OUTSIDE THE SOCIAL:

THE SACRIFICIAL BODY AS WOMAN*

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The subject of exile represents a common theme for writers and artists of Latin America. As a trope the subject has served as a way of addressing the condition of colonialism, of deterritorialization or displacement and of forced exile during periods of military repression. Yet, as explored by women writers from Latin America, such as Marta Traba, Gabriela Mistral or Luisa Valenzuela, the experience of exile obtains a particular significance and poignancy. Rather than the association of women with the home and with the 'earthbound mother', associations which contain woman, the "place of exile for such authors is defined by what is missing, not by what it contains." 2

For Ana Mendieta, the experience of cultural displacement from her homeland Cuba likewise inscribes itself as a haunting estrangement of herself from herself, a detachment of the self. More than any other of her extant writing the following statement expresses this position.

All detachment or separation provokes a wound. A rupture, whether it is with ourselves or what surrounds us or with the past or present produces a feeling of aloneness. In my case where I was separated from my parents and my country at the age of 12 1/2 this feeling of aloneness identified itself as a form of orphanhood. And it manifested itself as consciousness of sin. The penalties and shame of separation caused me necessary sacrifices and solitude as a way of purifying myself. You live it, like proof and promise of communion. 3
The concept of being other, a movement towards exteriority is the ground on which Mendieta defines herself, a destiny that is also the place of departure and address. In this sense, her work bears witness to herself, a testimony of herself as other, in which language is understood as a “principle of separation and division through which the self is at the same constructed and decentered.” The negative dialectics of exile: a borderland, homelessness, wandering, solitude and disappearance. This language of exile yearns for an “imagined community” (Anderson), yet yields also to living out a “community of absence” (Blanchot). In such terms there is the risk of not-belonging, of being of but not in the world.

The submission to the profane temporality of history and conversely her sense of a mythic time become part of the same movement. The tension between two temporalities is expressed in the words that follow Mendieta’s remarks on detachment. She speaks of becoming “aware of her own being” in “the context to the world” around her and “the cosmos.”

And, rather than re-enacting an endless series of origin stories, as if to cover loss through an appeal to the paternal model (of oedipus) of authorship, her work recalls Eurydice as the muse whose disappearance is the advent of inspiration, of poetry and art. Difference marks the possibility of art just as art becomes an assertion of difference. As Bataille wrote: “In the strongest sense, transgression exists only from the moment when art reveals itself.”

Art became a refuge, a means, the only means, of recreating a link to her culture, but also transcending her condition of exile through either assimilating or rupturing the dominant discourses of her newfound environment and culture. At the time of an early exhibition, Mendieta wrote:

This exhibition points not necessarily to the injustice or incapacity of a society that has not been capable of assimilating us but more towards a personal will to continue being ‘other.’

Identity is always in the making and Mendieta radical disturbs its perpetual positioning by authorizing an image of difference founded within a space of absence, a mise-en-abîme. The ephemeral, transient character and therefore unstable condition of the work becomes the subject. The work displaces the location of meaning and identity from the fixity of the image or place (the body and land) onto the processes and marks of inscription. As Shoshana Felman remarks, it is not a question of “what model do I imitate, what structure of otherness do I identify with; but what structure of otherness do I address myself to.”

What Mendieta’s work beckons us towards is, on the one hand, a desire for community, and on the other, an impulse of abandonment and loss. There is in the art either an excessiveness or an minimal tracing of signs, of being consumed and consuming, a movement between possession and dispossession. This is the place of ritual in her work. Her sense of self, her orphanhood, solitude and of being different (other, exotic, erotic) is mediated through her use of a deeply ingrained sense of religious ritual and belief, her catholicism and investment in Afro-Cuban and Mexican cultures. Her references to Afro-Cuban religions do not claim a lost identity, nor simply gesture towards returning to her native land, Cuba. Rather they speak of a plenitude of desire to erase, and a constant returning to the place of erasure as the site of restitution.

BECOMING OTHER:

One of Mendieta’s favorite stories, a story she refers to many times in her notes and statements was of a custom amongst the people of Kimberly.

The men from Kimberly go outside their village to seek their brides. When a man brings his new wife home, the woman brings with her a sack of earth from her homeland and every night she eats a little bit of that earth. The earth will help her make the transition between her homeland and her new home.
Moreover, the Kimberly women’s story represented a powerful example of the idea of being taken outside of oneself, of becoming other, an idea which, as I have suggested, Mendieta explores throughout her work. Such is her reference to the concept of the ‘sílhueta’ or her work in which she draws upon Afro-Cuban religious rituals.

What becomes dramatically clear in both the work and writings of Mendieta is the critical issue of the performative body, of its extension into the world, of becoming other, of finding mimetic forms of embodiment (or duplication), that is, the replicating, doubling of oneself. In the act of producing a mimetic double of herself, she is both disembodying and re-embodying herself. The doubling and phantom image of a person intimates the scene of death, yet stages too its reappearance.

The staging and restaging of these ideas are central to the conception of her work. It is the work of art that can take us out of ourselves. This is its power, at once restorative and threatening. And because this power does not only return in order to restore order, but is also always a movement of transgression that does not return as the same, it is a liminal place of transformation. Such too is the danger of reproduction, where the embodiment, the doubling becomes fixed in its place, outside of one, by another, a victim if you will, and therefore a kind of fetish object disembodied, dead.

In a series of performances, films and actions, produced by Mendieta between 1972-74, there is a sense of the body, her body, the body as woman to be the point of departure and return. The body is material to be worked upon, that could be possessed with a sacred or magical energy or spirit, or be the object of interdiction, prohibition and violence. She works along its thresholds, limits and excesses, its proximities to the organic, to animal, undoing its idealization to claim rather the body as woman as the subject of rituals of violence and sacrifice.

One of the first of these works was a series “Death of a Chicken” of November 1972. She presented herself standing naked against a wall holding a white beheaded chicken. In a short Super-8 film she made of the
performance, the head of the chicken is seen being beheaded and its body handed to Mendieta. She stands there holding the chicken upside down by the legs in front of her at the height where its neck dangles in front of her pubis. The blood flows, splattering across her body and the floor.

Watching the performance, what strikes me is a virtually involuntary aspect to this performance. It passes quickly, a flicker that leaves me as much uncertain as otherwise to its event. That is, the sensation of fear as Mendieta takes the beheaded chicken by the legs and it jerks violently about unable to be controlled. Mendieta holds the legs tightly, away from her body and closes her eyes momentarily as the death throes reverberate through her body and the blood spurt across hers. It is what Victor Turner would define as a point of liminality, a threshold state reached precisely through an image-producing degree of uncertainty, a gesture of abandonment? The violent conjunction of her naked body, the killing of the animal and its dying coalesce as a scene of estrangement for the spectator. The coalescence of a living and a dying body appears as shocking. Moreover, by using what we associate to be a "primitive custom" but without clearly defining it to be the ritual of another's culture, Mendieta's mise-en-scene becomes our own. As spectators we read the dying body across that of the living, so that we become witness to and participants in the performing of sacrifice.

Drawing on ethnographic studies of both Aztec religion and Haitian vodoun, both Georges Bataille and Roger Cailllois have argued for an understanding of sacrifice as holding a structural relation to the concept of festival and its economy of excess and metamorphosis. "(W)aste and destruction as forms of excess", Cailllois writes, "are rightfully part of the festival's excess." And the function of such excesses is to make evident repression through overturning the law of prohibition and by this means revitalize or renew society. In other words, the concept of sacrifice is understood as an act of cleansing the community rather than defiling. However, at the same time, the economy of such excess depends on its recognition and disavowal of difference. The impact of Mendieta's work is that the animal comes to stand for woman. The subjection of herself brings a sense of proximity and identification of woman's body to that of the animal. Woman becomes the sacrificial object. Yet it is not the sacrifice of herself. Rather, Mendieta's performance commits an even more dramatic scene of transgression by her assuming the body of man, in order to expose masculinity's uncanny difference from itself and thereby disrupt the fundamental gender relation of the sacrificial economy. By this means her performance subverts the construction of orderly oppositions, producing ambiguity, doubt, and sense of alienation from the self.

Over the next two years, Mendieta continued an intense exploration of this subject around what we may call the 'scene of the crime.' This led her to produce in December 1974 a series based on the image of the shrouded corpse and its corporeal remains, the stain.

Covering herself in blood and paint, she lay on the ground then had herself covered over with a black then afterwards a white sheet. Two sets of work can be distinguished, the first in which the body still remains and a second comprising only of the "body prints", more dramatically marks the disappearance of the body. While in the former we are made witness to the corpse, in the latter it is only its representation, an appearance which marks its disappearance. The sheet serves not only as a support like a canvas, but the work itself. The emergence of the trace and imprint as the residue of the body, marking a space therefore between experience and representation. And yet more than that, Mendieta's work makes evident again that this advent of the visible is achieved by only through death of the other. Like the shroud of Turin, a negative imprint of the body, marks the "baptism of sight." The stain is an index of the absent wound, the sheet a funerale shroud. For Mendieta, the relation to the trace was about the wasting (defilement) of the body and death as the necessary condition of life.

And, while clearly referencing the exile and martyrdom of Christ, Mendieta's work again refuges "corps estranger" as the body of woman.
Through the work of art transgression reveals itself in the violence of the law and the sacred. Each act spills over into a vertiginous series of mis-en-scenes, scenes of violation and laying waste of the body, the body as corpse. The use of her own body or its traces left to stain or trace its remains, demanding its disappearance, conveys not only a commitment of faith in such beliefs and practices, but a kind of fascination and repulsion, a liberating desire and abject death. Death is not left outside, although we need to go there in order that art begins, culture begins. The phantom image that haunts Mendieta’s work is both the disembodied subject and the subject possessed by its other, by its ancestors and the spirits who occupy the earth to which we return.

Mendieta’s use of Mexican and Afro-Cuban religious practices, unfold before us as a shocking transgression of everyday civility, revealing the violence that lies at the heart of the profane world in which we live. She sees herself and art as working within two temporalities of interdiction and transgression, a strategic use of essentialism that represents both a recognition and disavowal of both the desire for and violence of difference.

Mendieta challenges representation, exploring the language of identity as neither coherent nor secure, but rather as the object of rituals and techniques anchored in the body, its support. It concerns less the formation of identity through experience than the violence of experience which the social formation of identity entails.

Mendieta turns this back and forth between society itself producing the transgression of the denial of and law against the body and the spilling of blood (menstrual or otherwise) and herself as the subject who is set apart from and will expel herself from the community. The magic of blood and power of sacrifice then becomes the possibility of redemption and healing of the self through its dissolution into the other. In other words, a return to the sacred and community through rituals of regenerative expulsion.

In this sense, Mendieta’s work performs a double movement of transgression and interdiction, of negation and return. Interdiction is the negation of nature yielding the passage to culture and transgression, a negation of culture as horizon of the given yielding the passage to the sacred. This ambiguity reveals a successive and simultaneous temporality: the profane temporality of history and sacred or mythic time. In her appeal and will to otherness Mendieta does not advocate a withdrawal from history, but a longing to enter mythic time of the absent collective subject.

Through the performance of ritual (in this case Mexican and Afro-Cuban religions), Mendieta’s art offers a kind of anthropology of the self, a space for self-reflection and cultural critique of ourselves. She engenders her subject of sacrifice and turns us into those who must bear witness. In this way, she writes herself into and out of the text. And through its structure of address, her art seeks to both estrange and bring into intimate proximity its subject: woman.

It is as if her art is the only way that she can piece together a memory that otherwise cannot be recalled. A form of autobiography then that moves back and forth between origin and destiny, that negotiates essentialism and social construction as conditions of possibility for the construction of a geography and identity of the self. And it will be precisely through her engagement with other places, Mexico and later Cuba, rather than her adopted home of Iowa that Mendieta finds a way of surviving in the spaces between different languages and cultures.

Notas


2 ibid., 29-30.


6 Shoshana Felman, op.cit., 156.

7 This was story was recounted in Levy-Bruhl, The Primitive Mentality.

8 Mendieta, unpublished notes in which she refers to this African custom as analogous to her work, undated.

9 ibid.

10 Mendieta, extract from unpublished papers, undated.


14 The "stained sheet" recalls a tradition in this region of Mexico where the virginity and consummation of marriage of the newly-wed bride is declared by an examination of the wedding bed following the first night of marriage.

15 While Mendieta's work recalls Yves Klein's Anthropometric series (1960-61), its concept of the trace was the quite the opposite to the artist's quest for indestructibility.