venerated across the African Diaspora, Mami Wata. She is worshiped in West African countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone as well as in Caribbean and Latin American countries such as Puerto Rico and Brazil. Mami Wata is associated with sensuality and procreation. Many worshippers of African and Afro-Atlantic religion believe that she regulates procreation and aids couples with their issues of infertility, infant mortality, and sexual impotence. This deity is also correlated with sexuality because she “helps women and men negotiate their sexual desires and preferences.”

Additionally, like her hybrid nature as both human and fish, Mami Wata also transcends Western gender binary. Although she is usually viewed as female, Mami Wata

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identifies as both a man and woman. Like the watery passages that she inhabits, Mami Wata’s identity is characterized by hybridity and fluidity.\footnote{Drewal, \textit{Sacred Waters}, 1.}

In \textit{Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora}, Henry John Drewal traces the iconographic legacy of representing the goddess back to Portuguese exploration in present-day Sierra Leone. The Portuguese had commissioned a local Sapi artist to create a sculpture of a European mermaid. Although the imagery of the sculpture was European in origin, the Sapi artist “Africanized” the mermaid by surrounding her by crocodiles, a species of animal that only reside in African waterways.\footnote{Ibid., 2.} The most widely circulated image used to refer to Mami Wata is a chromolithograph based on the 1880s \textit{Der Schlangenbandiger}, or \textit{The Snake Charmer}, printed by the Adolph Friedlander Company in Germany (Fig. 37).\footnote{Henry John Drewal, “Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in African and Its Diaspora,” \textit{African Arts} 41, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 67.} This is mostly likely survives by a reprinted edition from the 1955 by the Shree Ram Calendar Company in Bombay, India.\footnote{Ibid.} The image portrays a dark-skinned woman holding a long snake in her arms. Unafraid of this creature, the woman rests the majority of the snake’s body on her neck while another snake emerges from behind her and rests its head near her chest. The woman herself wears bright blue, yellow, and red clothing and is ornamented with golden earrings, necklaces, and bangles.

\textbf{Trans-Atlantic Reveries in \textit{Mami Wata}}

By titling the installation as \textit{Mami Wata}, Leigh imbues the work the potency of Black womanhood. Although Leigh does not directly incorporate the Black female body into the work...
she is still able to conceptually allude to the body through her choice of materiality. The multiple ellipses created in this installation refer to the suppleness and roundness of the female body. The large ellipse created by the steel frame of the installation also abstractly resembles the labia of the female vaginal form. Leigh also evokes images of breasts in *Mami Wata*. The way in which the heavy net of red and white ceramic forms hangs from the elliptical steel frame mimic the form of a breast. Additionally, the individual red and white ceramic objects also simulate breasts. The pointed red ends of each of these objects specifically represent female nipples. This imagery is reinforced by the shadows of this installation on the gallery floor. When the three-dimensionality of *Mami Wata* is collapsed into these two-dimensional forms, the shadows resemble masses of tissue found in mammary ducts.

Although Leigh’s *Mami Wata* evokes and celebrates the Black female body, it also archives the brutal history of the treatment of enslaved peoples of African descent during the Middle Passage. As alluded to earlier in this chapter, the overall form of this installation resembles a wooden boat. This boat visually signifies the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The clustered mass of red and white ceramic forms is reminiscent of the overcrowded slave quarters on commercial ships traveling to the Americas from the African continent. A notable engraving from Thomas Clarkson’s 1808 *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African Slave-Trade by the British Parliament* records the spatial planning of the slave quarters on commercial slave ships (Fig. 38). This print illustrates the method in which enslaved Africans were inhumanely packed and chained together like inanimate cargo. Although this print conveys the overwhelming amounts of enslaved peoples organized on these

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ships, it does not quite capture the frenzy of these conditions. Leigh’s clumping of these ceramic forms in *Mami Wata* communicate the dimensionality of the overcrowding on slave ships; enslaved peoples were often piled on top of each other in multiple rows of bunks in the ship slave quarters.

The red and white ceramics also resemble buoys, floating navigation markers placed throughout seas and oceans. While this visual allusion to buoys can refer to the process of navigating from Africa to the Americas it also represents a haunting aspect of trans-Atlantic history. These ceramic objects also reference enslaved peoples thrown overboard, dead or alive, during the Middle Passage. After someone drowns their bodies ultimately float back up to the surface of the ocean, like a buoy. However, many enslaved Africans were thrown overboard while still in metal shackles, causing them to sink down to the depths of the sea. These ceramic objects archive these peculiar anchored objects at the bottom of the ocean, struggling against the weight of the chains to float back to the surface.

Simone Leigh’s *Mami Wata* also conceptually charts the history of enslaved women of African descent during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The combined imagery of Mami Wata, womanhood, and the trans-Atlantic slave in this sculptural installation hint at Leigh’s interest in exploring the histories of these enslaved women. Leigh’s art-making practice is primarily concerned with investigating the subjectivity and commodification of Black women throughout the diaspora. The evocation of Mami Wata in this installation alludes to notions of wealth and commodity. Mami Wata has been worshipped for her ability to bestow “economic gain” upon devotees.96 This relationship between Mami Wata and wealth correlates to the commodification

of the Black female body in the institution of slavery in the Americas. The belief in Mami Wata’s “irresistible seductive presence” also reflects the legacy of hyper-sexuality forced onto Black womanhood during the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a result of the rape of enslaved women by their white slave masters. The imagery of the boat, breasts, and female reproductive also archives the rape of enslaved African women while aboard the commercial slave ships.

Conclusion

In *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas*, Henry John Drewal makes this claim regarding the oceanic deity:

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\ldots \text{it is Mami as seen through a mirror, or glimpsed in the surface of water in this world that is merely a reflection of an otherworldly reality.}^98
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While it is true that Mami Wata is viewed upon through the boundary of a water mirror, I would argue that this reflection does depict an “otherworldly reality.” Instead the reflection of Mami Wata’s ocean truly mirror any Black woman who would stand before her. Similar to Erzulie and Yemayá, Mami Wata’s identity is also connected to the fates of enslaved Black women and their descendants throughout the African diaspora. Simone Leigh summoned Mami Wata into her sculpture in order to employ the deity as an embodiment of Black womanhood and of this trans-Atlantic history.

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97 For a more extensive analysis of this, please refer to the previous chapters on María Magdalena Campos-Pons and Renée Stout. Also see Patricia Hill Collins, “Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 69-96 (New York: Routledge, 2000), 81-84.
98 Drewal, 87.
CONCLUSION

Renée Stout and María Magdalena Campos-Pons, as well as Simone Leigh, employ the embodiment and the essence of Afro-Atlantic female deities in their works to explore greater definitions of Black womanhood and the legacy that the trans-Atlantic slave trade left on Black female identity. All three deities discussed in this thesis—the Haitian Vodou loa Erzulie, the Afro-Cuban oricha Yemayá, and the Afro-Diasporic Mami Wata—reflect hypersexual stereotypes forced on to women of African descent due to the institutional practice of raping enslaved women. Mami Wata also archives the commodification of the Black female body due to her association with wealth and economic gain. While the existence of these three deities testifies to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, their presence in the diaspora also provides Black women with alternative definitions of Black womanhood. These Afro-Atlantic spirits do not uplift Black womanhood due to their status as divine beings, but because the histories of these deities and enslaved Black women are one in the same. The identities of Erzulie, Yemayá, and Mami Wata are interwoven in the gendered archive of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. By summoning these deities to the sites of their artworks and installations, Stout, Campos-Pons, and Leigh embody an archetype of Black womanhood, allowing their artworks to operate as “secular altars” to the infinite scope of Black female identity.

This veneration is reinforced by the referencing of the Black female body embedded in the works of Stout, Campos-Pons, and Leigh. Stout and Campos-Pons both physically incorporate their own bodies into Erzulie Dreams and Breast and Bottle Feeding in order to assert the power and agency that the Black female body contains. Although her artwork does not specifically incorporate the body, Leigh’s Mami Wata conceptually alludes to the Black female body by employing objects imbued with the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
Bibliography


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