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Spoken Softly with Mama: Memory, Monuments, and Black Women's Spaces in Cuba

David C. Hart

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Article abstract

Spoken Softly with Mama (1998) est une installation de María Magdalena Campos-Pons, une artiste cubaine d'origine yorouba vivant aux États-Unis depuis le début des années 1990. L'installation de Campos-Pons raconte les vies et les pratiques culturelles de part et d'autre dans l'Atlantique noir. Cette oeuvre fait partie d'une série de trois installations multimédias se voulant portraits et monuments conceptuels. La série apporte un regard critique sur l'exclusion des Cubain·e·s défavorisé·e·s à la fois de l'histoire officielle, et des monuments publics conventionnels. Dans cet article, j'examine le parcours de Campos-Pons, son exploration esthétique interdisciplinaire et innovatrice de l'expérience diasporique des personnes noires, et l'importance culturelle de cette valorisation des femmes noires, leur travail, et les espaces où leur mémoire est célébrée. Comme d'autres artistes qui puisent dans le riche legs culturel de l'Atlantique noir, Campos-Pons réussit à étendre les multiples sens de l'iconographie afro-cubaine du particulier à l'universel.

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Spoken Softly with Mama: Memory, Monuments, and Black Women's Spaces in Cuba

David C. Hart

***Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998) est une installation de María Magdalena Campos-Pons, une artiste cubaine d'origine yorouba vivant aux États-Unis depuis le début des années 1990. L'installation de Campos-Pons raconte les vies et les pratiques culturelles de part et d'autre dans l'Atlantique noir. Cette œuvre fait partie d'une série de trois installations multimédias se voulant portraits et monuments conceptuels. La série apporte un regard critique sur l'exclusion des Cubain·e·s défavorisé·e·s à la fois de l'histoire officielle, et des monuments publics conventionnels. Dans cet article, j'examine le parcours de Campos-Pons, son exploration esthétique interdisciplinaire et innovatrice de l'expérience diasporique des personnes noires, et l'importance culturelle de cette valorisation des femmes noires, leur travail, et les espaces où leur mémoire est célébrée. Comme d'autres artistes qui puisent dans le riche legs culturel de l'Atlantique noir, Campos-Pons réussit à étendre les multiples sens de l'iconographie afro-cubaine du particulier à l'universel.**

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> Nor do we need to accept a polarized view of history and memory which posits that the whites (or some other 'advanced' group with power or privilege) had the history while the blacks (or some other 'simple' group without power or privilege…) were stuck with nothing but impulsive, affective memory…[1]

The installation *Spoken Softly with Mama*, 1998[2] | **fig. 1** | by María Magdalena Campos-Pons, a Cuban expatriate artist of Yoruban ancestry living in the United States since the early 1990s, recalls the lives of people and cultural practices that span the Black Atlantic including women in the artist's own family. As a multimedia installation, this work allows an immersive, embodied experience as the viewer navigates the space of the installation, moving among and perceiving its arrangement of objects, videos, photography, light, and sound. Employing a conceptual approach to contemporary multimedia art, each element retains meanings of the objects and forms they represent while at the same time generating new meanings in their juxtaposition with objects and forms they typically would not be paired with. Moving between objects and meanings in a gallery space parallels a critical conceptual strategy of pointing to and disrupting categories such as history and memory, in order to create new meanings.[3] Described by curators as non-sentimental, poetic, and elegiac in its evocations of memory, spirituality, and domestic spaces, *Spoken Softly with Mama* is one of several works by the artist that focuses on displacement as it relates to the lives of Black people from the African and Cuban diasporas.[4]

Spoken Softly with Mama is the second in a series of three complex multimedia installations Campos-Pons created between 1994 and 1999, collectively titled *History of a People Who Were Not Heroes*, works she describes as conceptual portraits. As she pursued new approaches to her artistic practice after artist residencies in both Canada and the United States, the artist, who was born and educated in Cuba, rethought her relationship with her homeland and African diasporic culture and experience more broadly.[5] The first, *History of a People Who Were Not Heroes: A Town Portrait* (1994) | **fig. 2** |, was followed by *Spoken Softly with Mama* (1998) and then *Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing* (1999) | **fig. 3** |. This essay focuses on the second, *Spoken Softly with Mama*, a work some critics and curators argued was the most successful in achieving her conceptual goals and garnered the widest critical attention for Campos-Pons. It was exhibited at NYC's Museum of Modern Art in 1997 and at the

49th Venice Biennale in 2001 in the exhibition *Authentic/Ex-Centric: Africa In and Out of Africa*.[6]

Campos-Pons's installations not only function as a critique of history's exclusions, but also resist the polarized and gendered binary construction of the domestic interior as feminine and public space as masculine. In *Spoken Softly with Mama*, the artist appropriated and refashioned everyday objects (irons, ironing boards, and textiles) with creative practices (through performances in audio and video recordings) that reference the scope and history of Black women's domestic labour in Cuba. First, I will discuss the artist's background, including her education and some aspects of the cultural and political context in Cuba in the 1980s, which impacted the creation of her work and prompted the artist's travel abroad. This is followed by a discussion of Campos-Pons's innovative aesthetic and interdisciplinary exploration of Black diasporic experience. Finally, I consider the cultural significance of foregrounding Black women, their work, and the spaces where they are remembered, including artistic forms such as public monuments, and the interest that artists from the 1970s to the 1990s have had in critiquing its forms and expressions.

Campos-Pons is part of the first generation of Cubans whose lives were fully shaped by the changes brought about by the 1959 Revolution. She was born in the Cuban Province of Matanzas in 1959, the year that the forces led by Fidel Castro successfully overthrew the dictatorship of Fulgensio Batista.[7] The new government established a radical program to provide all its citizens health care, housing, and literacy, with the result that Cuba ultimately possessed one of the best educated populations in Latin America.[8] Art literacy, an integral part of this program, was seen as a crucial vehicle to achieve cultural change and manifested in the creation of a number of schools of art across the country that built upon the extant and sophisticated—if traditional—art culture of museums, galleries, and art schools such as the Academia de San Alejandro, founded in 1817.[9] This program of art education, post-revolution, resulted in the establishment in 1962 of the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art) or ENA—an undergraduate college of fine arts notable for the employment of prominent contemporary artists like modernist painter Antonia Eiriz, though women artists were few among the faculty—and in 1976 of the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), a graduate program in visual arts, institutions that Campos-Pons attended.[10]

Campos-Pons was among the few women and Black people pursuing a career as a professional artist and could look to very few Black Cuban artists as role models in the 1980s when she was in graduate school at ISA. Such demographics did not inhibit but rather strengthened her resolve to be included with notable artists such as Wifredo Lam in the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana and enhance the prominence of Afro-Cuban women's lives and experience.[11]

The Cuban government's investment in education and culture nurtured a generation of artists who, by the 1980s, would constitute the so-called New Cuban Art.[12] A signal characteristic of the New Cuban Art was its focus on

1. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, "Introduction," in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 8–9.

2. *Spoken Softly with Mama*, originally created in 1998, was subsequently acquired by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa for its permanent collection. See https://www.gallery.ca/collection/artwork/spoken-softly-with-mama. A second version of the installation, *Spoken Softly with Mama II*, 2008, was acquired in 2011 by the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta. See: https://museum.spelman.edu/spotlights/maria-magdalena-campos-pons-spoken-softly-with-mama-ii-1998-2008/.

3. Fabre and O'Meally, 5–8.

4. A wide-ranging discussion that foregrounds these characteristics is Lisa D. Freiman, ed., *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water*, exh. cat. (Indianapolis/ New Haven and London: Indianapolis Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2007).

5. In 1988 Campos-Pons received approval to be an exchange student at the Massachusetts College of Art and in 1990 had a painting fellowship at the Banff Center for the Arts in Alberta Canada. Freiman, 27, 35.

6. Susan Snodgrass, "Vestiges of Memory," *Art in America* 95, no. 10 (November 2007), 181.

7. Maifeli Pérez-Stable, *The Cuban Revolution: Origins, Causes and Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Stephen Cushion, *A Hidden History of the Cuban Revolution: How the Working Class Shaped the Guerillas' Victory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015).

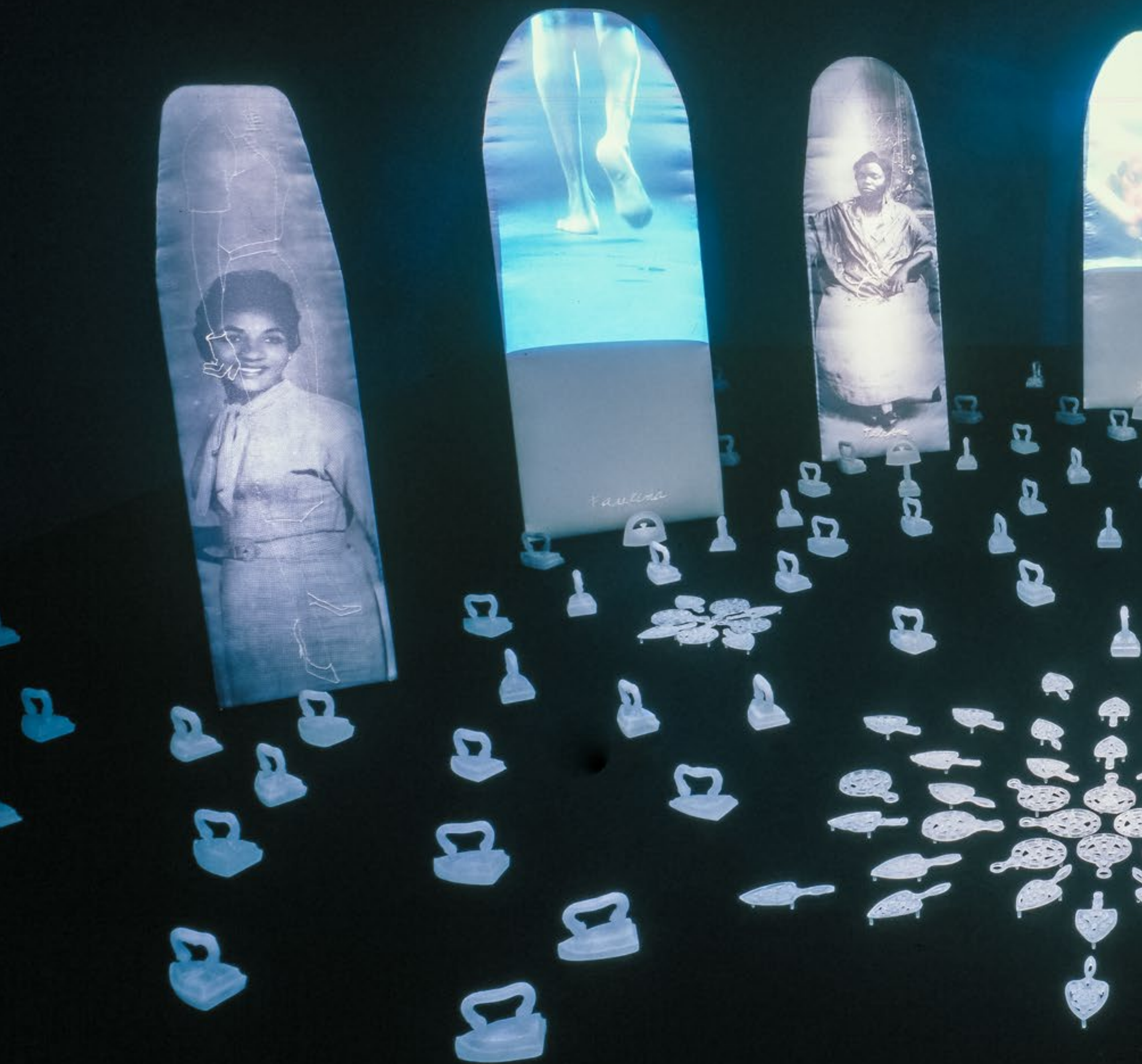
8. John A. Loomis, *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 19.

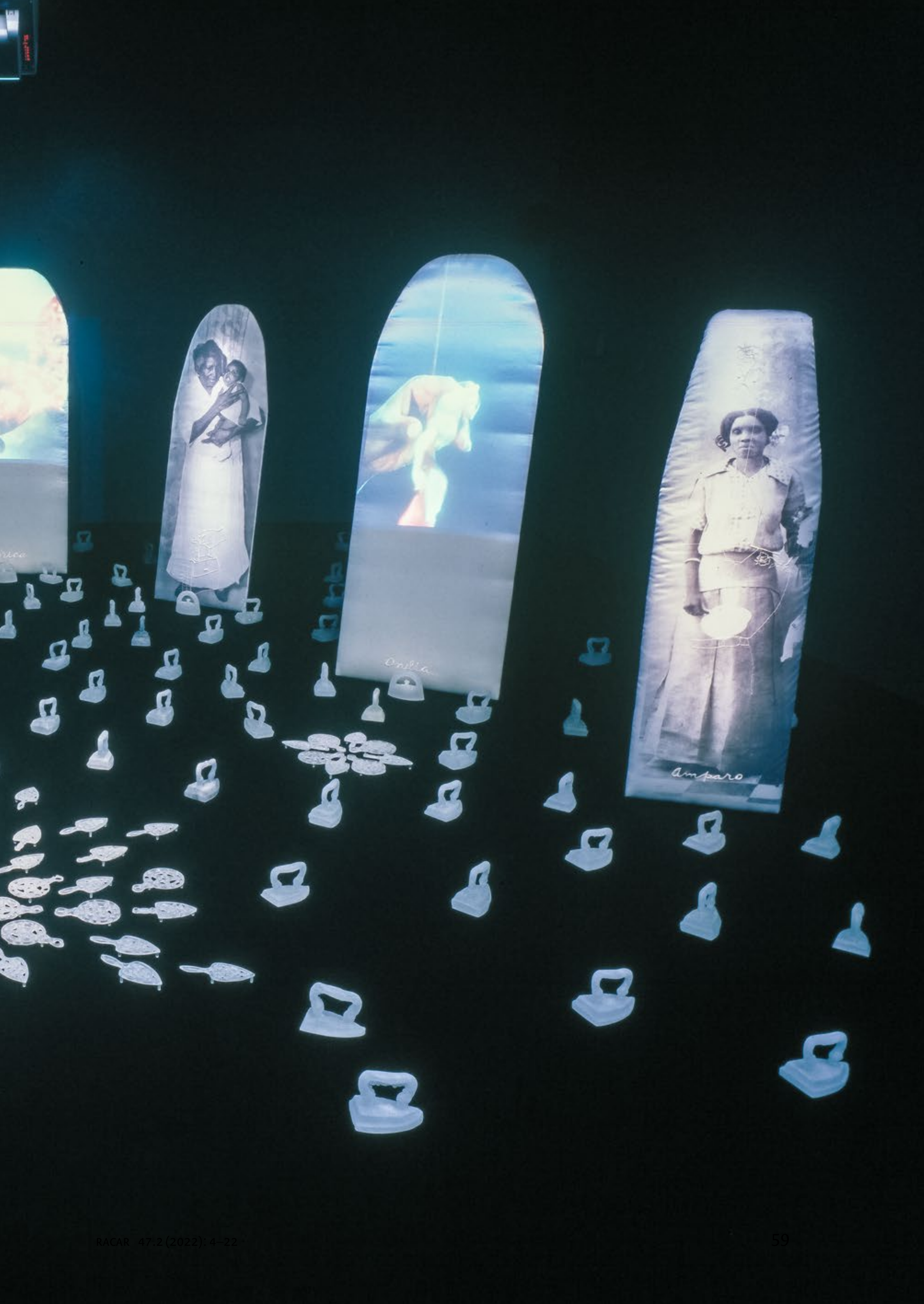
9. Lowery Stokes Sims, *Wifredo Lam and the International Avant-Garde, 1923–1982* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 9, and Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 152–159.

10. Alejandro Anreus, "The Road to Dystopia: The Paintings of Antonia Eiriz," *Art Journal* 63, no. 3 (Fall 2004): 4–17.

11. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003; Camnitzer, 161.

Figure 1. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Spoken Softly with Mama*, 1998. Embroidered silk and organza over ironing boards with photographic transfers, embroidered cotton sheets, cast glass irons and trivets, wooden benches, six projected video tracks, stereo sound, 8.6 × 11.7 m (installation dimensions variable). Purchased 1999 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Photo: NGC.

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national identity, widely recognized in the signifiers of racial, ethnic, and cultural mixture and cultural forms (such as Santería and Indigenous cultural and spiritual practices) that those mixtures generated. To create this work, this generation of Cuban artists employed what were seen at the time as new artistic practices: performance, conceptual art, and installation. Two events in the manifestation of this new direction in contemporary art in Cuba were pivotal: the ground-breaking exhibition *Volumen Uno* (*Volume One*) in 1981 and the first Havana Biennial in 1984.[13] The performance, conceptual, and installation art they both featured would have a profound impact not only on the contemporary art future artists would make, but also positioned contemporary Cuban artists and art on par with advanced art globally.

Volumen Uno consisted of eleven male artists, who were older than Campos-Pons but whose lives were also mostly shaped by the post-revolutionary period, and it occurred just as Campos-Pons began her graduate studies at ISA in 1980. The shift in styles between the 1970s and 1980s of one of its members, Flavio Garciandía, (who was one of Campos-Pons's teachers) is in some ways emblematic of the shifts to new art forms, discourses, and experimentation that characterized much contemporary Cuban art after 1980. His earlier photorealistic painting style was succeeded in the first Havana Biennial in 1984 by the installation *El lago de los Cisnes (Swan Lake)* with flat, cut-out, decorative forms sprinkled with glitter and postmodern kitsch references.[14]

Another feature of 1980s art that Campos-Pons would take up later and develop independently from her Cuban peers such as Manuel Mendive, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey, and Marta María Pérez Bravo, was the specificity of Cuban identity in the form of creolization in Cuba. Like other places in the Caribbean, Cuba was a crucible for the dynamics of migration, mixture, and the creation of new cultures and cultural forms. Cultural mixture as a characteristic of Cubanness became widely known in the 20th century in the writings of anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, who used the metaphor of the *ajaico*, a common type of stew in Cuba. Ajaico's resonance as a symbol for Cuban culture comes not only from the variety of ingredients depending on the cook, but also because some of its many ingredients meld together as they simmer while others retain their distinctiveness.[15] Artists and critics such as Lucy Lippard commented on works like Manuel Mendive's performance art work for the Second Havana Biennial in 1986, for example, which drew on the body-centered ritual practices of Santería. What was significant for her was the practice of combining elements from popular culture; from marginalized cultures and identities; and the employment of cultural mixture as both a subject and an aesthetic—a distinctive, postmodern artistic position. The result was that Cubans were making advanced art that challenged Western assumptions of Cuba's marginalized cultural status.[16]

With the emergence of a distinctive Cuban art and art scene in the 1980s occurring just before the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the ensuing economic crisis and instances of repression and artistic censorship in Cuba, Campos-Pons carefully negotiated limited opportunities to

12. Camnitzer prefers "New Cuban Art" to "Cuban Renaissance" because the latter term is too dependent on rebirth and classicism in Italy rather than Cuba in the late 20th century; Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, xxi.

13. Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, 1–67.

14. Ibid, 19–20.

15. Fernando Ortiz, "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad," in *Orbita de Fernando Ortiz* (Havana: ediciones Unión, 1973), 154–157, cited in Gerardo Mosquera, "Eleggúá at the (Post?)Modern Crossroads: The Presence of Africa in the visual arts of Cuba," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 226, 237; Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, *Cuban Artists Across the Diaspora: Setting the Tent Against the House* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 63.

16. Lucy R. Lippard, cited in Gerardo Mosquera, "The Infinite Island: Introduction to New Cuban Art," in *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island*, ed. Marilyn A. Zeitli (Tempe: Arizona State University Art Museum, 1999), 23. See also Lucy Lippard, "Made in the U.S.A.: Art from Cuba," *Art in America* 74, no. 4 (April 1986), 27.

Figure 2. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *History of a People Who Were Not Heroes: A Town Portrait*, 1993. Installation by Campos-Pons and sound by Neil Leonard. Mixed media installation: wood, glass steel, clay tablets, black and white photographs, 3 channel video, stereo sound. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

travel abroad and eventually to leave Cuba permanently.[17] As curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor observed: "Perhaps it is coincidental that Campos-Pons migrated to Canada and the United States at the very moment when radical content in artistic discourse was being censored and attacked by the State and artists were increasingly subjected to procedures of intimidation and arbitrary withdrawal of institutional support."[18]

In 1988, Campos-Pons received approval from both the Cuban and US governments to attend the Massachusetts College of Art as an exchange student, part of only a second group of artists from Cuba to have such an opportunity in the United States. In 1990 she received an artist's residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta, Canada. Campos-Pons's 1990 marriage to a Boston-based jazz musician Neil Leonard (before her Banff residency) and fears that the Cuban government might prevent her from traveling between the US and Cuba (among other reasons) led to the artist's personal choice to live outside her homeland—a displacement that the curator of her 2007 mid-career retrospective called a "voluntary exile."[19] The artist acknowledges that the circumstances of her leaving Cuba were not as harsh as those who left for the US in successive waves after the 1959 revolution. She does not think of herself as an exile in that sense.[20] Exile is not merely dependent on the particularities of Campos-Pons's circumstances but extends beyond them to the forced migration of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade.[21] As a contemporary artist, "exile" also becomes a critical and theoretical position and resonates across multiple possible meanings in Campos-Pons's work relative to displacement and alienation based on race and gender generally. But measuring the circumstances of her identity and her departure from Cuba necessarily judges her work only as an autobiographical "document," a limitation that, as I will argue later, does not sufficiently consider the fuller implications and dynamics of creolization in the Black Atlantic.

Being separated from her homeland and being located in the very different geographic and cultural context of North America foregrounded the distinctiveness of Cuban identity and culture for Campos-Pons. This is also the case for many Cubans who "became Cuban," to use Louis A. Pérez's phrase, after traveling abroad.[22] Campos-Pons contemplated those media that were the carriers of history and tradition in the Afro-Cuban community, performative and oral traditions such as storytelling, song, and ritual as well as assemblage using ritual objects of Afro-Cuban and African traditions. Campos-Pons's exile paralleled, in a much broader sense, the experiences of enslaved laborers displaced from Africa, of women exiled from patriarchal culture, and of historical "master narratives" that excluded the personal and social experiences of poor people, especially Black women.

Prior to leaving Cuba for North America, Campos-Pons's work was more closely linked to critiques of the systemic oppression of women than to exploration of the African diaspora. Her earlier work was characterized by shaped painted forms rather than the media arts she explored in North America. Campos-Pons's *Contraceptive* (1987), for example, consists of gesturally painted, abstracted forms vaguely resembling reproductive organs

17. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003.

18. Okwui Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination: The Memory Works of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water*, ed. Lisa D. Freiman (Indianapolis/New Haven and London: Indianapolis Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2007), 88, n 46. Enwezor notes that several essays in Holly Block, ed., *Art Cuba: The New Generation* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001) refer to the instances of repression and censorship, especially Eugenio Valdés Figueroa's "Trajectories of a Rumor: Cuban Art in the Postwar Period," which marks 1989 as a particular point of heightened tension in the Cuban art community.

19. Freiman, 35. That Campos-Pons was later able to travel between her home in the US and Cuba led some to question whether the artist should use the term "exile" when many Cubans fled the country based on arguably greater threats to their freedom and safety that preceded leaving the country.

20. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003.

21. Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination: The Memory Works of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," 71–74; María Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by Sama Alshaibi, September 26, 2002, University of Colorado at Boulder. Videotape series *What Follows*.

22. Louis A. Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality and Culture* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 6, 1999.

surrounded by threatening phallic and spear-like forms. There are feminist implications in these works, including the oppression of women (interrogating women's ability to have control of their bodies in terms of sexuality and reproduction), and female subjectivity (celebrating "woman" in terms of bodily experiences and processes). These themes are similar in some respects to the work of feminist artists in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s in that they deal with patriarchy, female subjectivity, and woman's bodily experience, but created in very different political, historical, and aesthetic contexts. Campos-Pons, along with Marta María Pérez Bravo, were among very few Cuban artists of their generation who dealt with such themes.[23] An artist Campos-Pons identifies as an influence was Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta, who visited Cuba several times in the early 1980s, though Campos-Pons did not adopt the same feminist position as Mendieta. The influence of conceptual strategies engaging gender issues and the cultures of African diaspora that Mendieta employed in installation art are discussed in detail below.

Although Campos-Pons and many women artists in Cuba did not identify themselves as feminists in the sense that North American women activists used that term or in the ways that North American critics understood feminism as a movement, works like *Contraceptive* emerged nonetheless in a Cuban cultural context with its own feminist discourses and analytical frameworks. Campos-Pons's woman-centered art evolved and expanded later in the artist's artistic practice. *Spoken Softly with Mama's* engagement with Black women's experience across time and space and within economic structures—and with Black women's exclusion from dominant representational systems—resulted from this expanded analytical framework. Specifically, this critical engagement across experiences, economies, and systems of representation aligned with intersectional Black feminist discourses that emerged in Latin America and North America in the 1970s and 1980s; discourses that were both distinct from and, at the time, critical of the feminist movement—largely middle class and white—that emerged in North America and Europe in those decades.

A feminist movement developed in Cuba dating at least to the post-colonial period following Cuba's war of independence. This movement, even though segregated by race and class, not only advanced women's rights politically but also culturally, even as it faced resistance by Cuban elites throughout the twentieth century. Women's feminist writing, for example—in which mostly white, middle-class women claimed their "position as social and political subjects" was part of a larger set of discourses, alongside the effort to establish an independent national and cultural identity (known as *Cubanismo*) and resist US neocolonialism in the first third of the twentieth century.[24]

In the post-revolutionary Cuba in which Campos-Pons grew up, the realm of cultural production was where Black artists in the 1960s and 1970s made the most effective contributions concerning questions of race, gender, social justice issues, and revolution, as was the case in leftist movements

23. Gerardo Mosquera "¿Feminismo en Cuba?" *Revolución y Cultura* 6 (June 1990), 52–57.
24. Catherine Davies, "National Feminism in Cuba: The Elaboration of a Counter-Discourse, 1900–1935," *The Modern Language Review* 91, no. 1 (1996): 107–109.

elsewhere in Latin America in the twentieth century. Many progressive Cuban women, including those who attacked patriarchal attitudes and fought for women's rights, did not identify with feminists like Mendieta, who saw themselves as outside of, and working against, a patriarchal, male-dominated, and sexist mainstream culture.[25] The Cuban government, which criticized North American feminism as bourgeois, anti-male, and imperialist, tended to see as acceptable only those frameworks addressing women's rights in Cuba that were subsumed under the Marxist ideology of class struggle. But some artists nevertheless addressed class, race, and gender together.[26] Black filmmaker Sara Gomez's important film *De cierta manera (One Way or Another)*, 1974, for instance, contained an intersectional analysis of its protagonists' romantic relationship in the sense that racism, sexism, and class prejudice needed to be confronted for the relationship to succeed.[27]

The term intersectionality was coined by Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe an analytical framework for understanding how social identities such as race, sex, class, and ability, as well as forms of oppression, overlap, combine, and intersect. Any analysis that considers these identities as separate and distinct, Crenshaw argued, insufficiently accounts for the subordination of Black women.[28] Although Crenshaw pioneered and named what became an intersectional framework in the United States, other Black feminists in the 1980s like Lélia Gonzalez were similarly critiquing analyses in Latin America that did not address sexism and racism in an intersectional way.[29]

Around the time of her residencies, Campos-Pons began to explore feminist theory and artists who employed feminist themes in their work more deeply.[30] Campos-Pons was already familiar with the Black feminist art of Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems in the late 1980s. Both made photographic work that critically investigated the practices of pictorial representation of Black women, the slippage between visual and textual representation, racial stereotypes, and the contingency and mediation of official history and personal memory. Campos-Pons attended a lecture by Weems in 1988 at the Massachusetts College of Art, spoke with her at length and saw the artist's work including her *Joke* series (1987–88), and also acquired a catalog that included Lorna Simpson's work.[31] I argue that *Spoken Softly with Mama's* engagement with Black women's experience across time and class oppression and exclusion from representational systems is distinctly intersectional.

While she was a fellow at the Banff Centre for the Visual Arts in Alberta in 1990–1991, Campos-Pons conceived the idea for *History of a People Who Were Not Heroes*, three installations intended to be both conceptual "monuments" and conceptual portraits that celebrated the poor black Cubans who, according to the artist, "nobody hears about" in official histories and public monuments.[32] *Spoken Softly with Mama* continued the theme of the first installation in her series (*History of a People who Were Not Heroes: A Town Portrait*, 1994) as both a conceptual monument to subaltern "heroes" and as a conceptual portrait

25. Mosquera, 1990.
26. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003; Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula, *Sex and Revolution: Women in Socialist Cuba* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45–56.
27. Frank A. Guridy and Juliet Hooker, "Currents in Afro-Latin American Political and Social Thought" in *Afro-Latin American Studies: An Introduction*, eds. Alejandro de la Fuente and George Reid Andrews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 210.
28. Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 140.
29. Lélia Gonzalez, "For an Afro-Latin American Feminism," in *Confronting the Crisis in Latin America: Women Organizing for Change* (Santiago: Isis International, 1988), 95-101, cited in Guridy and Hooker, 210.
30. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003 and June 23, 2004.
31. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003. The catalog with Simpson's work was Trevor Fairbrother, David Joselit, and Elizabeth Sussman, eds., *The BiNational: American and German Art of the Late 80s* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art and The Museum of Fine Arts, 1988), 182. See Lisa D. Freiman, "Constructing Afro-Cuban Female Identity: An Introduction to the Work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," Master's Thesis, Emory University, 1997, 43, n78.
32. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003

of the people in her community, but its subject matter centered Black women in relation to the economic and racial legacy of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism; the contribution of Africans to Cuba's distinctive cultural mixture; and a more inclusive vision of recalling the past. It speaks to female subjectivity as it celebrates the supportive and matrilineal relationships among women and the labour relegated to Black women in Cuba as laundresses and domestics but also critiques the gendered and racial ideologies that undergird the conventional public monument.

The entrance to *Spoken Softly with Mama* is a separate antechamber-like section consisting of three simple ebony stands upon which are neatly folded white sheets. On each sheet are French and English hand-embroidered phrases in white script, "For Beauty," "For Survival," and "For Necessity." Projected from above onto the top of each sheet is a colour video repeating hands embroidering and folding sheets. This kind of work had been elided by history and the larger Cuban society, rendering these Black working class women invisible. In this part of the installation, Campos-Pons introduces her critique of the public monument, countering the convention of public sculptures celebrating wealthy white men by framing women's domestic labor as heroic. With their work, they not only support and nurture their families (and each other), their survival strategies also produce and exemplify beauty.

The main part of the installation gives a sense of both the memorial and monumental characteristics of the work in the sense of both preserving the memory of those who might be forgotten and celebrating Black women's work in a patriarchal culture that marginalizes its citizens on the basis of gender, race, and class. The objects that signify these ideas include photographs and video, sound, textiles, and the objects of these women's labor: ironing boards accompanied by irons and trivets cast in white *pâte de verre* glass.[33] There are seven upright ironing boards of varying sizes covered in shimmering white silk arranged in an arc with images and names of Campos-Pons's sister, aunts, mother and grandmother. In Cuba, the legacy of the slave trade and of sugar cultivation continued after emancipation in a division of labor in which men worked the cane fields and mills, and women were domestic servants, nannies, and laundresses for wealthy whites and mixed-race people.

The installation speaks also to the history of the forcible migration of Africans that served as commodities in Cuba's labor market. The ironing boards and the cast glass irons refer not only to the labor that Black women performed but also to the slave ships that brought Africans, including Campos-Pons's ancestors, to the Western hemisphere. The white cast glass resembles granulated cane sugar, a key product of Cuba's profitable plantations worked by enslaved laborers that enriched their white owners. This agricultural forced-labor system created racialized and gender-based classes of plantation laborers both in fields and domestic spaces.

Campos-Pons conceived the metaphorical relationship between, on the one hand, the iron and ironing board as objects of gendered and racialized

33. *Pâte de verre* (glass paste) is a form of kiln casting using finely ground glass resulting in objects with a white translucent appearance.

Figure 3. María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing*, 1999–2000 (installation view). Installation by Campos-Pons and sound by Neil Leonard. Mixed media installation: metallic organdy, silk, embroidered fabric, pâte de verre flowers, four projected video tracts, stereo sound. Dimensions variable.
Image courtesy of Gallery Wendi Norris.

labor in the Western Hemisphere and, on the other, the slave ships that transported slaves across the Middle Passage, based on her memory of seeing *Description of a Slave Ship*, a 1789 illustration, in a book in school.[34] Perhaps the most famous image of slavery, *Description* was based on a technical illustration for the British slave ship *Brookes* and was created to determine the number of slaves that could be packed into a ship crossing the Atlantic. It was later appropriated and distributed around the Atlantic Basin by the London-based Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade as visual evidence of the horrors of slavery.[35] Campos-Pons was not the first artist to use and reconfigure the plan of a slave ship for critical conceptual art. Like other Black artists in the late 20th century, such as Malcolm Bailey, Phyllis Bowdwin, and Keith Piper, Campos-Pons created works that reconfigured the schematized silhouetted figures in *Description*, such as *The Seven Powers Came by the Sea* in 1992.[36] Around the same time, artists Willie Cole and Betye Saar made the same conceptual connection between an iron and slave ship. Like Campos Pons's *Spoken*, their work pointed to the link between Black women's labor as domestics before and after slavery, the means of transporting slaves, and the conceptual geography of violence across the Black Atlantic, communicating counternarratives of power that resisted canonical and exclusionary versions of history.[37]

Why have so many artists, and Campos-Pons in particular, repeatedly returned to the slave ship as metaphor in engaging the history of the Atlantic basin? As Paul Gilroy theorizes, the slave ship is central to the concept of the Black Atlantic as a "counterculture of modernity":

> The image of the ship—a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion—is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons… Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records and choirs.[38]

One set of explanations could be seen in the reception of Campos-Pons's mature work like *Spoken*—produced after her trips to Canada and the United States—in which she references the role of the legacy of slavery and the violence of the Middle Passage in geographic displacement; the strength and resilience of a people subjected to this violence; and the practices of African cultures in forming the mixed cultures of the Western Hemisphere. But she is also clear about what the three installations constituting *History of a People Who are Not Heroes* were not: "[t]he work is not about trauma. …I am trying with the work to explain to myself…what this means for the time I am living in. What this means for the people coming after me. …[I]t's part of my experience; the human experience."[39] Sally Berger, in *Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa In and Out of Africa* at the 49th Venice Biennale, saw performance in that work as largely biographical.[40] Enwezor, on the other hand, argued for a more nuanced understanding of Campos-Pons complex work in positing that it is an engagement with the African diasporic archive grounded in the ideas of W. E. B. Dubois, Édouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy, and others, who acknowledge

34. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003.
35. Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 14–40.
36. Tanya Barson and Peter Gorschlüter, eds., *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 28–29, 143.
37. Cheryl Finley, *Committed to Memory: The Art of the Slave Ship Icon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018). This argument does not suggest that Campos-Pons was inspired or influenced by these artists.
38. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 4.
39. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003.
40. Sally Berger, "Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons: 1990-2001," in *Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa In and Out of Africa*, eds. Salah M. Hassan and Olu Oguibe (Ithaca, NY: Forum for African Arts/Prince Claus Fund Library, 2001), 122–143; Enwezor, 82.

that the Middle Passage is a site not only of violent displacement and trauma, but also of connection to the ongoing, dynamic, and generative forces of cultural production at the heart of creolization.[41]

Spoken's multiple references to home are not limited to the sphere of the domestic as a site of women's labor. Conjuring the feeling of home, motherhood, and love is also a reference for people in the diaspora to Africa as a "motherland."[42] The content of the videos projected on the upright ironing boards are somber reflections on a longing for home, a theme the artist repeated in several installations and photographic works. The video projected on the left board features the artist's bare legs and feet walking slowly back and forth. At each turn she stops and clicks her heels together, repeating Dorothy's gesture from *The Wizard of Oz* and performing the magic act that transports her home. The central board featuring the peeling of a pomegranate, one seed at a time, refers to the Greek myth of Persephone, who, like Dorothy, suffers exile in a netherworld and longs to return home. The last video track alternates between a close-up of hands sewing a piece of cloth and the artist walking with folded laundry upon her head. This traditional way that women carry goods in Africa and in the Caribbean signifies the transfer and transformation of cultural practices across the Atlantic. *Spoken's* multivalent treatment of home across time, then, aligns with a more expansive idea of home given that it exists in diasporic consciousness more as an idea than an originary homeland one ever physically lived in: "… having a nomadic, exilic, diasporic, or migratory perspective does not necessarily imply spatial movement. The emphasis, then, is not so much on locating 'home,' but on the process of 'voyaging' … amid multiple identities and worlds: in other words, the journey is 'home.'"[43]

Campos-Pons makes reference to this historical process, but as in all her installations, she does not illustrate this process as a linear, historical narrative of facts. Rather she refers to it through the conceptual associations among objects, media, and images. The critical conceptual art practice Campos-Pons has pursued, like that of many contemporary artists in the 1990s, has generated work that pointed to cultural binary oppositions in order to destabilize them, an approach similar to Mendieta's installations in the landscape. On this aspect of her art works that address memory, Campos-Pons said: "…the *in-between*—the interstitial space…capture[s] the feeling in my work, the way I place myself in a Third Space: a space between territory, between what is home, between languages, between media, between performance versus ritual, between three- and two-dimensional, between what happens there i*n-between*."[44]

The darkened space of *Spoken Softly with Mama* as well as its formal characteristics evoke interior, spiritual, and cerebral associations with the Santería altars Campos-Pons experienced in the Cuban community she grew up in. Known as *tronos* or thrones, these altars are elaborate assemblages consisting of draped cloth, offerings of fruits, and prepared foods, money, and ritual beads, intricately woven into the ritual practices of priests and priestesses, and designed to evoke and enhance the *ashé* (spiritual power or life

41. Enwezor, 69.
42. Jordan Mason Mayfield, "María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Spoken Softly with Mama II*," *Art Papers* 40, no. 6 (November–December 2016), 50.
43. Herrera, 7–8.
44. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003 and Bell, 42. The idea of the "third" or "interstitial" space came from Homi K. Bhabha, "Beyond the Pale: Art in the Age of Multicultural Translation," in *1993 Biennial Exhibition*, exh. cat., eds. Elizabeth Sussman, Thelma Golden, John G. Hanhardt, et al. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 62–73.

force) of particular Orisha, or God, for ceremonial purposes. Art historian Robert Farris Thompson in *Face of the Gods* characterized the Afro-Atlantic altar such as the *trono* in terms similar to those used to describe contemporary art installations: as additive, assemblage-like environments. They share with the altars of West Africa qualities Thompson described as "…school[s] of being, designed to attract and deepen the powers of inspiration."[45] At the same time *Spoken Softly with Mama* sought to remember and celebrate the historical and cultural, the material and spiritual experiences of her forbears whose lives had been devalued and forgotten, it also critiqued the public monument as an art form that perpetuates misremembering.

Spoken and the other installations in the series *History of a People Who are Not Heroes* were part of two larger, interrelated critical practices that informed the creation of Campos-Pons's memory works from the 1990s. The first was participation by scholars, designers, and artists in the multidisciplinary discourse that made an epistemological distinction between history and memory and how thinking critically about this distinction helped reveal the meanings and value of cultural practices (such as rituals) and objects (monuments/memorials) for recalling the past.[46] The second was a practice by contemporary artists to create artistic allegories of history but use references to memory to comment on and critique history's omissions.[47] In discussing both, scholar James E. Young has argued that memory is inextricably linked to a convention of public monuments around the world.[48]

An example Campos-Pons would have seen in Havana is the classicizing equestrian statue of General Máximo Gomez, Cuban "hero" in the war of independence. Twentieth-century avant-garde modernist as well as contemporary artists have critiqued such monuments as myths, as "heroic, self-aggrandizing figurative icons; grounded in conservative artistic conventions."[49] In their monumentality, materials, aesthetics, and idealization, they evince permanence and universality, as if a single set of national ideals and narratives are suitable for everyone.[50] For artists like Campos-Pons, such monuments celebrate and reinforce the normativity of those who are white, powerful, elite, wealthy, and male, hardly appropriate for a country whose identity is characterized by creolization. By including in *Spoken* so many objects and meanings associated with Black womanhood, which collectively led the artist to describe the work overall as intimate, delicate, and feminine, the work resists the conventional public monument's masculinist, classist and exclusionary associations.[51] What *Spoken* represents, therefore, is not simply the expansion of modes of recalling the past (in terms of its references to memory) as a way of including what the concept of history and its material form in the public monument had previously excluded. In keeping with Campos-Pons's effort (and that of cultural theorists) to disrupt binary categories, she charts new ways to conceptualize recalling the past *in-between* the categories of history and memory.[52]

The interrogation of the public monument as a subject of critical conceptual art in the 1990s, when *Spoken* was conceived and realized, occurred alongside that of a better known institution: the art museum. This

45. Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), 20–21, 147.

46. Andreas Huyssen, "Introduction: Time and Cultural Memory at Our Fin de Siècle," in *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 6; Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally, 3–17.

47. James E. Young, "Memory/Monument," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, second ed., eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 234–247; Michael D. Harris, "Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing," in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Meanwhile The Girls Were Playing* (Cambridge: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 1999).

48. Young, 234–235.

49. Young, 235.

50. Young, 237.

51. Campos-Pons, interview with the author, August 20, 2003.

52. Based on distinctions between history and memory, French theorist Pierre Nora argued that memory could be located in specific people and things, attached to specific objects, what he called *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory). See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," trans. Marc Roudebush, in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, eds. Geneviève Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 284–300.

"institutional critique" of both the museum and the public monument had its origins in twentieth-century criticism, Dada, and conceptual art in the 1960s and after.[53] Institutional critique saw the institution of art not simply as the spaces in which art was created, exhibited, and sold (artists' studios, museums, and galleries respectively) but also as an intersecting set of discourses including criticism and journalism. Further, it considered the viewer not simply in terms of perceiving art but as a subject of social forces such as race, gender, and class, the kinds of subject positions theorized most productively by intersectional Black feminism.[54] For these reasons *Spoken* could be seen as advancing institutional critique in innovative ways that center African diasporic women's experiences and histories.

As an art form, *Spoken* draws on and advances the art historical genealogy of installation art from two main sources, one in neo-avant-garde art in North America and Europe in the 1950s and 1960s, and the other in the long history of conceptualism seen in assemblage altars in both West Africa and their diasporic counterparts in Afro-Cuban Santería.[55] Ana Mendieta's works (discussed earlier as an inspiration for Campos-Pons) pioneered some of the ideas that Campos-Pons would later expand in innovative ways.

In works often made of materials of and in the landscape, Mendieta evoked the idea of a female goddess imagery found in several cultures including the polytheistic Afro-Cuban Regla de Ocha, or Santería, belief system | **fig. 4** |. She was particularly interested in the symbolism and attributes of the Santería Orisha, or Goddess, Yemaya, powerful symbol of waters and maternity.[56] Mendieta used her own body as a template connecting her person to the long tradition and archetype of powerful female icons. In contrast to the archetype of the male hero in public monuments, whose solidity symbolizes the memorializing of its subject's likeness in perpetuity, Mendieta's earth-body works were ephemeral, subject to the forces of nature. Water, Yemaya's attribute, disappears. Mendieta's roughly oblong, earthen-form work "grounds" it materially and symbolically as a metaphor for an island, the artist's native Cuba.

Jane Blocker argues in *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile*, that Mendieta's use of earth as symbolic body and island plays conceptually between ideological binaries: earth and nation; home and exile; essence and in essence. In the process, she resists those binaries.[57] By succumbing to the environment's forces and ultimately reintegrating into it, Blocker argues, her work embodies and signifies instability and change at many levels and is therefore caught between binary categories.[58] Later, in the series *History of a People Who Were Not Heroes*, Campos-Pons would take up the idea of in-betweenness, though informed by other thinkers.

Compos-Pons' and Mendieta's work, although very different, share a common skepticism of the attributes associated with the traditional monument and are identified by some art historians as "anti-monumental."[59] While the conventional monument presents itself as permanent, larger than life, and fixes memory in realistic figural form using older and conventional aesthetic traditions, the anti-monument is characterized by

53. Young, 235; Hal Foster, "The Anthropological Model," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, eds. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 624.
54. Foster, 624.
55. Okwui Enwezor, "Where, What, Who, When: A Few Notes on 'African' Conceptualism," in *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950s–1980s*, exh. cat., eds. Luis Camnitzer, Jane Farver, and Rachel Weiss (New York: Queens Museum of Art, 1999), 109–110.
56. Mary Jane Jacob "Ashé in the Art of Ana Mendieta," in *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 190.
57. Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta? Identity, Performativity and Exile* (Durham: Duke University Press), 1999, 73.
58. Blocker, 81.
59. Young, 237

Figure 4. Ana Mendieta, *Isla*, 1981. © 2022 The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

contingency and change, human scale, abstraction, multiple interpretations and contemporary artistic practices of interdisciplinary critique and conceptualism.[60]

Campos-Pons employs a critical conceptual practice that resists the materiality and permanence of the conventional monument with non-material elements that are time- and performance-based, such as projected videos and sound. The sound that permeates the space of *Spoken*, for instance, is the artist singing "Arroz con leche (Rice with Milk)," a children's song popular throughout Latin America about a young man whose ideal wife is a widow whose virtues are limited to the domestic arts of sewing. This choice also reinforces cultural connection to Yorubaland in West Africa and cultural mixture across the Black Atlantic in Cuba's Santería practices. The predominant white colour of the installation, for example—the frosty white cast glass and white cloth, white beads and dress in the videos, the foods in the song "Arroz con leche (Rice with Milk)"—is associated with that of the Orisha Obatala, the supreme deity of the terrestrial Orishas, whose emblematic color is white and whose initiates wear white beads.[61] Far from being a replication of religious rituals and iconographic associations as a practitioner, Campos-Pons's goal is to allude to the practices and images she observed while growing up in Cuba, based on memory.[62] As such, it is one source among many others that the artist draws on in the installation.

What an in-depth exploration of Campos-Pons's *Spoken Softly with Mama* reveals is that through the use of installation art and its attendant conceptual strategies, time-based media, and forms based on everyday objects, the value of Black women's labor and their roles as both creators and stewards of a community's history is foregrounded as a critical counter-argument to the archetypal masculine figural monument. Through the inclusion of references to personal and collective memories, Campos-Pons provides a critique of history and its exclusions by challenging the biases embedded in the public monument as an art form. She also destabilizes the notion of fixed identities—national, ethnic, and personal—by showing how all identities are multiple, interconnected, interactive, and varied across time. In other words, Campos-Pons's works do not engage the past in search of a single cultural origin in Africa. Nor do they assume a singular conception of cultural interaction. Instead, looking to the cultural past is an exercise that, akin to the ideas of James Clifford, recognizes the complex, dynamic nature of culture and history, one that flows along temporal and geographic "routes" and recognizes that these concepts "roots" and "routes" are inextricably linked.[63] Campos-Pons's installations, generally, are not limited to a nostalgic search for a fixed site of cultural origin or roots but are rather conceived, as Clifford suggests to "rethink culture, and its science, anthropology, in terms of travel."[64] As valuable as these analyses of artistic responses to recalling the past and identity in the Black Atlantic are, the sheer range of individual experiences artists reference across spatial, ideological and identity differences in their artistic production—not to mention the equally wide-ranging responses of viewers—continues to challenge scholars' ability

60. Young, 240–244.

61. Berger, 141. Núñez points out that Obatala's attributes include the concept of whiteness as purity as well as "white" metal such as silver. See Luis Manuel Núñez, *Santería: A Practical Guide to Afro-Cuban Magic* (Dallas:Spring Publications, 1992), 32.

62. Campos-Pons, interview with Sama Alshaibi, September 26, 2002.

63. Lisa Gail Collins, "Visible Roots and Visual Routes: Art, Africanisms, and the Sea Islands," in *The Art of History: African American Women Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 83–-98.

64. James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 25, cited in Collins, 64.

to take account of them. This is especially the case in relation to the particularly fraught and often painful history of the diasporic, exilic, and migratory perspectives of Cubans on and off the island.[65]

If memory versus history, home versus exile, and diaspora as concepts are key subjects of critical contemplation in Campos-Pons's works like *Spoken*, how do we think of them in the conceptual, interstitial space of *in-betweenness* she also prompts us to consider? Campos-Pons pointed in her work to those concepts to disrupt our understanding of them as stable, binary categories similar to the ways scholars of diaspora have critiqued and reconsidered them. In Stuart Hall's and Paul Gilroy's writing, for instance, diaspora serves as an alternative to the essentialist notions of nation, home, race, and culture.[66] Other scholars, even in accepting the value of Clifford's theories of culture and travel, have also moved beyond them to embrace more fluidity and poly-culturalism in geographic displacement independent of travel or territory. These theories include the ideas that cultural memory can be transmitted intergenerationally regardless of one's having been in a place, that diaspora allows for multiple cultural identifications, and that a cultural consciousness can be claimed vicariously.[67]

The path to the past and to cultural practices through individual and collective memory that is woven through Campos-Pons's memory works like *Spoken* cannot be reduced to a simplistic illustration of identity, a document of a linear history, a relocation and borrowing of cultural practices, or a fixation on trauma, as important as identity, the past, cultural mixture, and pain are in the memories and histories she references. *Spoken* is thus also about the transformative and generative power of Black diasporic experience. Like other artists who mine the Black Atlantic's rich cultural repository, Campos-Pons has brilliantly "extended and reshaped the meanings of the Afro-Cuban iconography beyond the space of the specific into the site of the universal."[68] ¶

65. Herrera, 7.
66. The writings of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy exemplify this position. See Herrera, 8.
67. Herrera, 8-9.
68. Enwezor (2007), 74.