



**HARVEST, ROAST, BREW, AND SAVOR:
CRAFTING AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH-BASED ARTS
AND ARTS-BASED RESEARCH**

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Abstract

Metaphors of harvesting, roasting, brewing, and savoring derived from childhood memories of my *abuela* (grandmother) making coffee organize this visual essay on my research-based art, art-based research, and auto-ethnographic mapping.



Keywords: *art, research, arts-based research, autoethnography, mapping*

**Harvesting
Research-Based Arts**

As far back as I can remember my life has always been spent in both the Caribbean and on the United States mainland. As a young child, I spent wonderful summer vacations with my grandparents on their farm in Puerto Rico. I would be on the lookout for my uncles and *abuelo* (grandfather) to bring the harvested coffee beans down from the forest to the small cottage, eagerly waiting the next phase of the coffee process. I remember watching my *abuela* (grandmother) in the mountains of *Adjuntas* roasting coffee beans under the hot Puerto Rican sun. The movement of her arms and body turning the coffee beans over and over to toast the beans evenly took time and diligence. The process offered a sweet reward at the end, as she would grind the coffee beans and make café for everyone. Café is more than a staple; it is a substantial part of everyday Caribbean life—waking up to roasting bean fragrance, having coffee as an afternoon refreshment when someone visited, and relaxing in the evenings after dinner. It is a way of life, part of the daily rhythm. As I recall these savored moments of my childhood that have carried me through to adult life, I find myself pouring over my own life in a similar way to my *abuela* roasting coffee beans.

Harvesting, roasting, brewing, and savoring, I am trying to find that keen essence of balance for myself as an individual, partner, mother, artist, and scholar. I cannot separate my studio artwork, my academic classroom knowledge, and my research. These varying facets of my identity, my person is interwoven with collective stories, and has become me. I am inspired by Audre Lorde (1998), who builds a foundation of autonomy in validating spaces of personal experience and one's own voice. My hope is that by sharing my life journey through both a creative arts process and research of my own history that this visual testimony may inspire a new perspective towards another's history and one's own.

**Roasting
Arts-Based Research**

Throughout my undergraduate studies, I sought to bridge studio art and scholarly work. I have often thought of my childhood with my *abuela* while in my studio as I have crouched down to shift and shake the fabrics that become my sculptural paintings. Similar to my *abuela* roasting coffee beans, I sway my arms from one side to another

as I stain the fabrics with acrylic mixes. As I do these movement, I have flashbacks to watching my abuela roast espresso beans and letting them toast in the sun in a similar way as I lay out my stained fabric pieces to dry in my studio. Coffee is to taste, smell, and share. My paintings are to see, imagine, and share. Both processes culminate in an experience of collective actions, history, and wisdom.

Arts-based research bridges research and art practices. In lending voice to my individual experiences through a creative arts process paralleled to my research about my ancestry and heritage, my perception of my experiences evolve. I have come to understand my identity as fluid and permeable similar to the mesh that held the coffee beans as they dried, which in turn changed the form and purpose of the coffee beans to aroma and taste. By uncovering silenced histories and testimonies I am actively engaging in a transformation process. By linking from individual stories to collective ones, I am creating social justice dialogues. This perspective of arts-based research links social activism, research, pedagogy, art, and education.

Fostering environments that inspire dialogue, activism, and inclusion can become a form of social justice and feminist pedagogy. This roasting of a combination of disciplines and discussions create a unique blend of aromas creating a distinct flavor. Arts-based research is a methodology of bringing connections to an art process from a research base, as Keifer-Boyd (2011) explains: “The hyphen in arts-based research suggests a copula or a junction between arts and research” (p. 5). Just as the art of roasting coffee beans in order to produce rich flavor and depth, arts-based research develops both simultaneously; the art and research components. According to art educator Graeme Sullivan (2006), creative and critical practice may construct new insight, which in essence is the creation of new research.

Brewing Auto-ethnographic Mapping

As the espresso maker is filled with water on the bottom, the strainer sits in it. It is filled with freshly ground espresso beans and the top is tightly screwed on. It is set on medium-high heat creating pressure. Soon, after a few minutes, it whistles as it brews. It is in this same way that transformation occurs, a series of layers, steeping, brewing; which creates a catalyst towards changing the grounds into espresso.

A feeling of displacement envelops me in many classroom environments. Wanda B. Knight (2007) describes this sense of displacement as identity politics. For her, the displacement is as a Black woman inhabiting multiple worlds, a Black one, and a White one. For me, this double consciousness is my position as a Latina, a mother, an artist, teacher, student, and researcher. The multiplicity of identities is empowering, as it is a form of resistance and activism, but the intersections can also be sites of discrimination, and a heavy burden. In the same way that an espresso maker is layered to brew, layered identities are catalysts that might build pressure and brew intersectional identities.

Anzaldúa’s writings, teachings, feminist theories, art, and life experiences offer a revolutionary perspective through holistic feminist Chicana pedagogy. Negotiating the challenges of multiplicity, as Anzaldúa discusses, is part of art and scholarship, offering constant motion, questioning, and reflection, a back-and-forth dialogue of identity positionality. Knight (2007) also references “safe houses” (Pratt & Anzaldúa, 2000) as “locations where people can go and not feel threatened. They are sites where people may share their experiences in the contact zone with those who have had similar experiences and can empathize” (p. 32). Through empathy a connection is created, informing awareness and visibility of social issues that brew together through shared experiences. Anzaldúa (1995) also speaks of this in-between world, these psychological, physical, spiritual, and emotional realities that are fractured spaces. By fostering environments that inspire dialogue, activism and inclusion become a form of social justice.

Through art, I portray and critique the micro-aggressions in life. The little things that simmer away in the backdrop of our lives everyday, whistling as it brews. Art may offer a safe space where race and gender are not necessarily the focus, but the context and meaning is. The maneuvering of these fragile layers of identity is complex because historically race and gender have marked a hierarchical chain inevitably creating segregated spaces. Bridges need to be re-built and extended in order to provoke change including the modification of educational frameworks.

Mapping has historically been used to categorize or locate places, resources, or ways to get from one point to another. However, I propose that mapping is also a form of understanding the human race, the past, the present, and the potential future, through emotional and psychological connections. Anzaldúa (1995) speaks of these spaces, of going and coming in between cultures as places of contradictions that are not easy or comfortable. These spaces expand beyond both physical and psychological borders. These narratives are often dismissed or simply ignored by society, cultural normative, and institutions.

A tracing of experiences, stories, migration, and family history offers a multi-layered perspective of my past, present, and possible future. The first layer is that the experience of one person is essential in some way to the experience of many people. Each individual influences other people in ways that may never be fully understood, in part because the influence may be beyond an individual’s lifespan or beyond familiar knowledge sources. This notion is similar to the second law of thermodynamics; that nothing is ever truly ‘one’ but the state of the object changes, transforms, transferring its energy and its mark in the world. The same can be seen with human life, in tracing what has come before, what is, and what will be.

The second layer is an understanding that not only is each person a continuing, undying form that is always accessible, but this form has shaped or somehow contributed something to what is. This is a multiple (having many identities within oneself) and fluid (not limiting or “categorized”) space that is continually changing and relative to one’s own place in life. What has been is not only important, but also necessary in what is becoming. It is through this process of transformation and knowledge of consciousness or *conocimiento* that we can then transition into the third layer of tracing experi-

ence, of being intentional about accepting and working through diverse interpretations of the past in order to come into our own skin. Anzaldúa (1995) speaks of these layered perspectives as transitions for crossing through the increments of consciousness, which enable change.

Transformation of consciousness acts as a catalyst in my studio practice as well as in my feminist mapping research project, which was begun in the fall of 2013 and is ongoing. I am interested in these connections of fragmentation of one's identity in relation to psychological and physical geographical locations. I created two interactive Google earth map projects (Figures 1 and 2) with the following questions as prompts: (1) *Where is home?* (2) *Where do you identify with? Why?* Users are to pinpoint their answers with an icon on the map and include as much or as little commentary as they desire. This project serves to continue a visual conversation of memory and the mosaic that it implies in our lives and identity formation.

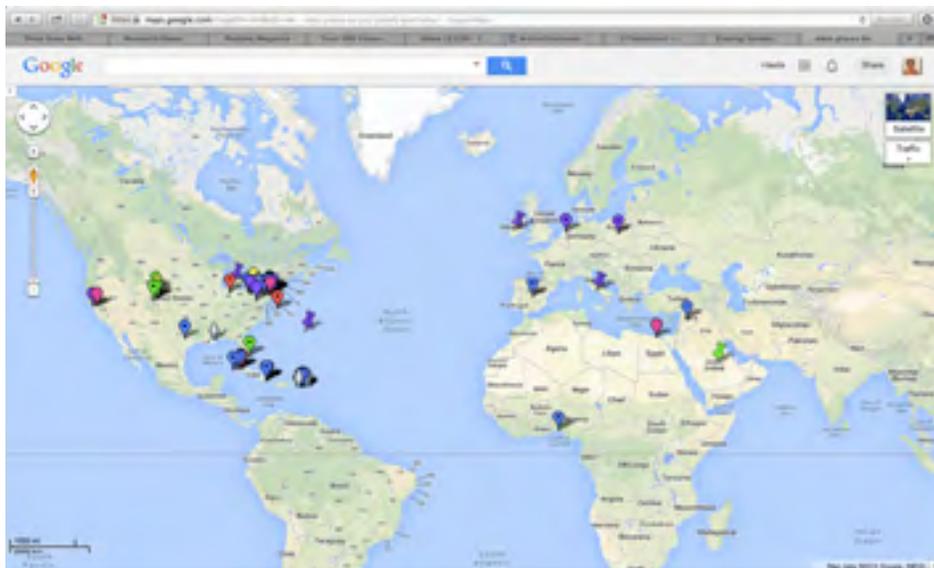


Figure 1. "Where is home?"
Google interactive map, 2013.

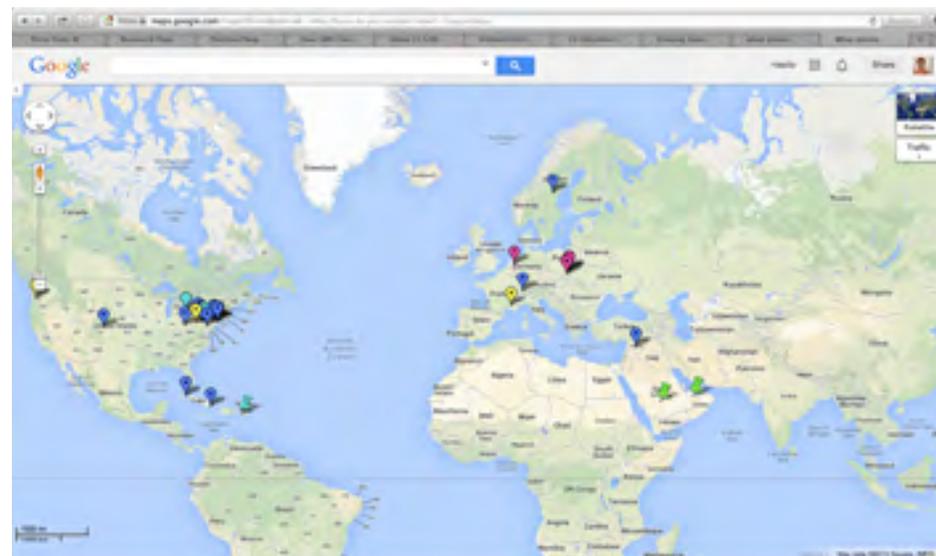


Figure 2. "Where do you identify with? Why?"
Google interactive map, 2013.

In Figure 1 there are 70 entries, 63 of which include commentary that documents a memory of why a location is identified as home. In Figure 2, there are 37 entries, 32 of which include a memory.

This project is multi-layered, as not only does it extend from my own experiences and a curiosity of how others relate to memory and geographical location as threads in life, but it also speaks to issues of transnationalism and migration. For example, one user wrote, "My dad is buried in the Jewish Cemetery here," and another explained, "I have roots in Ireland. My mother's side of the family came from Ireland many decades ago and I have always felt a spiritual connection to Irish culture and environment." Documenting who we are and how we identify home on an interactive Internet map of the world displaying the political borders of nations, states/provinces, and cities as well as natural borders formed by landmasses and water is a way to archive testimonies that extend notions of identity politics beyond our individual selves.

After collecting poignant fragments of self-definition in relation to notions of home, memory of place, and geographic locations, I create paintings from the archived imprints gathered from the interactive maps (See Figure 3). The paintings that build up from these archived memories from the interactive maps, are cropped, framed pieces of fabric (canvas, pillowcases, paper) and metal with tears, burns, stitching, pockets, folds, and lines, which illustrate layers of life stories, with gaps of time, distance, and memory; all that have been brewing in my studio space. In Figure 3, a pillowcase is used as a metaphor for dreaming and remembering. It is stained with earth-tone acrylics and has a burned-out hole referencing loss, making visible an additional layer of wrinkles, folds,

and cloth. These paintings represent the brewing throughout my life; the things that I have experienced in various forms and spill onto my paintings. Through these paintings I am able to share my narratives, and those that I have collected with others. My studio and exhibited spaces of my work have witnessed and held testimony of how viewers of my work have connected to the psychological and emotional fluidness of my paintings as mappings.



Figure 3. *Geográfica nostálgica/geographic nostalgias*.
12" x 12", mixed media on pillowcase, 2014.

Auto-ethnographic Trace

Although art has been a part of my life since childhood, it has also been a foreign experience. High-culture art has never been a part of my life; however, what I did experience were the colors of the places that I have traveled, the crafts that I was making, graffiti in the city, music, and what I saw in the media, relatives' homes, and books from the library. The art that I was exposed to did not coincide with the high art that I would later be introduced to, leaving me feeling estranged. Although my early exposure to art was limited, I continue to be seduced by the imaginative quality that it invokes. I am allured by how everyday aesthetically pleasing pieces create different conceptual spaces and translate into "art in my mind" (hooks, 1995, p. 10). The constructions in my head of what art was, meant, and should be have many times seemed either illegal, primitive, or beyond my reach. All of these aspects of my life experiences have created pressure to brew into my art and research work in my studio space. In the same way to making espresso, there are layers to have it brew. Identity is from the layers of life experiences, and like espresso brew is fluid and in motion.

The epistemology and framework of formal education needs to integrate social movements and the use of art within them as significant components of history. Bridges need to be created and extended in order to provoke change and modifications of educational frameworks. Feminist, social justice pedagogy can be this bridge through identity politics in visual arts and academia. hooks (1995) writes about art being shown in segregated spaces, such as museums specifically for Puerto Rican artists, rather than in inclusive public spaces. This has been evident, for example, in African American culture, where African or African American art has not been incorporated into mainstream society; it has been designated its own enclave within a segregated space (hooks, 1995). Furthermore, hooks (1995) notes that in U.S. history, when African art was displayed in segregated Black communities, it was not enough to make an intervention or a revolutionized collective art experience. Continued education and conversation is necessary in order to address issues of race. When a segregated setting is the only place where people can become familiar with particular artworks, it is likely they will then assume that the "primary value [is] only when it document[s] the world as [it] is" experienced by the artist (p. 4). This is also noted in the production and exposure of "high art" historically, as defined by a predominantly White, male world, in which women and people of color are scarcely attended to in the books and collections studied in Western European and U.S. education.

In order for people to identify with art, a shift must occur that changes the way we look at art. One of the ways that hooks (1995) proposes for this to occur is through critical education, and she also argues that the creation and public sharing of art is essential to the practice of freedom. She writes that "we must set our imaginations free" (p. 4). The importance of art in culture and society, according to hooks, is the magnitude of weight it holds not only to express, but also to offer a pool of reflection, a space for dialogue and activism. Visual politics are "acts of critical resistance that actively introduce change within existing visual politics" (p. XVI). How can this then be an ac-

tive space to engage in conversation across boundaries, creating transformations within culture and vision? The importance lies not only in the act of creating art, but also in discussing art, experiencing art, and having access to art. Art is needed for culture, society, and individual well-being and is an agent for cultural change. Our individual experiences that are often under pressure and encapsulated as they brew need to also be part of a collective conversation in order to brew new conversations and resistances.

Savoring Non-Linear Traces of the Past, Present, and Future

Let's sit and savor our cups of espresso together by sharing our stories, re-searching our past, and facing our present and future. Feelings of geographic displacement, a different language, and compound identity merged throughout my life, leaving impressions that have shaped my world. This spirit of exile, of passage, of returning to memory becomes necessary to me because I want to know how diaspora, migration, and psychological ties to a geographical homeland inform who I am and who others are. Weems (1995) explains this as a cycle of exile, returning home, and then leaving again. A cycle of transnational experiences and psychological borders talk to the shadows of what we were and who we are. I was born in the United States, but there are undertones of my connections with Cuba and Puerto Rico through ancestry, family, and distant impressions that I have always felt; yet never understood. Weems discusses diasporic landscapes of longing, where "[H]ome is not a place but a condition—felt only when there is freedom of movement and expression. It is the seeking that is shared, not what is found" (hooks, 1995, p. 65). These diasporic landscapes are crafted from very emotional and psychological places.

Testimonio, or testimony, is part of my work, threading life experiences, family, heritage, and cultures as a way to document not only ancestry, but also personal identity. Anzaldúa (1995) explains that speaking of these places' psychological, physical, nostalgic, and spiritual borders, or any particular place wherever two or more cultures border each other, is necessary to somehow "birth" these experiences. Like Anzaldúa, I have an "almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows" (p. X). These paths are deemed necessary throughout creative art process and experience. In order to reconstruct, one must be willing to deconstruct first, to pull apart, weed through, and deepen the creative art process.

The work of Ana Mendieta (for example, *The Black Venus/La Venus Negra*¹ contains a mixture of this process in which her life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and identity are "unearthed" through her "earth-body" forms (Mendieta's term). Mendieta's conceptual work and process carries out dialogues of various themes including colonization, exile, identity, and family. Her work incorporates many forms

including writing, performance, photography, and earth art, which in its ephemeral qualities speak to issues of ethnicity, dislocation, and gender. Her earth art and practice of imprinting on and into various surfaces allude to this disconnect she struggled with throughout her life in leaving her birth country of Cuba and being separated from her parents. Her mixture of history, myth, writing, and the arts is a prime example of the awareness of crossing and conflating borders, geographically and culturally, as well as the disciplinary borders of academia.

My studio space, where I create, has layers of stories, imprints on the floor document my movements, white walls that have been stained by time, floors with drippings from a multitude of materials and paintings, and piles of books and articles, journals, maps, and photos. A self-documenting of my life, being fossilized in my working environment, is an ongoing process, interwoven with my research, experiences, and studio art. Audre Lorde (1998) speaks of this biomythography, a non-linear documenting of history, of mapping and making sense, as a creative process of unearthing. Being within the art field and feminist pedagogy, many aspects of my work are intertwined both artistically and academically. Ana Mendieta shows us examples of the layering of these spaces, experiences, research, transnationalism, and visual arts; how to savor the experiences.

The studio can be a place of meditation and connecting with the collective unconscious, churning with passion, inspiration, and remembrance. I am a painter, and my work is formed in multiple layers of color staining, pouring, and movement around the canvas on the floor and wall. My work may fit into the abstract expressionism frame work, as I am actively "in" my paintings, drinking them in. The "subjects" of my paintings are interconnected with my life experiences and historical contexts. For example, I have been developing a series based on maps. In a work from the *Autorretrato Series* (Figure 4) I layered sketches of geographical maps of Cuba, the United States, Syria, and Lebanon. These maps then were embellished with layers of pencil, acrylic, and impasto, creating lines that illustrate physical geographical borders. Stains of acrylic paint were layered over translucent watercolor hues, echoing the stretches of ocean that separate and unite landmasses, countries, and people. These maps have formed a historical documentation of the past that I am trying to somehow "get a grasp on."

My research is focused on migration, identity, and the arts, specifically looking at my maternal ancestry in Cuba, going as far back as my great grandparents from the Mediterranean. It is my attempt at retracing the steps of my family, where they went, and the impact of their lives on my own identity. The map-like drawings and paintings vary in sizes and materials such as canvas and old bedsheets, which are remnants of a former life. In *Guantanamo* (Figure 5), I used a childhood blanket that belonged to my daughter. I re-purposed it to record a 1940s map of Guantanamo, Cuba, portraying the location and decade of my mother's birth. The map is "drawn" with pours of coffee, as this region of Cuba is well known for the delicious dark espresso produced in the mountain farms. The red stitching is a metaphor for family bloodlines, birthing, and loss of blood back into the earth through death. The red stitching also demarcates the approximate location of where my mother was born and lived in Guantanamo. The

1. (Sileuta Series, 1973-80, see: <http://www.hatjecantz.de/ana-mendieta-earth-body-1362-1.html>)

stained clothes that I use are biographical, artifacts collected from my own life and the people in it. This symbolizes a collective experience coming together in a visual form, through a painting that holds a multitude of stories. It is another way of savoring the past, remembering, and ponder the life.



Figure 4. Autorretrato Series.
2.5' x 2.5', mixed-media painting on bedsheet, 2014.

My studio art would not, and could not, exist without my research I see my research and my studio work as interconnected, as needing each other. I could not savor the espresso without it first not being harvested, roasted, and brewed. This concept of mapping oneself is not singular. It may feel singular to the person who produces the art and experiences the pain, the isolation, and the estrangement, but it is multiple as it overlays a variety of interwoven realities. In another work from the *Autorretrato Series* (see Figure 6) there are overlapping folds, wrinkles, paint stains, and rips in the bed sheet; these all occurred at different moments for different reasons. The initial use of

the bed sheet, the journey from intimate home to studio space being manipulated with liquids and then stretched over wood to be processed again echoing familiar private spaces. The multiple uses of this fabric over the course of years hold a history for the artist and are then translated once more by the viewer. Therefore, the dialogue does not stop or come to a culmination with the finished painting, on the contrary, it is a catalyst for deeper, meaningful conversations.



Figure 5. Guantanamo. Map of Guantanamo, Cuba.
7' x 9', coffee, bedspread, thread, 2013.

Feminist Experiences

Through my own experiences of harvesting, roasting, brewing, and savoring, I have come to recognize that I resist and challenge identity and culture through my art as scholarship. I connect my production of scholarly work with my visual artworks. Feminist movements that have specifically included the experiences of single and collective voices have strengthened the notions of validity through testimony and life experiences. Therefore, the scholarly spaces that seek to bridge and interconnect these fluid spaces with the personal and larger contexts of inclusion through visual art dialogues as a form of documenting and writing history need to be reassessed and supported.

My artworks are created with a strong emphasis on cultural and biographical aspects as a vehicle to expose myself and become stronger, more flexible, and open-minded as an artist, learner, and educator. It is within this framework that I can deconstruct and challenge binaries that dictate categorization of women's experiences and cultural standpoints. My work is feminist as it realizes the power dimensions of subject and object and searches to visualize and include marginalized perspectives and voices. Through integration of identity through art and research I can heal as I expand my work.

My intention is to bridge the arts, scholarly work, experience, research, and social justice using visual narrative. In the same manner that memories of my abuela and her tenacity for life have left traces within me, my art stories may leave traces for others. My abuela was a petite woman, but she was *fuerte* (strong). By keeping parts of her alive in myself and sharing her with others I am keeping her memory and history alive. Through auto-ethnographic visual arts, I am interweaving arts-based research and research-based arts with my artistic voice. By navigating through and among various disciplines a creative process, much like the process of harvesting, roasting, brewing, and savoring the cup of café, is not only important because of the labor it represents, but also necessary for its collective history. I will never forget my abuela's *café con leche* (milk and espresso) that she would make just so; her arms back and forth beating the steamy milk to get it thick and frothy from cup to strainer and back and forth again and again. Her repetitive movements hypnotized me. One of my fondest memories is sitting at her kitchen table, no more than nine years old, watching her make it for me, and then savoring it. It was simple, sweet, and delicious. It is this memory, which links a physical and psychological space for me, creating a rich base of connection. It is this memory that evokes fluidness to past and present and can serve to connect others through art, which in my experiences, is a catalyst to discussions about mapping oneself within varies contexts. Collective psychological, geographical, and nostalgic memories haunt our human experiences and shape our connections to each other.

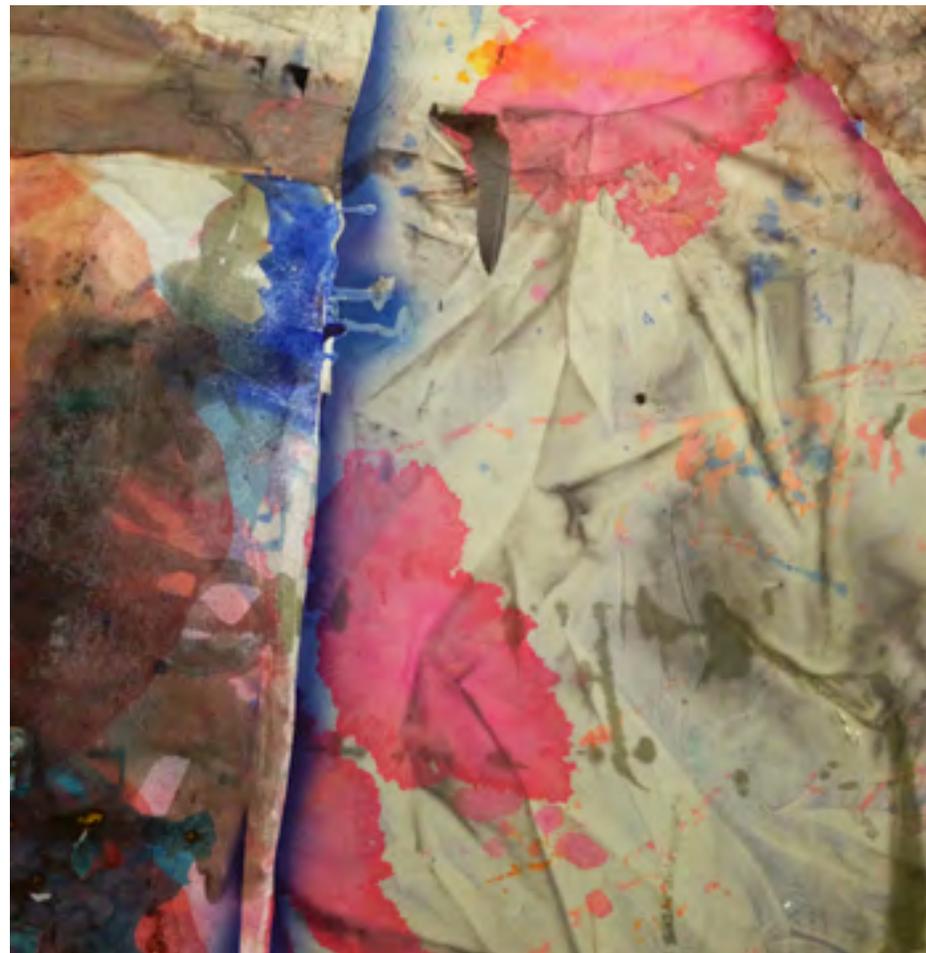


Figure 6. *Autorretrato Series*.
2.5' x2.5', mixed media painting on bedsheet, 2014.

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About the Author

Leslie C. Sotomayor is currently a doctorate student at The Pennsylvania State University for a dual title in Art Education and Women's Studies. She is an artist in painting and drawing and has curated her first show this fall, *Borrando fronteras/Erasing borders*, a collaborative art exhibit of Cuban and Cuban-American artists. Sotomayor's fieldwork in 2012 in Cuba has grounded her research about Arab migration into Cuba and its cultural impact. her plans are to continue with feminist curatorial projects, research in Cuba among Arab communities, and continue exhibiting collaborative and solo exhibits. She may be contacted at lc25008@psu.edu.

Credits

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