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FA25

Assignment: Final Paper

### Distributed Intensities as Countervisuals in Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self Portrait Series*

Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait #11* (fig. 1) in her black-and-white photographic series, *Nature Self-Portrait*, pictures a fat, nude woman with dark hair a rocky desert landscape; she is at center frame and in the midground. Her body is frontal, towards the camera with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. She gazes to the left, towards the light source, with her eyes closed; only the right half of her face is in view. The folds of her body cast shadows onto itself and hide the bottom left of her torso and bottom of the right leg. The angular ground stretches upwards towards the top right corner of the image, but stops about two-thirds of the way up the composition to reveal a light grey sky. Tall grass, boulders, and a few trees scatter over the landscape. Her black hair merges with the dark foliage behind her while her body becomes one with the rocks beneath. The cascading rocks before her replicate the folds of her breasts and stomach, and the foliage and stones that surround her are comparable to the triangular shape of her silhouette.

Aguilar's use of value in the composition that allows the woman to blend into the landscape creates a sense of unity for each composition itself but also for the series as a whole. This sense of unity is further explored by the similar compositions of each photograph which create the effect of narrative. However, there is also a textural contrast between the rigid rocky landscape and soft flesh folds of her flesh. This difference in texture allows for the figure to be different *enough* to transition between the position of the sitter and part of the landscape around her. This dual identity is insisted upon again through the juxtaposition of scale and the

placement of the figure in the composition. While centering the figure extends the history of portraiture and places emphasis on the importance and personhood of the figure, the scale of the figure contrarily establishes the body as a piece within the larger image of a landscape. Aguilar is simultaneously using value, proportion, and form to transform the body into landscape while also using texture and emphasis from framing to indicate a clear difference between person and Earth.

The other 14 images in the series function similarly to *Nature Self-Portrait #11*. While the position of the camera and location differ, with some capturing only the ground from a high vantage point and others low enough to capture the horizon, the rocky desert landscape remains the same throughout every photograph. The figure rotates between lying horizontally facing away from the camera, then facing the camera, standing, sitting up, and laying stomach down all while refusing to meet the lens's gaze. The various positions entangle the figures' fat body with the landscape while the grayscale of the photographs add to the complication of where body ends and landscape begins. Several of the images repeat the same framing of the landscape with a different position of the figure, and, in the case of #13 (fig. 2) and #15 (fig. 3), remove the figure entirely. The viewer is left feeling the absence of the figure with a familiar landscape (fig. 4 and 5). By including these two pieces in the series, Aguilar is asserting the importance of the figure to the compositions, contrary to the merging of body and land done by the rest of the series. Aguilar is both, at the same time, assuming the position of a portrait sitter and refusing it by allowing the folds of her body to become landscape.

Laura Aguilar (1959-2018) was an American-born, Chicana photographer who grew up and worked out of California.<sup>1</sup> Her photography was a way to express herself through art in a way she was unable to verbally, which made most of her work heavily autobiographical. Aguilar had auditory dyslexia which disrupted her ability to speak and understand spoken word, leaving

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Chicana" refers to an American woman of Mexican descent or heritage. The more general/masculine term is Chicano. While Chicano traditionally refers to Mexican descent, in some cases the term is used to refer to someone born in the United States with any Latina American heritage.

photography as her primary source of self expression.<sup>2</sup> Her work centers around her own struggles with the different facets of her identity and the body she inhabits. She began working in the late 1970s but didn't gain traction until her breakout series in the mid 1980s, *Latina Lesbians*, that captured portraits of Latina lesbians in LA, including herself (fig. 6), with handwritten messages by each sitter below stating an anecdote about their discovery of sexual identity. Her next major series which introduced nude portraiture into Aguilar's career is the 1990 series *Clothed/Unclothed* where each piece was a diptych with clothed figures on the left, and those same figures unclothed on the right. The first piece within this series is a self portrait of Aguilar (fig. 7), and the rest are members of her social circle in LA. Her most well known work, also from 1990, is *Three Eagles Flying* (fig. 8). This triptych depicts a vertical American flag on the left, a vertical Mexican flag on the right, and Aguilar in the center bound by both flags and thick rope with her breasts exposed. What separates this piece from the rest of Aguilar's work is that *Three Eagles Flying* does not belong to a series. However, this stand alone piece carries the themes of body and identity that extends Aguilar's previous work. In 1996, *The Nature Self-Portrait series* was created on a road trip from LA to New Mexico with fellow photographer Delilah Montoya. This series is the first in Aguilar's career to picture only Aguilar as opposed to her earlier community based portraits, and marked a shift in her career that from then on focused on the themes of body and nature.<sup>3</sup> *Nature Self-Portrait* is also responsible for Aguilar's international recognition by art historians.<sup>4</sup>

With a short career, from the late 1970s to the early 2010s, Aguilar was able to create several series and individual pieces that caught the attention of art historians because of her unique approach to portrait photography as a fat, queer, Chicana woman struggling with her mental health. Scholarship on Aguilar did not emerge until after the creation of her series *Latina*

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<sup>2</sup> Sybil Venegas, "Take Me To The River: The Photography of Laura Aguilar," in *Laura Aguilar : Show and Tell*, ed. Rebecca Epstein (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017), 13

<sup>3</sup> Aguilar's nature based self imagery continued to the end of her career with the exception of her last series *Toys* (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Sybil Venegas, "Take Me To The River," 16

*Lesbians and Clothed/Unclothed* which caught the eye of Chicano Studies scholars and feminist art historians. After the creation of the *Nature Self-Portrait series*, scholarship on Aguilar increased, most of which address the artist's attempt to represent Chicana and lesbian identity, community, and the fat female form. The interdisciplinary nature of Aguilar's portraits contribute to the lack of scholarship around the artist, as recent fields of study such as queer studies, disability studies, and fat studies are still being integrated into art history. While Aguilar is still not widely written about compared to other American female photographers, it is clear that her *Nature Self-Portrait series* was the catalyst for interest in her work in the academic world, and with historical distance, more scholarship is sure to come.

The first scholarly analysis on Aguilar's work was written by Yvonne Yarbro-Bejanaro, a Professor Emerita at Stanford University with a PhD in Spanish from Harvard. She specializes in Chicano Studies with a focus on gender studies which made Aguilar's early 1990s work catch her eye. The essay addressed Aguilar's approach to nudity within her portraits of herself and her community. Published in a 1998 anthology of Chicana feminist theory, "Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar" examined Aguilar's earlier series *Clothed/Unclothed* and pinpointed her unique approach to nude photography that curated a viewing experience of the series. The most significant assertion Yarbro-Bejanaro made was her claim that "the nudity [in Aguilar's self portraits] highlights both subjects' and viewers' culturally conditioned attitudes and feelings about bodies, race, and sexuality. Aguilar's nude portraiture engages exclusionary ideals of beauty and sexuality and how these ideals are internalized and contested by their 'Others.'"<sup>5</sup> "Others," in this case, refers to the theoretical label of "other" projected by the dominant culture onto those who do not align with the normative ideas of success, beauty, and worth. Yarbro-Bejanaro is asserting that Aguilar is exposing both her subjects, by photographing them nude, and the viewer, by showcasing fat, nude bodies, which

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<sup>5</sup> Yvonne Yarbro-Bejanaro. "Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar" in *Living Chicana Theory*. Edited by Carla Trujillo. Berkeley, California: Third Woman Press, 1998, 290.

calls out the subject and viewer on their own perceptions of beauty established by their social conditioning. Yarbro-Bejarano established Aguilar's work in theoretical feminist frameworks, critical discussions of race, and body politics.

Amelia Jones is a leading scholar of feminist modern and contemporary art history, and she specializes in analyzing body and performance art through a queer feminist lens. With three published essays about Aguilar's work spanning from the early 2000s to the late 2010s, Jones is one of Aguilar's most frequent writers and a prominent scholar on her work. In her earliest writing about Aguilar, "Performing the Other Self: Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject," (2002) Jones explores the idea of separating the vulnerability of self-portraiture from Aguilar, in a comparison with Cindy Sherman's work and how they are "performing the other self" by playing with exaggerations of their identities.<sup>6</sup> Both Aguilar and Sherman are engaging with the history of women in photography and complicating the idea of self-portraiture. By placing Aguilar's photographs in conversation with Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (fig. 9), Jones is asserting that the performance in Aguilar's nude self-portraits deflect the vulnerability away from the sitter as she is not portraying herself. Jones is later informed by Yarbro-Bejarano's interpretation of the series *Clothed/Un clothed* which she references in her essay "Clothed/Un clothed: Laura Aguilar's Radical Vulnerability" in a 2017 monograph of Aguilar's career.<sup>7</sup> Jones combines her idea of "performing the other self" with Yarbro-Bejarano's idea of the viewer's experience of the nudity in Aguilar's portraiture to create the concept of "radical vulnerability" where not only is the vulnerability deflected from the sitter of the portrait, but that the vulnerability is then placed onto the viewer. Jones argues that the viewer's insecurities embedded within the oppressive culture of aesthetics and body norms are revealed, and by

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<sup>6</sup> Amelia Jones. "Performing the Other Self: Cindy Sherman and Laura Aguilar Pose the Subject" in *Interfaces : Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002

<sup>7</sup> Amelia Jones, "Clothed/Un clothed: Laura Aguilar's Radical Vulnerability" in *Laura Aguilar : Show and Tell*, ed. Rebecca Epstein ( Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017).

seeing a fat woman, the audience is in turn put face to face with their own body image and insecurities which creates a “radical vulnerability.”<sup>8</sup>

In the same 2017 monograph, indigenous studies scholar, Macarena Gomez-Barris, builds upon Jones’ 2002 concept of the connection between viewer and subject. Gomez-Barris’ scholarship focuses on media studies and environmental feminism with decolonial practices, and her essay “Mestiza Cultural Memory: The Self-Ecologies of Laura Aguilar” continues themes of her previous scholarship.<sup>9</sup> Gomez-Barris takes a two-pronged approach at rethinking *Nature Self-Portrait*: asserting the importance of the locations she was photographed given her social positioning as a Mestiza woman to decolonize the genre of landscape photography and reading the series as a form of auto-ecology that blurs the line between figure and landscape through a lens of feminist post-colonial studies.<sup>10</sup> She begins the essay by connecting Aguilar’s self-portraits to Nicholas Mirzoeff’s idea of a countervisual, a concept outlined in the visual culture scholar’s book *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Mirzoeff introduces countervisuality as “the attempt to reconfigure visibility as a whole” in a way that dismantles the power systems that shaped the original visibility.<sup>11</sup> Gomez-Barris asserts that the visibility of a fat, brown, Mestiza woman inhabiting a landscape is in direct opposition to the dominant culture of settler colonialism. By inserting herself within the image and populating the landscape, Gomez-Barris claims Aguilar is “visually block[ing] the project of American Expansionism.”<sup>12</sup> Gomez-Barris claims that by placing herself in these landscapes, Aguilar is fighting the traditional narrative of 19th century American landscape portrait artists that photograph a barren land ripe for the taking, such as Ansel Adams (fig. 10) who depicts vast black-and-white

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<sup>8</sup> Amelia Jones, “Clothed/Unclouted,” 46.

<sup>9</sup> Macarena Gomez-Barris. “Mestiza Cultural Memory: The Self-Ecologies of Laura Aguilar” in *Laura Aguilar : Show and Tell*, ed. Rebecca Epstein ( Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> The term Mestiza refers to a woman who is mixed race, specifically between indigenous people and European settlers. The term is the feminine singular version of the term mestizaje which roughly translates to people who are of mixed races.

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look, or, How to Think With and Against Visuality.” in *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

<sup>12</sup> Macarena Gomez-Barris, “Mestiza Cultural Memory,” 82.

landscapes that are devoid of people and framed to invite the exploration of the viewer into the space. Secondly, in an auto-ecologies section of the essay, Gomez-Barris ties in Jones' essay "Performing the Other Self," in relation to act of viewing these portraits, claiming "these portraits frame the complex histories between the viewer and the inherence of a disembodied theory of vision and seeing."<sup>13</sup> By building upon Jones' idea of the role of the viewer, Gomez-Barris is able to apply this concept to a post-colonial approach to art. Finally, Gomez-Barris concludes that "Laura Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* [...] make[s] a profound visual shift that shows a generative possibility for how to get out of the colonial and heteropatriarchal formulations."<sup>14</sup>

Maya Strohmeier's essay, "Laura Aguilar's Nature Self-Portrait Series: Where the Body Meets the Earth" (2025) continues the trend of forwarding the analysis and interpretation rather than countering previous scholarship.<sup>15</sup> Strohmeier received her MA from Williams College in Art history with a concentration in Latinx Art and is currently the Douglass Foundation Fellow in Curatorial Studies at the McNay Art Museum in SanAntonio. Her essay was published in *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, making this her first article in a peer reviewed journal. Strohmeier takes a more biographically driven approach to analysing the series than her predecessors, who focused heavily on theoretical frameworks and historical context. In the beginning of the essay, Strohmeier draws attention to the fact that Aguilar's close friend and fellow Chicax creative Gil Cuadros died the same year the series was created, and yet, that year also happened to be when Aguilar's lifelong struggle with chronic depression finally received medical attention and medication. The whirlwind of chemical regulation, grief, and self acceptance is what Strohmeier claims Aguilar wanted the audience to experience while scanning through the 15 images. Strohmeier uses visual analysis to place the photographs into groups of emotions and analyzes the lack of order as a nod towards the unpredictable, cyclical nature of love, loss, and

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<sup>13</sup> Macarena Gomez-Barris, "Mestiza Cultural Memory," 83.

<sup>14</sup> Macarena Gomez-Barris, "Mestiza Cultural Memory," 85.

<sup>15</sup> Maya Strohmeier, "Laura Aguilar's Nature Self-Portrait Series: Where the Body Meets the Earth." *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 50, no. 1 (2025), 161–76.

acceptance. She specifically cites *Nature Self-Portrait #14* (fig. 11) as an image of healing and acceptance as Aguilar reaches to touch her reflection in the watering hole similar to the Greek myth of Narcissus which furthers the assertion of self acceptance and love. Stromeier recognizes Gomez-Barris's deep examination of the backgrounds for Aguilar's images and their larger cultural and historical significance, and affirms their historical importance while adding Aguilar's personal connection to the land. Some of the photographs were taken in Joshua Tree, California which was a special spot for Cuadros and Aguilar. Strohmeier brought the conversation of Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait* back to its intimate, autobiographical roots after a long thread of scholarship removing the series from its personal context.

The scholarship on Aguilar unanimously agrees that her work, and specifically the series *Nature Self-Portrait*, visually engages the viewer in ways that provokes and interrogates systemic ideas of body and identity. However, to fully understand how the simplistic composition of a black-and-white nude female figure against a landscape can evoke such a passionate response from scholars and viewers alike, we must acknowledge the social positioning of the sitter. In this essay, I will attempt to argue that the reevaluation of the *Nature Self-Portrait series* through Monica Moreno Figueroa's theoretical frameworks of distributed intensities and varying intensities transforms Aguilar's autobiographical work into one of countervisuals and counterculture when held against her genre predecessors.

Distributed intensities was developed in Moreno Figueroa's publication from 2010, "Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism," where she analyzes racism in Mexico through relativity to whiteness: the darker the skin, the further from whiteness, the more oppression one would experience.<sup>16</sup> With her recent publication, "Reclaiming Beauty: Non-heteronormative and Racialized Conversations on Fatness and Transness," Moreno Figueroa expands the concept of distributed intensities to challenge more

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<sup>16</sup> Monica Moreno Figueroa, "Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, Mestizaje and the Logics of Mexican Racism," *Ethnicities* 10, no. 3 (August 23, 2010): 387–401, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796810372305>.

binaries than just white/non-white. The expansion of distributed intensities that now interrogates sex, gender, weight, class, and other normative ideas creates a tool for analyzing the nuances of intersectional oppression rather than just racial oppression. The concept of distributed intensities functions as a sliding scale of experience of oppression relative to proximity to dominant cultural ideas based on the different facets of one's identity.<sup>17</sup> For example, a thin, white, gay man is closer in proximity to the dominant culture of aesthetics than a fat, brown, lesbian woman despite them both belonging to marginalized groups.

By photographing her fat, nude, lesbian, Chicana and Mestiza body, uncovered and unposed, Aguilar is revealing to the viewer in her *Nature Self-Portrait series* that her existence is in direct opposition with aesthetics and normative ideas perpetuated by dominant culture. She is uninterested in presenting her identity in a more palatable way that would position her in closer proximity to privilege and instead strongly stands against Western ideas of beauty and worth.

Moreno Figueroa's framework explores another facet of experienced oppression that varies depending on the social context, space, and time one is in called varying intensities. With varying intensities, even those inhabiting the same intersections of identity may experience oppression differently. For example, a fat, dark-skinned, drag queen is much more likely to feel the effects of oppression when working for a white dominated drag club compared to a club composed entirely of Black and curvy queens. While identity remains constant, the distance from dominant culture is exacerbated by the overwhelming presence of those who are closer in proximity to privilege.

Aguilar has already established herself and her body as non-conforming to normative ideas of aesthetics with her earlier works such as *Clothed/Unclothed #1* (fig. 7) and *Three Eagles Flying* (fig. 8). However, Aguilar's *Nature Self-Portrait series* was informed by the art historical context of the genres it contributes to: self-portraiture and women in landscape. By

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<sup>17</sup> Monica Moreno Figueroa and Julieta Vartabedian, "Reclaiming Beauty: Non-Heteronormative and Racialised Conversations on Fatness and Transness," *Feminist Theory* 26, no. 4 (July 15, 2025): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001251351195>.

directly responding visually with *Nature Self-Portrait #13* (fig. 12) to her mentor and inspiration, Judy Dater's, 1981 *Self Portrait with Stone* (fig. 13), Aguilar is situating her body in a thin, white dominated space, thus the intensity of oppression placed upon her body is stronger.<sup>18</sup> Both photographs are in grayscale, and while Dater's pale skin contrasts the dark landscape, Aguilar's skin blends in. The lack of contrast places emphasis on Aguilar's darker skin when placed next to Dater. Aguilar also chose to photograph herself with larger stones than Dater, speaking to how significantly larger Aguilar's body is compared to Dater's even in their respective curled positions. The dark lines of shadow on Dater's figure highlight the presence of her ribs while the lines of shadow on Aguilar's figure highlight the folds of fat continuing from her left side across her back. The lighting then furthers the juxtaposition of Aguilar's fat to Dater's skeletal build. Aguilar's choice to starkly contrast her genre predecessors is what establishes the *Nature Self-Portrait series* as a work of counter culture and countervisuals and creates the evocative imagery scholars are drawn to analyze and contextualize.

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<sup>18</sup> Sybil Venegas, "Take Me To The River," 16



fig. 1 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #11*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 13  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 19 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 2 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #13*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14 × 18 7/8 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 3 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #15*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 4 ½ × 6 ⅛ in. The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens, San Marino, California.

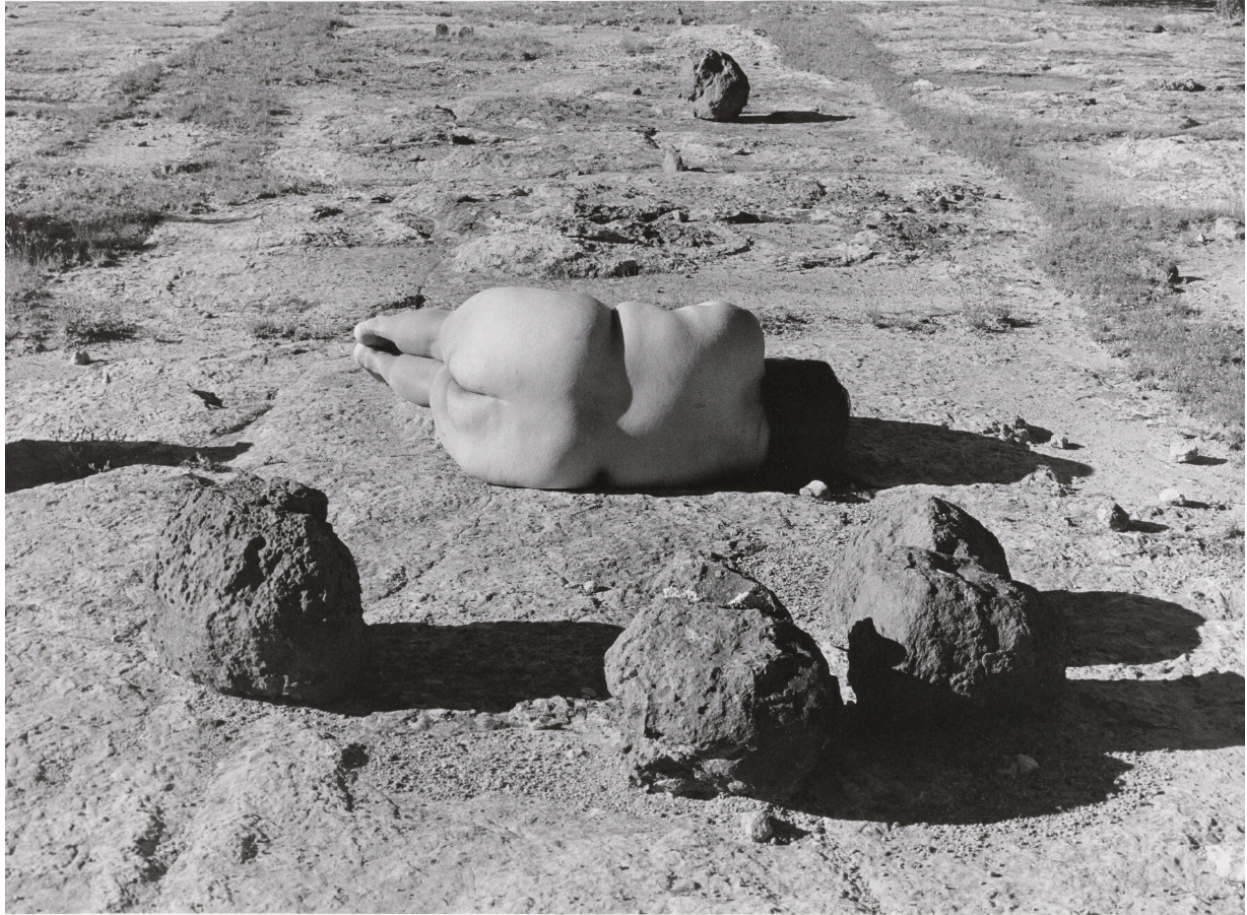


fig. 4 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14 × 19 1/16 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 5 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #6*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 18  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Im not comfortable with the word  
 Lesbian but as each day go's by Im  
 more and more comfortable with the  
 word LAURA. I know some people  
 see me as very child like, naive.  
 Maybe so. I am. But I will be  
 damned if I let this part  
 of me die!

fig. 6 Laura Aguilar, *Laura A.*, from the *Latina Lesbians*, 1988, Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 in.  
 Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.



fig. 7 Laura Aguilar, *Clothed/Unclothed #1*, ca. 1990, gelatin silver print from original negative, Image (Each, Approx.): 20 × 16 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 8 Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, ca. 1990, gelatin silver print from original negative, Image (Each, Approx.): 24 × 20 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 9 Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #6*, ca. 1977, gelatin silver print from original negative, 9 7/16 × 6 1/2 in. MoMA, Manhattan, New York



fig. 10 Ansel Adams, *Banner Peak—Thousand Island Lake*, from the portfolio *Parmelian Prints of the High Sierras*, ca. 1923, gelatin silver print from original negative, 6 × 8 in, SFMoMA, San Francisco, California



fig. 11 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #14*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 13 × 19 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 12 Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #13*, ca. 1996, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14 × 18 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California



fig. 13 Judy Dater, *Self Portrait with Stone*, ca. 1981, gelatin silver print from original negative, 14 1/16 × 18 1/4 in. Getty Museum, Los Angeles, California

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