

Another Way of Being: The Performative Practices of Contemporary Female
Colombian Artists

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This dissertation titled
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ABSTRACT

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Another Way of Being: The Performative Practices of Contemporary Female
Colombian Artists

Director of Dissertation: Marina Peterson

This is a feminist project that investigates the performative practices of contemporary female Colombian artists. It was guided by a main research question: Is there a particular kind of strength that comes from their specific situation as contemporary Colombian female artists? As such, this dissertation relies on fieldwork and critical theory in order to elucidate how such diverse individuals perform multiple art practices and what they do in and with their art practices. Two dozen women opened their doors, provided their time for video taped conversation and gave their archival material for the realization of this project.

The main hypothesis this dissertation worked with relates to the existence of a possible double work or doubling of the work a woman artist executes in the need to undo what has been culturally assigned in order to then create her own images, ideas and concepts about being a woman in her society. Within the undoing and the doing, a liminal space allows the artists to realize how the cultural ideas of feminine essences evidence a conceptual void. Once the artistic work uncovers these supposed essences as false expectations, the strength that emanates from the vantage point of un-definition becomes the source of unbound creativity that produces artwork of political significance.

The themes that emerged during fieldwork and writing show that in the same way these artists become others; multiplying possibilities of being while in their practices, they are able to influence their surroundings in minute, effective ways. Otherness is a central theme that has aided the understanding of the work these women realize. An important theoretical source is the seminal work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, even though in five chapters the artistic work of nine artists are thoroughly discussed through multiple theories that traverse the text. Some of the theorists that have aided the present text are: Gloria Anzaldúa, Rosi Braidoti, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Bracha Ettinger, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Catherine Malabou, Laura Mulvey, Jean Luc Nancy, Peggy Phelan, Griselda Pollock, Jacques Ranciere, and Monique Wittig.

PREFACE

Let us start with naming. This is a starting point for a text that names itself *Another of Being* after the last line of a poem by Rosario Castellanos (1925-1974), written in 1948. This Mexican woman's poem gave me the sign I needed to understand the direction this project was to take. Every time I forgot its path, the poem brought me back. This poem talks about the difficulty of being another way, moving away from a pre-determined destiny. The poem names historical women as examples of ways of being that have become signs for others in similar processes. I propose to do as an artist does, as a poet does. I am supporting an indefinite trace that leads to another place because making is not definite. It is a process that makes us in its own way. While in this project, I am being made. The words of this Mexican poet always seem to come back to me when I need some more reassurance that the path I chose is the correct one. With Rosario I become one who meditates at this threshold. I hope to give my readers a similar place full of possibilities.

Meditation at the Threshold

No, the solution is not
 to throw oneself under a train like Tolstoy's Anna
 nor to drink up Madame Bovary's arsenic
 or await at de Avila's plateau
 the angel's angry visit
 before wrapping one's head with the cloak

and start acting.

Neither to conclude geometric laws
by counting the beams of the punishment cell
like Sor Juana. It is not the solution
to write while guests arrive
at the living room of the Austen family
nor to shut yourself in the attic of some
New England home in order to dream
with the Dickinson family bible
under a spinster's pillow.

There has to be another way that is not called
Sappho or Mesalina or Mary of Egypt
nor Magdalene or Clémence Isaure.
Another way of being human and free.
Another way of being.¹

¹ Rosario Castellanos, "Meditation en el umbral" [Meditation on the threshold] in *Meditación en el umbral: Antología poética* [Meditation on the threshold: Poetic anthology], Comp. Julian Palley (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1985); my translation, 73.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my son Gabriel Eisenband Gontovnik, who more than a decade ago pushed me to stay on track when I started my academic career as a master's student, after twenty years as an artist. Back then, I almost returned home scared of the road ahead. His simple phrase was: "Mom, don't come back, you are already there."

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I would like to thank the two institutions that have made this dissertation and my initiation to the doctoral world possible. I thank Ohio University and the professors at the Interdisciplinary Arts Doctoral Program who took me under their wing for three years financially and academically. Universidad del Norte supported the writing of this dissertation for another three years and waited patiently for my full reintegration as a teacher in the Philosophy and the Humanities Department.

I am grateful in particular to my advisor and thesis director, Doctor Marina Peterson, for her hard labor in following my vision and guiding me to deeper understanding of where I needed to go. I also appreciate Doctor Vladimir Marchenkov's support of my way of writing and my philosophical intentions while talking and thinking about artists. I am in debt to Doctor Jennie Klein for her valuable comments regarding art history's way of approaching these artists' reading, while understanding that this is not a disciplinary dissertation. I also would like to thank my last reader and committee member, Doctor Louis George Schwartz, whose incisive classes on film and visual art were a memory that helped me think through many of the problems I encountered while writing.

I am mostly indebted to the artists who welcomed me into their lives, their work and even their homes. They gave me their time; they gave me information and archival material. They allowed me to videotape and interview them extensively. They have corresponded with me and have followed the process of the writing of this dissertation for more than three years. Nine of them are in five chapters that

analyze their work: Beatriz Camargo, Clara Gaviria, Gisela Savdie, Jessica Mitrani, Margarita Ariza, Raisa Galofre, Margarita Vazquez, Obeida Benavides and Tania Maza. Six of them, in their own voices, talk about their work in sections called *Interludes*: Olga Barrios, María José Arjona, Julieta María, Piedad Bonnet, Monica Savdie and Rossina Bossio. Viridiana Molinares ceded unpublished material to be used within the text. Bellaluz Gutierrez, María Rodriguez, Clemencia Echeverry, Nadia Granados, Juliana Reyes and Diana Quintana, who also gave me generous time and material, could not be part of this dissertation but will be part of my future academic work. I am committed to this future, since this is only the beginning of my research and writing in the interdisciplinary field I am entering.

With my friend and colleague, Amalia Boyer, I have entered in a profound collaboration that entails philosophy and performance. She has been listening to all of my doubts and concerns for all of the years it has taken me to write this dissertation. She has read and commented on some of its parts and has encouraged me to keep my vision and stick to the things I have found. She has been, better said, a sort of cheerleader of this solo performance played on the lonely computer ground.

Finally I need to thank a person that entered my process at the last stage. She became more than the editor I needed. Susan Kanter understood the difficulties inherent with not being a native English speaker and coached me for over six months. She always received all of my frustrations with a “Skypean” smile, saying, “Yes, I know what you mean, but this is not the way we say it in English. I am not

sure I would have been able to survive this process without her and our long conversations and her belief in what I was trying to convey.”

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INTRODUCTION

This is a project that deals with the work of contemporary Colombian female artists. It is a feminist project that aims at making their artwork visible. It is a personal-political project which understands that even if some of its participants do not perceive themselves as feminists, nor intend their art to be feminist, what they perform is causing personal and political transformations that are important to a feminist project. Both the subjects (artists) and the objects (their works) of study for this dissertation, as well as the researcher, are immersed in a gendered society that will benefit from alternative ways of performing hegemonic logocentric scholarship. Listening to live artists gives those artists a voice. Doing research on artists who struggle with visibility in a patriarchal society permits the field to open to new possibilities. The artists' doing of their work announces their perception that inessentiality is a place culturally assigned, but it is also a place where the strength to create arises.

Art making is a form of living that permeates all aspects of everydayness, including small, apparently private ways. This is a dissertation that performs a thesis found during fieldwork and writing. It is about finding a form that would work both as art and as theory. The intention here is to mend the split between practice and theory by creating a performative text that plays within these two artificially sanctioned borders. The women artists that participated in this project are playing with culturally assigned feminine essences, also an artificial border. Many work with the concept of womanliness. The greater the understanding of the

workings behind what seems natural within a culture, the more the prescribed essences can be seen as a mask, one which t can be used or discarded. These artists are masquerading, using the tropes of femininity in order to deconstruct and possibly empower themselves and others.

Creating artworks in diverse media is a way to create new possibilities of being and at the same time influence one's surroundings. Since the advent of the right to vote in the middle of the 20th Century, Colombian women have been participating actively in political life. They have become more educated and have had access to more professions. Today they graduate from higher education in greater numbers than males. In a few decades they have managed to change many laws and participate fully as citizens. I contend here that it does matter that an artist is a woman. It is something that defines you if you are born marked as female in a country that maintains a view on femaleness as a natural phenomenon with certain essential characteristics. Performing new ways of being through an artistic practice is a way women define their own identities. It is a way to participate and influence their lives and the lives of those around them as familial and national trauma transform them. In turn, they transform personally and influence their milieu.

Feminist academic work is needed in countries like Colombia, where, in just the past two decades, scholars working in the field of literature have been trying to make the work done by women writers visible. In books such as the anthology *Ellas*

Cuentan (They Tell) by Luz Mery Giraldo² (1998), *Literature and difference: Colombian Women Writers of the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1 and 2³ (1995) and *The Creole Scheherazade: Essays on Latin American Women's Literature*, by literary scholar Helena Araujo⁴ (1989), scholars have identified women's suffrage as a breakthrough moment in national Colombian history, one that had a great impact on female writers born around that time, who all seem to have broken away from tradition and started experimenting with language and existential questions. Like works of literature, the visual arts by women in Latin America have been explored by academic studies in the last twenty years. In *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism*⁵ (1992), feminist scholar Debra A. Castillo undertook the task of looking at female writers in order to find feminist strategies in their texts. In addition, Marjorie Agosin⁶ edited a collection of writings on Latin American women artists, yet neither of these two books has a section devoted to a Colombian writer or artist.

Aside from literature, where texts are accepted as self-revelatory, there seems to have been little interest, in writing about art done by women in Latin

² Luz Mary Giraldo, *Ellas Cuentan: Una antología de relatos de escritoras Colombianas, de la colonia Nuestros Días* [They tell stories: An anthology of tales by Colombian women writers, from the *Nuestros Días* neighborhood] (Bogotá: Planeta, 1998).

³ Maria M. Jaramillo, Betty Osorio y Angela Robledo, eds., *Literatura y Diferencia: Escritoras Colombianas del Siglo XX*, vols. 1 and 2 [Literature and difference: Colombian women writers of the twentieth century, vols. 1 and 2] (Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes y Universidad Nacional, 1995).

⁴ Helena Araujo, *La Scherezada Criolla: Ensayos Sobre Literatura Femenina Latinoamericana* [The Creole Sheherezade: Essays on feminine Latinamerican literature] (Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1989).

⁵ Debra A. Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁶ Marjorie Agosin, ed., *A Woman's Gaze: Latin American Women Artists*. (New York: WhitePone Press, 1998).

America. A few exceptions exist: Marta Traba⁷ compiled an encyclopedic volume entitled *Art of Latin America: 1960-1980*, where she mentions at least 25 Colombian female visual artists when discussing Latin America as a whole field of study. The work of two female Colombian artists is showcased in a recent publication about an important 2005 exhibition in the Irish Museum of Modern Art called *The Hours: Visual Arts of Contemporary Latin America*.⁸ In 2008, El Museo del Barrio in New York published a group of essays edited by Deborah Cullen⁹ (2008), dedicated to the action by artists of the Americas. It contains a short text by Maria Iovino on María Teresa Hincapié, considered the pioneer of Performance Art in Colombia. More recently (in November 2010), a book of essays on Maria Teresa Hincapié, *Elemental*,¹⁰ was published. Dutch cultural theorist and art critic Mieke Bal has devoted an entire book to the political artwork of one of Colombia's most important contemporary artists, Doris Salcedo¹¹. This project embraces a wide range of women artists and their diverse activities, as a contribution to the field of academic inquiry in the arts of the Americas.

Likewise, few studies on Latin American women in theater have emerged in the last two decades. Most of these studies are on dramaturgy and the texts of many

⁷ Marta Traba, *Art in Latin America: 1960-1980* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press and The American Development Bank, 1994).

⁸ Irish Museum of Modern Art, *The Hours: Visual Arts of Contemporary Latin America* (Zurich: Daros-Latinamerica AG, 2005).

⁹ Deborah Cullen, ed., *Arte No Es Vida: Actions by Artists of the Americas 1960-2000* (New York: El Museo del Barrio, 2008).

¹⁰ Grupo de Investigación "En un Lugar de la Plástica" [Research Group "In a Place of the Plastic"], *Elemental: Vida y Obra de Maria Teresa Hincapié*. [Elemental: Life and work of Maria Teresa Hincapie] (Bogotá: Laguna Libros, 2010).

¹¹ Mieke Bal, *Of What One Cannot Speak: Doris Salcedo's Political Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Latin American women. They focus on the literary aspect of theater production. Examples are *Women Writing Women: An Anthology of Spanish-American Theater of the 1980's*¹² (1997); *Latin American Women Dramatists: Theater, Texts and Theories*¹³ (1998), *The Drama of Gender: Feminist Theater by Women of the Americas*¹⁴ (2000), *Games and Play in the Theater of Spanish American Women*¹⁵ (2004). None of these studies reference Colombian dramatists, but we find two contemporary female theater performers and directors from Colombia (Patricia Ariza and Beatriz Camargo) referenced in *The Encyclopedia of Latin American Theater* (2003), as well as three dramatists (Piedad Bonnet, Fanny Buitrago and Judith Porto de Gonzalez).

Beatriz Rizk has published several books that take women doing theater in Colombia into account: *Posmodernismo y teatro en América Latina: teorías y prácticas en el umbral del siglo XXI*¹⁶ (2003); *Teatro y diáspora: testimonios escénicos latinoamericanos*¹⁷ (2002). Diana Taylor and Roselin Constantino edited *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*¹⁸ (2003), a volume of essays dedicated to

¹² Teresa Cajiao Salas and Margarita Vargas, eds., *Women Writing Women: An Anthology of Spanish-American Theater of the 1980s* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

¹³ Catherine Larson and Margarita Vargas, Eds., *Latin American Women Dramatists: Theater, Texts, and Theories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Yolanda Flores, *The Drama of Gender: Feminist Theater by Women of the Americas* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

¹⁵ Catherine Larson, *Games and Play in the Theater of Spanish American Women* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2004).

¹⁶ Beatriz J. Rizk, *Posmodernismo y teatro en América Latina: Teorías y prácticas en el umbral del siglo XXI* [Postmodernism and theatre in Latin America] (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener, 2003).

¹⁷ Ibid., *Teatro y Diáspora: Testimonios Escénicos Latinoamericanos* [Theatre and diaspora: Scenic Latin American testimonies], vol. 7 (Irvine, CA: Ediciones de Gestos, 2002).

¹⁸ Diana Taylor and Roselin Constantino, eds., *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

Latin American women who perform. In one of the essays, Marlène Ramírez-Cancio describes the feminist theater collective La Mascara and their “invisibilized” twenty-eight years of work.¹⁹ In general, the works that attract the most attention are those with clear political intention. The horrors of war in a country plagued by violence for six decades are a constant interest of critical theory concerning Colombia and the arts. Through this project I have explored the lives and work of a few contemporary Colombian women artists in a very intimate way. I decided to focus on what they could tell and share instead of the opinions of others, such as critics or institutions. The intimacy of this encounter is what showed me their definite political gestures.

Ideas about presence and absence, so important to the ontology of performance as understood by Phelan, occur within a *doubling* that arises in the art practices of these women artists. Phelan²⁰ defined the ontology of performance as the unrepeatable, that which disappears. What persists is a memory, something that is no longer visible. It is this unacknowledged invisibility and the implied *doubling* that is of interest here. My thesis is that women who do artistic work undertake what is now called in common vernacular²¹ *la doble jornada (double shift)*. I identify this *doble jornada* with the double work of a woman artist, one as invisible as housework. It deals with an internalized identity that needs to be reckoned with,

¹⁹ Marlène Ramírez-Cancio, “Teatro La Mascara: Twenty-eight Years of Invisibilized Theatre,” in *Holy Terrors*, ed. Diana Taylor and Roselyn Constantino (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 331-52.

²⁰ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²¹ Based on the feminism of the 1960’s.

forcing the female artist to begin at “ground zero” in order to first face and work through questions of gender and representation raised by cultural constructs. These artists all have something in common: as women they must un-do in order to do. It is after or during this undoing and only in the *doubling* that they can attempt a new performance of their “selves,” which beg to be re-defined, re-ejected and re-constructed by the very practice of making art. I found that contemporary Colombian women artists reach a liminal state or space when *doubling* and in doing so, they are able to also reshape their community, nation and world. This relates to what Turner (1988) described as liminality: a state of being that is between moments, structures, situations. It is that space in between where creativity occurs, where things change, where a person or a community are about to become something else.

The women chosen for this project were born around or after 1954, a watershed moment when Colombian women obtained the right to vote. Studying a selection of Colombian women artists active in diverse artistic media during the 21st century is about art as a personal and political transformational practice. I am thus framing diverse forms of artistic activities, including visual arts such as photography, painting and video, as well as the performing arts as *performance*. Thus I am ascribing to Richard Schechner’s²² assertion “... that any action that is framed, presented, highlighted, or displayed is a performance” (2). This project will use diverse methodologies to reach its goal. In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s terms it will

²² Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

“do, behave and expose.”²³ This dissertation looks at performance, studies what performance does and exposes performatively what it has seen, heard and analyzed.

In defining the methodology for this project, I followed in the footsteps of cultural theorist and feminist thinker Mieke Bal, who plays with what she calls “the central dogma of modern epistemology,”²⁴ or the separation between subject and object in her own writing on art history and museums. For Bal, this central dogma problematizes ways of looking and displaying. All cultural agents, including academics, are involved in showing and exposing, a fact that underscores attitudes about power and legitimate knowledge. Lorraine Code,²⁵ a feminist philosopher, believes “knowing” is affected by the “knower.” It matters that the artists studied here are women. It should also matter that the researcher and writer of this dissertation is a Colombian woman who is also an artist. In Bal’s terms, the idea is to keep in touch with the fact that the researcher and writer of this project is a performer and an academic at the same time.

One of the goals of this dissertation from the beginning was to establish a dialogue with the women who participated this study. They were to be co-performers of this dissertation. Therefore I set out an ethnographic principle to guide and limit my research work: I would only look into the lives and work of women I could talk to, those who would allow me into their lives and spaces in full

²³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses: Food as Performance Medium,” *Performance Research* 4, No. 1 (1999): 1-30.

²⁴ Mieke Bal, *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

²⁵ Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

participation. This methodology focused my efforts during a year and a half of fieldwork. It proved to be very fructiferous. Not all of the gathered material could be accommodated in body of the text. Other artists and their work will be saved for further intellectual production. Some data has been used in alternative formats with this text.

I strove to find the delicate balance--maybe a feat of equilibrium--in being a performer-ethnographer-researcher-writer. The subjects I worked with are women who received me implicitly as a dancer trying to perform such a feat, but who can also understand what they are telling as poets, precisely because the questions are intimately related to all of us. We conducted unstructured interviews for hours, often on more than one date. I travelled to some of their places of residence, both in the US and in other Colombian cities. Some came to my home. The interviews were all video-recorded as I held a camera on my own hands in order to get close shots of their words and gestures. Sometimes I was able to record their working spaces and works in progress; I also attended exhibitions. All of our conversations have an intimate tone.

These details bring me to the subject of *We*, an ethical standpoint that is about placing oneself in the shoes of the other. The artists present in this text assumed my investigation as part of their own artistic investigations, helping its horizontal tone. I started with artists I knew, and they suggested others, and these others knew others that I contacted for more unstructured conversations. As themes emerged and I found ways to connect their works, some of the material

gathered had to be archived for later research projects. The scope of the present dissertation was also a factor that helped an organic process that started to mold which of the artists would be featured in the final text.

Dwight Conquergood²⁶ posed that ethnography should not strive for perfection in observation through detachment from its subjects of study. He rightfully applied the notion that the observer's gaze is the gaze of domination in his work. He felt that when one goes into a different culture in order to understand it without involvement, one is using and reproducing power. In the case of this dissertation the other cultures are all of the different women, their work, the private lives, places I was allowed into through our conversations. Conquergood advocated the positioning of one's own body as a researcher: one's own complete presence into the field that one is studying was necessary in order to understand it in an embodied way. As an embodied researcher, I often found myself at a loss for words to explain my findings until I just wrote them down and allowed them to become that other that I was. I also became involved in some artistic/performance projects, which enriched my reflections as I moved forward.

Writing, further along, became a distancing tool, but at the same time it connected me to the artists I was getting to know in a more profound way. I was discovering them in new dimensions through the writing. The videos of our conversations and the material they gave me became new discoveries as I made connections. This led me to contact them further, asking more and more questions

²⁶ Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, No. 2 (1985): 1-13.

and then sometimes feeling defeated as time passed and they continued to create new works. I could not become interested in works I would not be able to include here, for the purpose of finishing the project. Therefore, in a sense, by the time this dissertation is finished and shared, it will not talk about the present work of the women who allowed me to be present in their lives and who are present in the text.

According to Diana Taylor,²⁷ transcripts and written documents transfer archival knowledge situated within a specific economy of interaction. In this sense, I was mindful of the power inherent to my position as a researcher who observes, analyzes, archives and then presents. The artists need to be part of the equation regarding their archives. Tuning into Taylor's discussion and the distinction between archive and repertoire, I saw the artists' work as repertoire, played out in a politically framed scenario: my desire was to become a witness who would not put on the mask of detached observation. Therefore, respectful theoretical hermeneutics took into account the subjects of the case studies' own views of their processes. The interviewed women retained their voices, sometimes even reviewing what I wrote about them in order to give further information. In this way I was not just approaching individuals who find it difficult to be visible in the institutionalized world of art in Colombia; I was researching living beings who have barely been studied by academia and who deserve to have a voice. How could I not recount their tales? Therefore, the chapters may be seen as lingering on life stories. These life stories are important to the artists' work and an obvious avowal to the non-

²⁷ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (London: Duke University Press, 2003).

separation that I intend to present here, between object and subject, between life and art, and between the personal and the political.

When considering archives, it was important to keep questions of power in mind. Ethnography that performs into a dissertation destabilizes while empowering. Performance can observe itself in the act. Artists are researchers, and researchers are artists that tango to similar tunes. For example, Julie Taylor²⁸ published *Paper Tangos*, where her practice of the dance produced the study of the Tango culture in Buenos Aires. Thus, it is with cautious optimism that I accept the idea that ethnography can be approached from the perspective of performance. It is also with caution that I present here a work that took three years to take shape. With each new step the choreography changed, and with these changes the doubts became stronger, until the final presentation appeared.

As an archivist who embodies a research practice, notions of presence and absence, as well as of liminality arose when witnessing. Video recording was an important performative part of this dissertation since it allows for a prolonged and ever-changing engagement with the artists' work. Archiving served the double purpose of retaining information for systematization and allowing the researcher to maintain an ongoing dialogue with the artistic creation of the different artists in their absence. All of this material is kept for further work and for curatorial purposes. To be the holder of such valuable material for the future (twenty artists videotaped, talking extensively about their life and work) is a huge responsibility.

²⁸ Julie Taylor, *Paper Tangos* (London: Duke University Press, 1998).

My first response is this dissertation, a text that is not intended solely as a critique but also a relation, in the sense of the Spanish word *relatar*.

I am referring here to *relatar*, the related word in Spanish, my mother tongue. Translated accurately, it is “to narrate,” which vacates the meaning into another plane. I *related* to these artists while doing fieldwork, and later I found myself narrating their lives, their stories and their work. Our shared stories were in Spanish. Once I translated them into academic language, also a second language, trying to confine plural meanings into the limits marked by scholarship, many of the shapes taken by their words and my interpretations seemed awkward. Not only were *We* speaking in Spanish, but both their words and my thoughts had a different taste once they migrated not only into English but into academic style.

Using Austin’s thesis on the performativity of words, Della Pollock²⁹ has shown, based on Derridian *differance* and Butler’s instability of identity, that a form of writing can perform by opening new possibilities: by talking metaphorically and metonymically, displacing meanings and moving structures of supposed fixed identities. Following Pollock’s path, this dissertation has been a performative work that is not only about giving me the space to perform a new way of being, but also about looking into the lives of other contemporary Colombian women who are performing new ways of being through art making. Finding the structure for this dissertation took plural formulations, while allowing the plurality of meanings that art can yield. Developing a finalized version that performed in a way that could

²⁹ Della Pollock, “Performing Writing,” in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 104-30.

satisfy the purposes stated above proved to be as hard as finding a final choreography that could be placed on a stage. As the curtain closes, one can reshape in dance, theatre and music. But text has the signature of completeness. It dies once it is inscribed and published.

The final form that this dissertation has taken was a negotiation that entailed resignation and renunciation. Using performance as the frame, I am permitting other possibilities for this text. This is the shape taken for its moment as a doctoral dissertation. Artistic practices are acts that do not become fixed, even though by studying them we tend to do so through a gaze that stabilizes them. I wish to see the result of my research and writing as an object that, once produced and read, can be de-stabilized. If art is about memory, traces that take other shapes, among other things, it is useful to think about the artists here showcased as still doing, within the text, performative acts that do not cease to mutate. The structure will keep changing. Now its form is fixed for its presentation. The fixed form is not lineal. There are five chapters that analyze the work of nine artists. Each chapter plays homage to a deceased artist who is looked at briefly. Within each chapter there are interstices and between chapters there are interludes that feature five more artists.

Chapters

In each chapter that structures this dissertation I have placed in relationship the works and lives of each one of the artists against a backdrop of specific laws and political and social situations that have had an impact in Colombia. Chapter One is titled *Naming*. The theme here is the need to name in order to control. Naming is

also the key that opens the discussion about Jessica Sofia Mitrani (nee Grossman) and Gisela Savdie (nee Sencherman). The backdrop chosen for their presentation is a law that allowed women in Colombia to keep their maiden names after 1970. The way they chose to name themselves as artists is an opening to the multiple ways they have chosen to disrupt a phallogocentric culture. Gisela Savdie's photographic series *We are all Broken Dolls* serves as a fragmented mirror to reflect how the idea of the woman's inessentiality is one of the causes of the trafficking of women, who are seen merely as body parts. Jessica Mitrani's multiple interdisciplinary media works ask over and over again, in humorous fashion, what is implied in ideas of femaleness. In this chapter I also honor Emilia Ayarza, a poet who defied canons of motherhood and wifedom in her conservative Bogotá of the 1960's.

Chapter Two is named *Situating*. It begins by situating the artists in Colombia's context while observing and analyzing how two artists, Clara Gaviria and Raisa Galofre, start their careers at home. I have placed Simone de Beauvoir's seminal *Second Sex* in the discussion here in order to show how pertinent her work has been in Colombia, ever since it appeared in the public arena through academic discourse in the seventies in Colombia. Her ideas concerning an understanding of woman as the Absolute Other are key to this chapter and disseminate to the rest of the dissertation. Home is the situation of immanence where women are culturally placed, as Beauvoir stated. As laws changed in modernist Colombia, women started to reject the idea of home as their only space to reside and develop. Raisa Galofre and Clara Gaviria, while grounded at home, depart from the situation by placing

their own selves intentionally there and then, deconstructing home from the inside in very personal ways. Galofre does this via self-portraits that challenge her home spaces with her own body. Gaviria creates shadow boxes out of carefully chosen and assembled minimal everyday household objects. Debora Arango, one of Colombia's art pioneers, is honored in this chapter by remembering her struggles as a woman painter born and raised in a very catholic, conservative nation, one who nonetheless defied church and state with her paintings, considered scandalous in her time.

In Chapter Three, the life long work of Beatriz Camargo is discussed through the tale of her life work as the creator of *La Maloca*. This is a place of her own, built in Villa de Leyva, a city next to the capital, Bogotá, where she lives and shares with others the methods she developed for creating and performing original theatre pieces. This chapter, which features her dramaturgy in detail, is about *Constructing*. Camargo has been placed in the context of displacement because Colombia is one of the top countries with internal displacement.³⁰ The need to construct a nomadic, borderless subjectivity is analyzed here. Camargo's construction of a feminine fertile space for creativity among the return to myth and ideas of pre Columbian indigenous cultures is discussed here to point to the need for possibilities of constructing subjectivities that possibly may not be essentialized, even though they seem to be trying to return to what seem as essential origins. Maria Teresa Hincapié, a pioneer in Colombia's field of performance art, is honored in this chapter. Her

³⁰ *BBC News*, "Colombia Tops IDMC Internally Displaced People List," last modified April 29, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-22341119>.

performances focused on constructing a feminine space that could trans-connect the intimate and the whole land of a country saturated in violence. Each of these women developed a particular work method that deals with a material spirituality. They are *chamanas* that shape shift with their craft and their intentions to change their surroundings.

In Chapter Four, *Healing*, one artist is featured as her artistic work uniquely illustrates the theme of healing. Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas' work is an obsessive-like investigation of healing, undertaken in multiple ways. In a country saturated by violence, trauma is inescapable. Familial and national trauma double the need for looking back, taking second looks, opening the places to emptiness in order to accomplish some sense of completion. This sense of completion may never fully develop, but it may still become a constant exercise. Margarita Vasquez looks for completion via artistic actions that repeat and re trace steps taken, identities assumed; thus she sustains a state of liminality that yields, at least, a sense of being able to do something, to perform other ways of existing in a place of empowerment. In this chapter the life and work of María Mercedes Carranza is honored. Poetry was not enough to alleviate her suffering as familial and national trauma led her to take her own life in her prime.

In *Coloring*, the fifth and final chapter of this dissertation, three artists are followed as they deal with issues of skin color in very different ways, including not dealing with these issues in a direct manner at all. Two Afro Colombian women, Obeida Benavides and Tania Maza, address issues of identity, ancestral memory and

abuse affecting women in general, as compatriots. They do not discuss in issues of difference in their creative work. Meanwhile Margarita Ariza, a woman considered white in Colombia, challenges her own family about racial discrimination, implicating the whole of the country in the way. The female Colombian voice tends toward collective processes, even when working individually. Cecilia Porras is honored in this chapter as another one of those few women who were able to enter the phallogentric art world in Colombia, due mainly to her association with her male colleagues for whom she performed as model and muse. Her capacity was truncated with an early death, but she is considered now as one of the few who experimented with self-performance in Colombia in the early sixties.

The argument across these five chapters grows as one can see that the artists interviewed and studied have no problems with addressing otherness, that is, speaking for others. And this is precisely due to the fact that they are quite aware of their own otherness. Throughout these five chapters I have tried to show that the concept of radical otherness as exposed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* is one that entails an awareness of the inessentiality of woman. Mythic discourses of womanhood are a sort of empty field, a land of lack that needs to be fulfilled within immanence. They need to be dismantled through other ontologies. Through art these women are being in another way while subverting those misleading ideas assigned by their culture as “feminine”. But in the process, this situation has become a form of

as these women artists decide to maintain a nomadic subjectivity³¹, one that does not allow grasping or fixing in definite ways that might control and subject them, yet again.

Interludes

After each chapter, there is an *Interlude*. These interludes do not pertain to the chapter themes. Five of the women who collaborated with this dissertation speak directly to the reader through the mediation of the work done for this dissertation. The translation of their thoughts about their work comes via narration, which I constructed from the video-taped interviews. Including some of the artists in their own voices, literally transcribing their thoughts as they spoke, frees them in a metaphorical sense from a gaze that fixes them for a study, even though they will be inscribed there. These *Interludes* also allowed me as a researcher to maintain focus on hearing the voices of the artists. It became a reminder of my role as one who heeds, not just one who interprets. It is a gesture that includes them without classifying them, a reminder of their freedom in action. These five women represent all those who spoke so generously with me for hours, whose work has become chapters in a dissertation, fixed, in a way, by my gaze. Their recorded voices became the distant voice of the past: the voice of Eurydice, who was so difficult to hear, while she remained silent and passive in myth.

³¹ Rosi Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Interstices

I wanted to allow slippages within the text, so I decided to include a voice that seems to come from nowhere and that does not apparently belong to the body of the text as a whole. These are called *Interstices*. In these interstices I placed that other voice I needed to hear and wanted to be heard--my own poetic voice, the one that is usually supposed to be avoided in an academic text. The call was mainly towards Eurydice, that mythological figure who dies twice, who fails to be rescued and whose voice is not heard, staying in the dark forever. Perhaps the antidote has been the actual writing of a dissertation about female voices that should be heard.

The figure of Eurydice is a trope that has accompanied me during the process that started in 2008, when I came to Ohio University to pursue doctoral studies in Interdisciplinary Arts, hoping to find a way to merge all of the interests I have developed during the past forty years: performance art, poetry, dance-theatre, healing, philosophy, writing, teaching and feminism. Writing about feminist psychoanalyst and artist Bracha Ettinger's work, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock named Eurydice, confirming this need to preserve her in mind as a figure who can represent women artists:

Bracha Ettinger calls upon a figure of Greek myth, but one she considers an emblem for the artist woman of our times. Eurydice is a figure of trauma out of time, who looks towards us from between two deaths. She remains held in a cultural space through which both questions of femininity and sexual difference on the one hand, and on the other, questions of temporality, death,

history and memory can be posed in an interwoven theoretical-aesthetic project.³²

Eurydice's voice appears in the *Interstices*, inserted at different places within each chapter as poem or prose. I wrote the interstices that address Eurydice directly. In the final chapter, the voice of yet another writer is heard. This interstice is not a product of an interview; it is a short story called "Socorro" by Viridiana Molinares, presented by the author as a gift to appear in this dissertation. In the first chapter there is an abrupt interstice that narrates a real event that happened to me in 1974. Back then I did not yet think of Eurydice at all. She was dormant, waiting as a figure I would later encounter.

Pioneers

This trope of the woman who dies twice is also a reminder that others have crossed thresholds that marked new ways of being. They are deceased, but the destiny I want for them is to be here, within the text, at the beginning of each chapter. They produced art that can help us envision their eyes, as they looked at doors that should be opened. While I chose to focus on women who are alive, I found myself immersed in the impulse to honor a few of these deceased artists. It was an impulse born out of gratitude. Other women artists had died while in a gesture that validates the struggle presented by the living artists I interviewed. They were trying to become something other than what their society dictated and still imposes.

³² Griselda Pollock, "Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metamorphosis," *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 12.

Remembering those five women was a way to enter into a deeper dialogue with the women who became subjects of my writing. They became part of the dialogue via their legacy. This was not a planned act from my part. They came when the act of writing required their presence. Since they were not included as subjects of study they became, in a sense, the bodies absent within the contextualization of the dissertation, phantasms or guardians vigilant of its content.

Interstice 0: Eurydice looks.

For centuries Eurydice had to remain forever lost, elusive, unreachable- only capable of being dreamed of. Lost in a limbo where souls stay indefinitely. Lost to knowledge, to being known.

Eurydice is not to undo the spell, she must stay put at the abyss, then look back as she falls or maybe as she strives to understand the darkness where she has been encased. But what would happen if women start to wonder between worlds wielding the magic wand of art making?

I see the Magdalena River as if its dried bed could be signaling the shape of Colombia, parted by its otherwise fruitful waters, crisscrossing the country before ending in the city of Barranquilla, entering the Atlantic Ocean.

I can imagine the many orphic heads that have been submerged in this river, the same ones that have later emerged to testify the violence that has affected the country in the last six decades. It is a violence we have all witnessed someday or another.

We don't believe in oracles any more. But art may be able to bring us back from the profundities of pain. And it has everything to do with the look: with the one that looks and the one that is looked at.

INTERLUDE 0: MARIA JOSE

When you choreograph it is about a specific quantity in movement during a specific quantity of time; there is concrete time, and you know it as a performance. When you work on long duration performance you never know exactly what will happen. There are no concrete movements to be performed, there is no stage, and there is no division between you and the audience. The energetic introduction of the other in your performance space changes everything. When you work during long stretches of time, the perception of time becomes de-structured, it becomes in a way, the matter of the performance. As a performer I do not think as of a stretch of time where I am performing. I do need to stretch that flexible line that time gives me, one that does not feel the same as in everyday life, in order to render myself present for the duration of the performance. As a performer it has helped me to be trained as a dancer, it has given me the discipline. But there is no choreographic line in my work any more. The process has become very organic; it comes from what happens at the moment.

The first performance I remember that I did in a way that guided me towards this sense of duration in presence, was one action called 365 Días (365 Days), one that I did in Santa Marta for a National Salon in 2000. Here I did a version of a Butoh exercise that consists of having an egg stay upright on the floor. This action can only happen if you are totally aligned with the object: the egg, in the present time and with the surroundings. You feel the connection with the energy of the egg. I had 365 eggs stand in a circle in an open space that kept changing, as the environment was

alive with people, wind changes, insects crawling, etc. I started at six in the morning and finished at seven at night. Spectators bring their own time to the performance. Some kids even brought in a superstition that I did not know about: eggs can stand on specific days in the Caribbean Colombian culture of Santa Marta. I was doing this in a wrong day, so I was perceived as some kind of witch. What I feel often is as if something shamanic happens during a performance piece. In all of my performance there is no rehearsal. I structure the ideas and then execute them in the present moment. The piece is the action. It is almost like a meditative process since you need to be in the present moment all the time. The practice is the performance. My actions are always an open question, never an answer. The action is also questioning itself all the time.

Aesthetically my pieces are very clean. Visually they change form one to the other. There is a line of work that I been refining but formally there are important changes. For example, in the cycle called *The White Series*, the performance space was white; there was nothing aside from myself blowing red bubbles that then are erased by writing on the traces with white chalk. It is an exercise about a memory that is not only about remembering and going backwards to think about past event, but about healing and not repeating. The next cycle of performances called *Vires* (figure 1) was much darker. This one is about power relations, specifically as it relates to the body. When I borrow from the aesthetics of bondage in order to do this, it is because visually people already have a clear relationship to this practice and its objects: there is an implicit physical dialogue between bodies and powers.

What the performance piece does is to try to go deeper into the actions that go into the power relations between bodies. I wanted to explore the power of desire, the power in physical force that can either heal or damage.

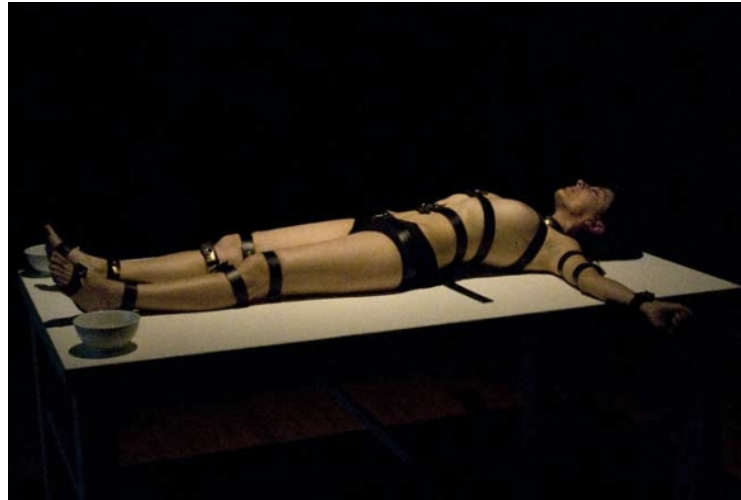


Figure 1. Photograph in the series *Vires*, retrieved from Location One, <http://www.location1.org/wpcontent/gallery/vires/arjona110x.jpg>.

In the first part of the series *Vires* I am lying on a table, bound by black leather belts, vulnerable. The audience enters the room and they instructed that I have a diamond in my mouth, which they can obtain. Everything that happens among the people that enter the performance and me on that table is the performance. I have been perplexed by what happens as I perform in different countries and places within the countries. To my amazement, in my own country, Colombia is the place where I have received the most aggressive treatment on the part of the people entering the performing space. Also the most interesting and touching experiences have happened there.

The strategies they use in order to get the diamond, which is actually given to the one that is able to take it from me, which is the gesture that stops the performance, are quite varied. In Naples it was beautiful; people sang, caressed me, and conversed...until a man that simply passed by found a way to play with the light on my face until at one point his tongue slapped my mouth and took it out. In Bogotá some people tried to choke me, put their nails into my teeth....until a very young boy tried to save me from the aggressive behavior of an audience member in particular. He talked me into giving him the diamond so that people would not hurt me. Then he gave it back to me. The diamond was given to him as the performance piece was stopped.

The next day I did another performance of the same series where there is a game with dice and actions. Many of the same people had come to the previous performance in Bogotá. They used the dice actions in order to ask me to forgive them for what they did the day before trying to get the diamond out of my mouth. As this performance piece also uses the time of the next day, it shows how if one is given the chance, time heals. That was incredible, it is not easy to ask for forgiveness and admitting you behaved aggressively. This is where I see that the piece created some degree of questioning: what are we really doing to the one another, especially in a country like ours.

In everyday life we are all under different forms of aggression but there is hardly the time for reconciliation. A performance that is long does give time for a moment of reflection. Durational performances can be an action helps reflect on

other actions. Usually the time it takes for the diamond to be finally taken out of my mouth is around five hours. In *Vires* what is important is the action in time. Space is almost eliminated from consciousness since everything is black and there is only light on me, directing the whole attention towards this vulnerable body with a precious object hidden in one of the most sensitive and secluded of its parts, the mouth.

To me it is important to put into effect one on-one-actions. I deem important to affirm my work by working individually. I prefer that to working on a collective. For me only strong individuals, already conscious of their own pursuits can work in a collective. That is, once they are strong and know where they are going. Therefore my work is in different form dance or theatre. Even though I go into strong regimes of training. Depending on the piece I will perform, I devise the type of training, which often changes accordingly. For the *White* series I stopped eating meat. I stopped doing a lot of things trying to help my body to have a clear, ephemeral strength. For this performance piece I had no direct contact with people, only with the space and the actions. But for *Vires* I had to do certain type of exercises that would give my body a forceful, clear strength, since I was constantly going to be touched, manipulated during at least nine hours. This makes the time you spend outside of the performance time, also a time of performance. While you are preparing for it, you are in it.

Time again is the element of creation that is almost like a co-performer. Quotidian life becomes estranged. It has consequences for me and for the audience

members that are able to be present watching or intervening. These types of long duration performances are very transformative for me because they are truly charged and complex and difficult to process in the aftermath. Once I am done I need to find a way to evacuate all that has moved during the process. I end up being too saturated by some many hands on my body. Not only does one become overly aware of the others and their effects on one's body, but also one literally feels their energies as if they have stuck to me. Moreover, in order to cede your power to control all that goes on in a performance, so as to allow the others to execute their actions according to the rules and structure you have created, you have to become really strong and powerful. It is a sort of contradiction.

There is a spiritual journey underlying this whole process of doing performance, it is a very powerful spiritual process. But expectations of the others about your own process are very dangerous. Sometimes I feel it is difficult for people to disengage from what they are expecting my actions in a performance to do. I have encountered so many situations that prove it. Therefore I must be very clear on the aesthetic structure I create for these long duration actions to happen. I think audiences should become less expectant. They should know that they need to be available for what is happening. To me, this is the most difficult task and sometimes I feel the surrendering of my energy is under valued. Often I am surprised by the capacity some bodies and energies have of transforming my own expectations during the performance event, and this is a marvelous experience.

Without the audience there is no performance. In my work I do acknowledge a need to touch or come in contact with very few people. In order to be able to really interact, the experience cannot be massive; therefore I feel this is a counteracting of what is happening in art globally. If I am willing to be affected by others and to affect others as well, one to one contact is needed. In a globalized society there is a need to recover the individual. I am influenced by Deleuze's ideas about the body. I see the body as a force, not as part of an identity or as a gendered entity. I am more interested in the exchange of forces on different spaces and times. These common and very real force effects have nothing to do with me being a woman or a man. These forces can take or add, thus strengthening and affirming or diminishing or destroying me. Life is a force that is not affirmed by my body. It does not matter if it is the body of a woman. I am interested in what my body can do in exchanges but I am not thinking if I do this as a woman. In my work identity is not important. I am a body in an energetic exchange.

Similarly, I do not question anything as a Colombian woman specifically. I question as any person and about issues that can touch anyone. For example in a piece called *Bóveda*, I tried to create a space for thought through the repetition of a drawing. If we do not find the space for thought, violence as what we have in our country, cannot be stopped, it is a chain of thought that needs another thought to open up and detain it. If you cannot think you do not know how to act. In that work I was not trying to represent violence, but to create a space for people to think. A bomb does not discriminate on gender when it kills. I have never had problems with

my identity and try to do work outside of these lines of thought that tend to classify one as a certain identity: woman, Latina, immigrant, etc. I wish to transcend this in my performance work. It is all again, about expectations. I am interested, for example, in getting to know how capable my body is to do something that is independent of me being Maria Jose Arjona. Expectations are culturally inherited and limiting. I want the performance structure to give me the boundaries, not what is socially situating me. I want to erase, through the performance itself, all that is limiting my body by previous conditioning. There is a strong desire to undo too many things in me and to be able to understand my self as a force that is alive.

Interlude 0 Note

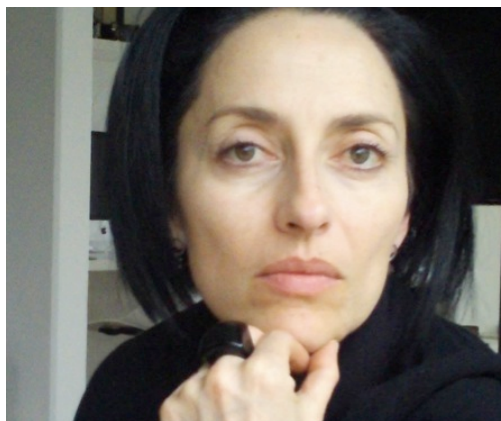


Figure 2. María Jose Arjona, screen shot from videotaped material gathered during fieldwork in January 2012, in Bogotá.

The narrative above is a text constructed from videotaped interview with María José Arjona (Bogotá, 1973) during fieldwork in Bogotá, in January 2012. María José has created an important international career as a performance artist.

She is most interested in the issue of time and energy in her long durational performances.

CHAPTER 1: NAMING

In 1970, Colombian legislative decree number 1260 eliminated, for the first time, the necessity for a married woman to carry her husband's name. Previously, the preposition "de" following her father's last name had been a requirement for all official identity papers, thus stressing the point of her belonging to someone who protected her. This law led to an everyday custom of naming, whose consequences affected identity papers, legal transactions, bank accounts, social invitations and more. The symbolic aspect of this use of the possessive preposition "de" (of) is a too-obvious indicator of the status of the female subject-citizen, a status that saw rapid changes during the 20th century. *De* in Spanish denotes pertinence to and possession by.

The decree in reference declares that the civil state of a person is a matter of national law, and thus it determines a person's rights and duties. Since 1970, a married woman is now free to use her maiden name, as she is "subject to all class of activities and capable of responding without dependency on a husband for all of her actions."³³ This decree was a new victory for women in Colombia, coming after the

³³ DECRETO 1260 DE 1970: Artículo 1o. "El Estado Civil de una persona es su situación jurídica en la familia y en la sociedad; determina su capacidad para ejercer ciertos derechos y contraer ciertas obligaciones, indivisible, indisponible e imperceptible y su asignación corresponde a la Ley." Este decreto suprime la obligación de que la mujer casada lleve el apellido de su marido precedido de la preposición de, simplemente puede figurar con sus apellidos de soltera, porque ya se ha declarado por Ley, que es sujeto de toda clase de actividades y capaz de responder sin dependencia del marido para todos sus actos.

attainment of full citizenship in 1954.³⁴ Women had become subjects with rights and duties in a country that needed their votes, but eliminating the apparently simple preposition “de” after their first name took thirteen more years, with all its implications. A small word, a preposition (DE), was a sign in need of, if not complete erasure, at least relegation to the possibility of choice.

In this chapter the choice is to begin with that preposition “de” as a portal, to look at three women who have dealt with the choice of how to name themselves, not only in their quotidian life, but also in their artistic life. Having your official name (in documents) and your artistic name (for the public) belong to the name of the man you are married to can be accepted as a normal occurrence in many countries. However, it should be a question of choice, and that choice signals a situation, a circumstance, something that defines. Can we really own our artwork and the statements it makes, without owning an independent identity? For a woman artist, doing her work in a patriarchal society is implied completely in her name and in the way she uses it and in how she is known for her work. Therefore, this chapter begins with a brief look at Emilia Ayarza, a poet who retained her maiden name during very conservative times and who knew how to name what she was living with words that seem forgotten but can resonate in contemporary Colombian society at present with rare force. The gesture of opening the chapter with a deceased artist, one who could

³⁴ Alicia Gomez Giraldo, “Los Derechos de la Mujer en la Legislación Colombiana,” *Reportorio Historico de la Academia Antioqueña de Historia* 38, no. 250 (1987), http://biblioteca-virtual-antioquia.udea.edu.co/pdf/11/11_306688912.pdf.

not be interviewed, is a way to name a lineage. It is a hopeful gesture of gratitude to those who came before.

Following this action, encounters with two artists, Jessica Grossman and Gisela Sencherman, will allow a view into their work. Their own choices regarding the usage of their names offer access to a complex artistic work with multiple edges, allowing ample opportunity to start exploring the difficulties encountered when trying to define a specific topic to classify these artists within their multiplicity. Jessica's choice to use her mother's maiden name, Mitrani, instead of her father's or husband's led to other expressions of independence and creativity, as she claimed her maternal family's heritage and also discovered another bold, avant-garde namesake's legacy. Meanwhile, Gisela Savdie, born Sencherman, left dentistry to take on a new identity as an artist, in addition to a change in name. *De*, in Spanish, also means "about". This chapter is about two artists that are re-thinking phallogocentric visions of womanhood in Colombia.

Interstice 1: Getting Personal

I wanted to keep my name, even though I knew there was an injustice in keeping it: it was only my father's name. However, under Colombian law we really have two last names, first the father's, then the mother's. For practical everyday purposes, we usually use only the first last name. Even if I resorted to my mom's name, that was still her father's name, not her mother's. It was a succession of facts that I could not change. Reality checked, I needed to fight at least to keep my name. I married in 1974, almost 21 years old, the age of full citizenship (*mayoría de edad*).

When we returned from the honeymoon, we went to get my new identification (cédula de ciudadanía). As my new husband watched, I had one of my first fights with bureaucracy. “I want to keep my name!” I said. “No,” the man answered, “You are married; you need to have your husband’s name.” I asked, “Why doesn’t he change his last name to mine?” He looked at me like I was crazy. He said, “This is the law. Your name has to go on your identification papers as follows: Monica Gontovnik de Eisenband; there is no other way.” I pleaded, “Can I at least sign the document with my own name?” Leo was getting restless; he did not know he had married a troublemaker. But he said nothing; he kind of liked it. The man said, “No. You need to sign with your husband’s legible last name.” “But that is not my signature!” I replied. He did not care. My only possible rebellious act was to then sign as I had never signed before. I told the bureaucrat who was not interested at all in my fight: “If my name does not matter, and if his name is what matters I will only sign my initials and then his last name.” So I did, and he really did not care as long as I signed with my husband’s last name. Once I finished I asked, “Why is it that a man can scribble anything, and it counts as a legal signature, but I cannot sign however I want?” No answer. So, on the most important document for a woman to exert citizenship, I did not have my name, and I did not sign with my real signature. This was a problem because the signature on that document was still the one people had to use to register in banks and show anywhere to prove their identity. I had to explain everywhere why my signature did not match my identification papers and that explanation, provided any place where I had to sign as a wife who writes

checks, became a political discourse about equality. I was at least making a performance of my inconformity. Everyone had to listen to my diatribe about the name. They mostly did not care and looked at me with incredulous eyes. They thought, "What does she want? What does this mean? She should be happy with the way things are going for her." Then I started writing to the newspapers and asking famous columnists to help me with the plight to keep my name and also to help every woman who desired it. Nobody cared; this was not an important issue. A few years passed. I was getting a divorce and my wallet was stolen on the beach. With the divorce papers, I went to get a duplicate of my lost document. Thus I finally got my name back. Forty years later, while researching the laws regarding this issue in order to write about other women artists, I discovered that had I been a better fighter, I could have gotten hold of the decree stating exactly what I was asking. Or maybe it would not have mattered. Customs lagged a few decades behind the law. Nobody cared. I did, but at that moment I did not have the knowledge or the right tools to fight.

Emilia's Flight



Figure 3. Scanned image from familial archives of Emilia Ayarza's books, obtained during fieldwork in Bogotá in January 2012.

At the same time that rapid changes were happening in Colombian, Emilia Ayarza (Bogotá 1919-Los Angeles, California 1966) had started to speak, to exercise her poetic voice, paying a hard price for it. She was an intelligent, educated woman whose life became harder as she became an active participant in the city's cultural life. Married to a wealthy man, one day she took off with her children and became a literary figure in her own right, but in another country: Mexico. Before emigrating in order to get away from the accusing gaze of patriarchal Bogotá, she managed to publish four books of poetry. She died of cancer in Los Angeles, California in 1966³⁵.

³⁵ Based on telephone conversations with Ayarza's son Angel Herrera, June 2012.

In Mexico Emilia Ayarza was able to support her self and her family through various teaching jobs, and she became a well-known figure in literary and intellectual circles, something she has also done in her native Bogotá. Her home was the site of all kinds of intellectual encounters. She worked on her writing incessantly until her children came back from school in the afternoon. Her children now remember her dictate: I will never return to Colombia.³⁶ In the following excerpt she talks about the name of her country, Colombia, without naming it:

Le he puesto a mis hijos en la almohada
 tu nombre
 para que amanezcan con patria
 y no pregunten como se llama ese olor
 a orfanato
 que se quedó flotando tras mi viaje.

I have placed on my children's pillows
 your name
 for them to awaken with patria
 and not to come asking what to call
 this smell of orphanage

³⁶ Mauricio Contreras Hernandez, "Una Voz al Mundo," *Revista Casa de Poesía Silva* 11 (1998), 87-9.

that stayed floating after my trip.³⁷

She does not name her “patria,” Colombia, yet she writes its name on the children’s pillows in a poetic act that will mark their lives as expatriates. In 1997 an important Colombian institution for poetry, *Casa de Poesía Silva*, honored her with an event. A lecture given that day was published in its magazine.³⁸ This is a small effort, one of several scattered gestures that are not reflected in the teaching of canonical literature across the country which still do not include her name. Her estrangement continues long after her death. Forever a foreigner, she produced work that is almost forgotten. One stumbles upon her poetry just by chance and once confronted with it, one is in awe of its quality as well as its relevance.

In 1957, Emilia published her first book, *Voices to the World* (Figures 4 and 5). The title of the book is a clear signal from a poet who wanted to stretch her arms beyond her limiting milieu and to have an unbound voice. Yet her last name is still bound by pertinence to a man, the husband. On the cover of *Voces al Mundo*, one can read her maiden name. Then her “proper” last name appears with the obligatory DE; that is, *pertaining to* Herrera, her husband’s surname, on the inside. But in this fragment from a poem in the book, we can see a woman acting beyond the norms her time dictated. She is calling with a voice that speaks to a world un-bound:

Que vengan. Si. Que estoy llamando.

Que estoy abriendo mi voz como una flor

³⁷ Ibid., 90; my translation.

³⁸ Ibid.

al mundo entero.

Estoy hablando de un millón de lenguas y dialectos

estoy estirando los brazos infinitamente.

They should come.

Yes. I am calling.

I am opening my voice like a flower

to the whole world.

I am talking about a million languages and dialects

I am stretching my arms infinitely.³⁹

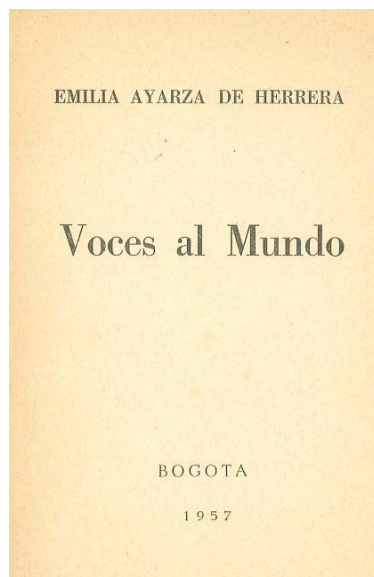


Figure 4. Scanned image from familial archives of Emilia Ayarza's books, obtained during fieldwork in Bogotá in January 2012.

³⁹ Emilia Ayarza, *Voces al Mundo* (Bogotá: Editorial Lumbre, 1957), 75; my translation.

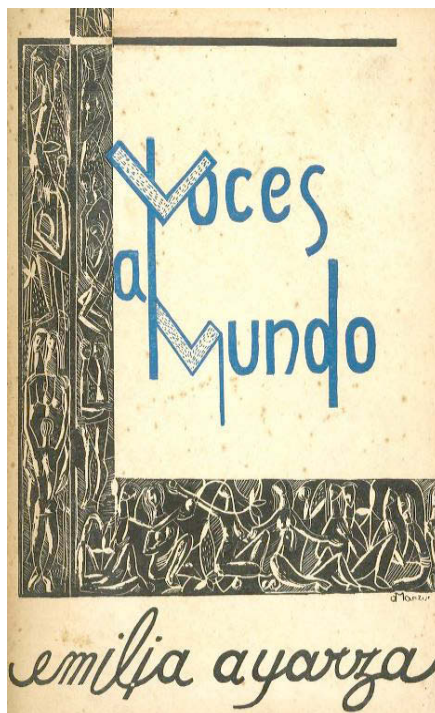


Figure 5. Scanned image from familial archives of Emilia Ayarza's books, obtained during fieldwork in Bogotá in January 2012.

Jessica's Desire

Jessica Sofia Mitrani was born Jessica Grossman in Barranquilla in 1968. Having found a way to exercise her artistic will, she decided to use her mother's last name. Married to a man whose name she did not take, because the law by then allowed it, she realized that her mother's lineage held an interesting kind of craziness that was a better fit for her name as an artist. One of her latest works is based on a lucky find, an unconventional woman who also had her mother's last name: Nora Mitrani, a perfect alter ego for Jessica Grossman in search of a new image of herself as a Jewish-Colombian emigrate, currently based in New York. Nora Mitrani (Sofia, Bulgaria 1921- Paris, France, 1961) was a surrealist writer,

philosopher and sociologist who became a muse, like so many women before her, to various artists. However, she was also an active artist herself. She is mainly remembered through the men she inspired: Hans Bellmer and Alexander O'Neill.

Jessica was given permission to use photographic images from Bellmer's archive, property of Herbert Lust, and to intervene them for a series named *Nora on the Beach* (Figure 6). While working on this piece that consists of the reproduction of five images, Jessica found herself facing her childhood fears of doing what is not supposed to be "girly" or "productive." As she imagines Nora Mitrani posing for her artist partner, naked and masturbating, Jessica scribbles on the photographs, defacing them ornately with her own words. Thus, she remembers with pleasure the hours she spent drawing with crayons on paper, as any girl in primary school would do, entertaining herself. Only she was writing on the images of a naked, open woman's body, a woman who also happened to have her own new-old last name. Writing on the body of another writer whom she admired, Jessica was re-inscribing her own body. Barely legible, these phrases are repeated all over the Bellmer photographs of Nora: "to be crazy - is it crazy," as if in a calligraphic exercise, the type taught in Colombian schools when Jessica was growing up. As an adult wanting to be in charge of her own body and destiny, she has gone beyond assigned roles and has defied traditional images of womanhood. Painting a childish ring on Nora Mitrani's finger, Jessica erases a masculine gaze that could render this body from 1946 a pornographic one. The artist seems to be announcing desire re-inscribed as a right, aligning herself with this other Jewish woman (Nora) whose mother was

killed in Auschwitz, as probably some of Jessica's relatives had been as well. Her desire to be allowed a difference she still did not understand but that needed exploring led her beyond the confines of upper middle class Jewish-Colombian culture; this desire also led her some years before, to Barranquilla, Colombia, where she joined, for the first time in her life, a collective of women artists.



Figure 6. Photograph from the series *Nora on the Beach*. Provided by Mitrani, in September 2011.

In 1992 Mitrani started her artistic career by participating in an experimental dance theatre group in Barranquilla called *Kore Danza-Teatro*. She tells the story of how this encounter with women who were “crazy like me ...” and her work in the piece *Tiempo Luna Creciente*, a deconstruction of the Medea story, led her to further experimentation with her own creative writing and then to her own first visual production, a fifteen-minute 35 mm film named *Rita Goes to the*

Supermarket, which she finished in 2001 in Barranquilla. The film starts with a scene of Rita, a woman who starts to make love to her husband and is interrupted by a call from her mother, advising her not to use contraceptives and to get on with bringing a child into the world.⁴⁰ In the short film Jessica plays with all of the feminine stereotypes in Colombian culture, as the woman goes to the supermarket in order to release her anxiety, complying with her husband's request to fetch him some cherries. At the supermarket Rita sees and listens to a lot of things that are completely absurd. The situations presented in an exaggerated and stylized manner in the film are obviously taken from quotidian happenings with which any woman in Colombia can identify.

Jessica used her friends as performers in the film, as well as replicas of some of the few canonic women artists recognized by art history in Latin America, Frida Kahlo and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who come to the supermarket as Rita wanders through it. The film has a careful colorful merchandise-like aesthetic that plays ironically with what otherwise passes as everydayness in front of our eyes, without attracting our attention. *Rita va al Supermercado* gained a lot of attention and was featured in film festivals around the world. This was an impressive way to launch a career for someone who was sure of only one thing: her need to say something by making art, an art that would represent her. In taking control of her destiny, Jessica Sofía Mitrani was probably doing unconsciously what Laura Mulvey had envisioned:

⁴⁰ *Rita va al Supermercado*, directed by Jessica Grossman, 2000, can be viewed at http://jessicasofiamitrani.com/pages/rita/rita_va_el_supermercado.html

Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. It is these cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures that must be broken down before mainstream film and the pleasure it provides can be challenged.⁴¹

For Jessica Mitrani, film is just one of the media she utilizes in order to play with representations of womanhood that forge the identity of women like her. Hers is a gaze behind the camera that involves not only that mechanical eye, but also the whole of the piece to be developed: its narrative, text, dialogue, music choice, editing, art, casting, and the look. In *Rita* the protagonist finally returns to the house to find her husband still in bed waiting for his cherries. Even though she saw the beautiful fruit he wanted her to bring home at the supermarket, she did not buy them, and smiling in a “very feminine way” she tells him there were no cherries. Again, a childish gesture signals victory in everydayness, and the audience knows, with Rita, that she is using the subaltern’s way to unhinge some parts of her cultural bondage. The protagonist, an upper middle class Colombian woman, is here seen as a subaltern of the husband who waits in bed until the wife completes the chores natural to a kept woman: buying the food for the family.

⁴¹ Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” consulted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17; Original publication in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975).

By 2001 Jessica had moved with her family (husband and two children) to New York, as she had always dreamed, in order to study a Masters of Fine Arts in Directing at the New School. There, she entered into creative alliances with other artists in theatre and in fashion, writing plays and starting to design sets and wardrobes. In 2004, while creating the wardrobe and aesthetic look for the set of the theatre piece *Some Historic Some Hysterical*, she made a pair of very high platform shoes that are stuck together in a single shoe as a unit. The woman who wore them during the play was the only character who could speak during the performance. This woman in the play had the power of words but not the power to move because the huge platform shoes were screwed to the floor. All of the other women in the play moved about uncontrollably (figure 7). For the show, developed by Mitrani and a friend as a critique of psychoanalysis, what interested Mitrani was “the tension between the articulate woman who could not move and the shoes that trap her... her image is that of a powerful woman, but she cannot move, even though she is the pillar of the play....”⁴² As a pillar of her own life-play, Jessica had often felt that the women in her family lineage had been the victims of stereotyping due to their flamboyant and dramatic natures. Many of her aunts, and obviously she herself, were deemed “kind of crazy” by the rest of the “normal” conservative, business oriented members. This “craziness” is of course, a dismissal of other ways of being

⁴² Personal interview. October, 2011. The play in reference is Nemeth and Mitrani’s *Some Historic/Some Hysterical*. For a review, see Jonathan Slaff, “Some Historic/Some Hysterical,” <http://loho10002.blogspot.com/2006/10/some-historic-some-hysterical.html>.

that these women represent. Like the woman on her single shoe platforms, Mitrani was hinged, unable to move, but full of things to say. Then she found the means: art.

The reactions of some audience members and conversations she had with other women who were troubled by this image of the woman on the single-platform shoe, prompted the artist to continue her investigations about shoes, women and power. As a fashion-conscious woman, she comments that the most expensive shoes are the most uncomfortable and also the most fashionable ones: “the ones we wear to parties and other special occasions are the ones that do not allow us to move, dance, enjoy.”⁴³ Thus, what Mitrani had designed for a theatrical production with co-creator Ildiko Nemeth⁴⁴ later became a whole series of shoes called *In a Single Shoe* (Figure 8). Playing with what aids women to walk safely on perilous ground (shoes as protection) and that which renders walking un-stable—staying, supposedly, in fashion. These are enormous ridiculous and beautifully crafted shoes that also play with desirability.

Again, as Jessica showed in beautifully crafted supermarket scenes in *Rita*, that which is desirable becomes incongruent for the viewer, who can identify with the gaze of the artist and laugh at her own desires. The shoes that make a woman feel fabulous and thus powerful imply the reliance of power on supposed canons of beauty. Beauty has been established in countries like Colombia as an important

⁴³ Personal interview, October 2011.

⁴⁴ For information on the New Stage Theatre Company, see their website at <http://www.newstagetheatre.org/>.

weapon for social climbing, for getting a job, for becoming a public figure.

However, the price to pay is not only that of spending lots of money but also the endangering her balance and her physicality. The artist creates an equally appealing object that produces a desire to own it, if it were not for the impossibility, an impossibility that ridicules the way things actually are for these women who fall into the trap. One need only walk on any street in too many places of the world to find many women balancing on their ankles as though on a tight rope that screams of desire, of a desire to be desired. Women and their love of shoes are by now a well-known cliché. But what is this love saying? As high heels and impossibly uncomfortable shoes mark the location of desire, a troubled image emerges and, possibly, a dangerous desire. Desiring shoes that immobilize is about wanting to be desired, even if you are trapped in an un-desiring space. The *single shoes* series speaks of accepting immobility in order to be desired. They seem to imply that in a twisted turn, what makes you attractive is as difficult to see as those single shoes that glue you to the floor. The question begged by inappropriate single shoes is one posed by an artist who has gone through a lot of psychoanalysis herself and mocks Freud's famous question: what do women want?



Figure 7. Photograph of a performance of *Some Historic/ Some Hysteria* in New York. Ceded by the Mitrani in September 2011.



Figure 8. Photograph of one of the shoes in the series *Single Shoe* provided by Mitrani in September 2011.

Jessica describes her playful work with the names that mark the shoes:

a Mary Jane single shoe that is supposed to be the first shoe a girl wears when she is not considered a baby any more; a femme fatale boudoir single shoe for the lady that wants to look sexier than barefoot; a Chanel single shoe for the proper minded, sober woman; a nurse's single shoe for the woman who can be patient and become a patient; a Blahnick single shoe for the fashionista; and a Vivienne Westwood single shoe as a wink to the designers' parody of clothes in general.⁴⁵

The production of the series of single shoes as objects was followed by the production of a series of videos also entitled *Single Shoe*. These were presented in various venues between 2008-2010, either as single video installations or as multiple video performances at film screenings, visual art fairs or art galleries. In all of the videos the women are shown happily wearing these shoes she had specially made while they stood still.⁴⁶ Each video features a beautiful woman or girl who is unfazed by the fact that she cannot really walk or do anything with her legs besides wearing the single shoe. The contrast between the beautiful setting and the beautiful women or girls enjoying life in paradisiacal landscapes of femininity, and the way these shoes function as objects of desire that paralyze, is strikingly funny and scary at the same time. In figure 9 one can see the image of the woman who parades the supermarket, as she did in her short *Rita Goes to the Supermarket*. A

⁴⁵ Conversation during fieldwork in New York, October, 2011.

⁴⁶ For a video of the 2009 performance, consult Mitrani's website, http://jessicasofiamitrani.com/pages/in%20a/in_a_single_shoe.html

sexy pose, an empty cart and beautiful legs do not seem out of place in an impossible scene. But it is a plausible scenario, if we begin to look through Jessica's eyes. She makes films and visual art pieces in sync with a consumer who is consumed while consuming goods and discourses about female subjectivity.



Figure 9. Photograph from a video of the series *Single Shoe*. Provided by Mitrani.

Mary Ann Doane, when using “women’s films” to analyze the functioning of film, gives some clues about what can happen if a woman is the maker of the film instead of just the object of the gaze or the spectator. The classic films of the 1940’s were directed towards the woman spectator, who was not the maker of her own image but was consuming an image to be desired. She was the protagonist on screen, but as an outsider to this image, she had to complete the picture through her

desire to be like the one projected. She was being constructed before her own eyes as an object of scopophilic desire, deprived of an active gaze and thus deprived of subjectivity. For Doane, woman, the perfect consumer, is also the perfect spectator, totally involved in the images presented to her even though, or precisely because, these films were masculine constructions.⁴⁷ In this sense, Jessica Mitrani appropriates a female non-subjectivity through a re-doubling of the images of women she has been sold through her education and the Colombian-Jewish culture while becoming a woman.

In figure 10, we see the legs and the single shoe of a nurse, one of the roles commonly assigned to women. Mitrani's object is to reflect these projections back to the unsuspecting spectator, who is enthralled and consumed by images of femininity all around, in television, films, magazines, Internet pages, and more. Because the artist's gaze depicts non-subjectivity, in the doubling of these images there is a beautiful but sinister message: really look, look intently, perform a double take, wait while I immobilize you, gaze again, look at where you stand, do you think this is really what desire is about? I believe this challenge to the viewer can happen mainly because the artist herself is aware that she is a part of the production of images. It is as if she is saying, what is your/my desire? At least I am working towards finding mine through these mirrors I make. Yes, watch me perform a sort of subversion by seduction. The same weapon women have been taught to use is the resource of a weak subjectivity that needs reflections in order to understand its place in the

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

world. Jessica is well aware of what Doane has stated: “The feminine position has come to exemplify the roles of consumer and spectator in an embodiment of a curiously passive desiring subjectivity.”⁴⁸ And, she is doing something about it, thus giving us the impulse as a new image that challenges the thousand previous others we have been bombarded with.

Mitrani, positioned as the perfect consumer-spectator, has learned how to become an active gaze that subverts while playing the game. She uses the same tools that have been implemented in the continuation of the propagation of ideas of what femininity is supposed to be. Designs, film, theater, visual arts, and fashion are deployed as humorous weapons of disarmament. Jessica holds the mirror and allows the spectator, a woman, to come out of the *scopophilic*⁴⁹ gaze in order to possibly to see her subjectivity as pertaining to that of a commodity. As Doane states, “The woman’s objectification, her susceptibility to processes of *fetishization*, display, profit and loss, the product of surplus value, all situate her in a relation of resemblance to the commodity form.”⁵⁰ Mitrani’s mirror is saying: Do you want to have these shoes or do you want to appear as if you wanted these single shoes? Do you want to imagine yourself rendered paralyzed, unable to act?

⁴⁸ Doane, *Desire to Desire*, 32.

⁴⁹ Scopophilia is a term that comes from Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, used to talk about the passive action of deriving pleasure from looking. It has had its developments but here the reference is to the term as used by feminist film theorists since the 1970s. As cinema developed, its situation in western patriarchal societies and film technology that derived in narrative cinema maintained and furthered the solitary pleasure of the male gaze as the objectifier and the identification of the female gaze with the object of pleasure with what is presented on screen.

⁵⁰ Doane, *Desire to Desire*, 22.



Figure 10. Photograph from a video of the series *Single Shoe*. Provided by Mitrani.

Jessica Mitrani admits that she struggled with “the theme of identity”⁵¹ from the beginning. She says that finding an image of what she wanted to emulate was similar to trying to *figure out* who she was going to be. Looking for an image of womanhood, she encountered what is passed from generation to generation. Usually a gift from women to women, dolls serve this purpose of educating images of oneself. She named her new series *Lupe*, honoring one of her childhood toys. This was a toy that she caressed even in absence, one that later on she regained, almost by chance. The story of *Lupe* is part of a narrative that has allowed Jessica to continue her path as an artist in search of an identity that is all about staying in liminal humorous spaces. As she laughs while re-making these spaces, there is a very detailed introspection:

Lupe was my first doll. She was plastic and blue. When I was five she disappeared, leaving emptiness in me. Many years later I would describe her

⁵¹ Personal Interview, November, 2011.

to a friend: Lupe was a little girl with her hands inside a coat, she wore boots and short hair. She was very urban and very androgynous, ready to walk around New York. He immediately said, "But you can find that doll in any street in Barranquilla!" So he brought me one that was fuchsia! When I came to live in New York, she was one of the few objects I brought with me. I put her near my books and I would stare at her. I would shift her positions. Sometimes I would punish her and made her face the wall. I was not sure if she was suicidal or if she was the one looking at me as a desperate woman. She was definitely the first object that fascinated me because it made me think of issues of identity and duplicity. She made me wonder if I wanted to be her or if I wanted to have her. Then a vision of another doll, an immaterial one started to appear, a phantasm.⁵²

The re-doubled doll and the doubled inverted phrases imply duplicity in Mitrani's behavior, as she wonders whether what she is doing is really art, as she wonders whether she is an artist or a *fashionista* with intellectual inclinations. This is the same duplicity found in shoes and clothes that can be plastic and blue, masking skin and bones. It is the same as shoes that do not serve any purpose beyond beauty, which is desirable but not useful. She is performing her doubts in front of her own eyes and for others to gaze at and to wonder if other gazes are possible.

⁵² Paraphrased from a personal interview and from her own writing, in a document from her personal archives, ceded during fieldwork in New York City, November, 2011. The *Lupe* series appears on Mitrani's website, http://jessicasofiamitrani.com/pictures/lupe/lupe_1_gallery/index.html.

This show had three components, or separate pieces: first, a dozen doubled dolls on different pedestals in a room (figure 11). In another room, there were framed sentences like paintings for an exhibition that read: “She is more interesting than her work. Her work is more interesting than she is. Her art collection is more interesting than she is. She is more interesting than her art collection (figure 12).” The third component of that particular exhibit was an installation in another room, *The Austrians*.



Figure 11. Dolls from the series Lupe exhibited in Bogotá in 2011 at the Gallery Christopher Paschall under the title *Lupe and the Austrians*. Photograph ceded by the artist in September 2011.

This installation consisted of wallpaper with decorative sturgeons and make-believe chandeliers hanging from the ceiling made of corset boning, and a video where a couple of porcelain figurines are doused with caviar. *The Austrians* (figure 13) is a reference to a wealthy couple that the artist met and visited in Soho, New

York. She was fascinated by the décor in their enormous place until she found out they were not really who they appeared to be, and the charming “noble man” turned out to be a spy who did not pay his ex-wife’s child support.

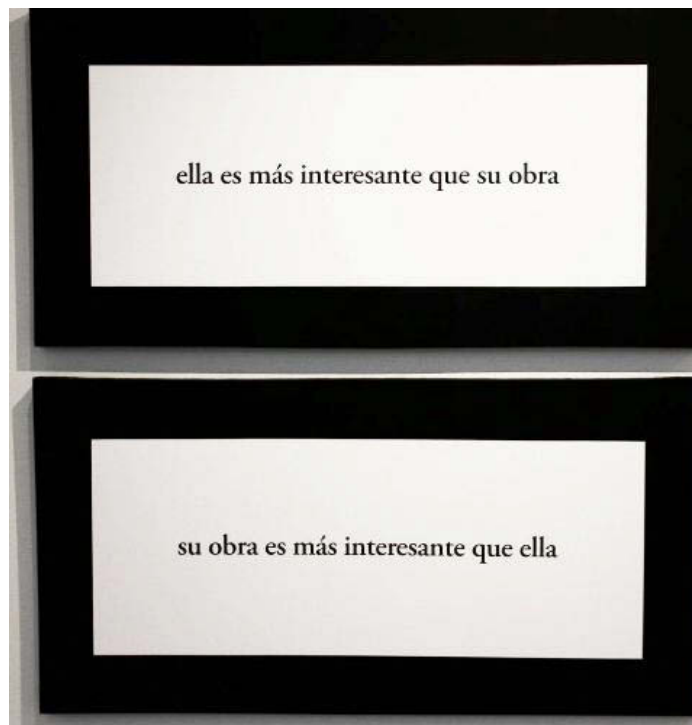


Figure 12. Photograph of sentences on the exhibition of *Lupe and the Austrians* provided by Mitrani in September 2011.



Figure 13. Photograph of the installation at the exhibition *Lupe and the Austrians* provided by Mitrani in September 2011.

Duplicity faces the artist in life, fashion and décor, hiding something else, and the structures that keep a woman tight and upright (corset bones) are rendered visible and laughable. Designs that look royal in a postmodern, upwardly mobile home (wall paper) and fake aristocrats that drown in their own rich food (caviar-porcelain figurines) expose the absurdity of appearances like the ones projected onto women, depending on the culture they were born in. Doubling can become duplicity, and not knowing who you really are becomes acting an identity as boneless as a fashion item that constrains the female movements, like the corsets she hangs from the ceilings in *The Austrians*, as if they were chandeliers.

In this fashion Mitrani comes face to face with the very real insecurities that mark her as a woman artist who is never sure that what she is doing has any meaning at all because it looks like she is not doing anything important. Jessica has had to fight the feeling of incompetence through and by her artistic practice. As a

girl, she would hide crayons and other art supplies and had to pretend to be doing something else. Later, as a housewife with an easy bourgeois life, often she was not taken seriously. Because her education had nothing to do with art, she felt her projects and ideas were really part of doing nothing. Therefore in 2008, in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in Barranquilla, Colombia, Mitrani hung four hundred twenty-five handkerchiefs embroidered by women she hired to make them. As with the single shoes and the doubled dolls, she had other people fashion her ideas, as many artists have done before (figure 14).

As a woman artist, Jessica is constantly made aware of being unable to enter the art world empowered. She says it amazes her that many of her male friends who are artists do not seem to wonder about these questions of pertinence. She wonders how is it that they can go and sit on a bench all afternoon and write their ideas in a notebook and feel that they are doing something. Maybe she is an ornament, as expected of her. Maybe her obsession with ornaments is only about precisely that. She pertains to a class of women who seem to be entertaining themselves while time passes as their husbands make the money to support the family. Siding with upper middle-class housewives, she says, "Nobody wants to know what they think, and if they do, they should do it among the conventions of their class and role... nothing is expected from them but to be efficient ornaments."⁵³

Since her own family expected her to do the same, breaking the mold was a question of tenacity. This was the same tenacity needed by the women who

⁵³ Personal interview, November, 2011.

embroidered her piece *Por lo menos me entretengo* (*At least I entertain myself*, figure 15). The surplus value of Mitrani's art piece is the same value housework has. There is an invisibility that comes with the work that a woman artist like Jessica does. It is like housework, a double duty that in order to create needs first to clean, to sweep. The questions about what being a woman is, beyond cultural projections, are similar to invisible work that later allows creativity to emerge. This labor is not only an identity void to be filled, it is also about cleaning out what has been filling it once you realize it is a void. It resembles the void felt by the millions of women whose embroidery never passed the test of Art as an institution, whose names we do not know, or who have never signed a piece of artwork. Mitrani's preoccupation with ornaments attests to the fact that the void may be at home. Home is everything she chooses, and it could be filled with beautiful yet unnecessary things, like art. As others perform expected happiness, the artist performs being an artist who is looking for something that eludes her, even while looking at the mirror. Naming is like entitling. When you name a child you do not know how this name will affect it. When your childhood name is replaced by your husband's, part of your identity is supposed to fade. When you name your art, you have command over your creations.



Figure 14. Photograph of the exhibition of *At Least I Entertain Myself* at the Museum of Modern Art in Barranquilla, provided by the artist in November 2011.



Figure15. Handkerchiefs of the exhibition *At Least I Entertain Myself*. Provided by Mitrani in November 2011.

In *Sunny Side Up* (figure 16), Mitrani created a set of pans, each one inscribed with different “aristocratic” logos. Thus she rendered these everyday pans as useless objects, unless they are used as mirrors to reflect on what being woman really means for the tenant of a fancy house. Ornaments like herself in the role of wife mirror an image she needs to see in order to make fun of her own role in adapting to images of womanhood. She sees herself as the image of a wife with beautiful objects to cook in when growing up, just as her mother did. But as it turned out, she can now make these desired objects, branded with a Caribbean palm tree that speaks of her culture where no one is an aristocrat, while copying actual monograms of wealthy families. This is a gesture that mocks our continued enchantment with objects that make us important as we acquire them. At the same time, the gesture speaks of her conflicting desires to own those objects. Naming, making a playful logo, the artist brands and has fun with tradition. Jessica is a Jewish woman who has fled from the need to do whatever was assigned to her. Her role is now determined by her activity as a woman who has the right to assign names and also play with the most quotidian and apparently innocuous objects.



Figure 16. Photograph of Mitrani reflected on her work. Taken during fieldwork in New York City in September 2011.

Another one of Jessica's pieces that speaks in an unexpected way about functionality in everydayness is a set of tampons that have become chandeliers (figure 17). Again, the theme of ornament leads Mitrani to fantasize about beauty in everyday objects, but now in an attempt to make abjection visible. The impossibility of cleansing the image of menstruation from the stain of Jewish orthodoxy comes to mind, along with the absurd idea of equating a spiritual source of light (like Shabbat candles) with a modern one: tampons that hide menstruation. It is as if a time that has allowed contemporary women to stop this flow of nature into the visibility of marked clothes with modern inventions like tampons of every type of color is again marking what distances a woman from active social and productive roles. If tampons are now giving light in an everyday home fixture, they are also being put in everyone's faces. The physical difference is accentuated in an ironic twist that makes the observer both laugh and become repulsed. Aware of her masquerade, working

through her questions about the meaning of womanhood while sheltered by her father and later her husband, we can see Mitrani playing a continuing, humorous game with her own image, her sense of self, her name.



Figure 17. Photograph of one of Mitrani's functional objects. Provided by the artist.

In figure 18 we see Jessica posing as the main character in Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, an image taken from the film with the same name (1992). Her feet in flippers suggest the need to swim in gendered waters. It is a hint of the artist's desire to navigate androgyny or to become multiple, un-differentiated, even sexless, like an unreachable mermaid. It is also a probable allusion to Virginia Woolf and her freedom through suicide by water. It is a signal of her obsession with immobility, as with the *Single Shoe* series. The identification with Woolf is also about finding a rightful place to be able to move, indefinitely, without defining herself, but in a place of her own, possibly one she now has the power to name. As an artist Jessica swims in seemingly muddled interdisciplinary waters: she is a writer, performer, video

artist, film director, dysfunctional object inventor and clothes designer. For her self portrait as Orlando, she devised her own fairy tale—the narrative of a woman who can time travel and gender swap using an outrageous costume that almost feels like Disney’s Snow White but was actually a dress she once wore for a wedding. It is obvious that femininity is a parody for Jessica who dreams of becoming a hybrid being who can move in all types of water—perhaps a Mermaid with a sore voice and single shoes?



Figure 18. Mitrani’s self-portrait. Retrieved May 15, 2014 from the artist’s website, <http://jessicasofiamitrani.com>.

For Jessica Mitrani, being a woman means questioning identity through an artistic practice that, in her own words, helps her get rid of things, past baggage. While creatively deconstructing cultural assumptions and her own fears, she has stated that she has “passed into another level.” One can assume the level she means is that of becoming empowered by her own doing and undoing, as a girl born from a second generation of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews in Colombia, and as a woman living in New York, who, with the maturity gained by the practice of art as investigation, says:

In doing these works, it is as if I advanced, and I can look back and see what I have done, and knowing there is no other need to find another side from where to create, one from where I am not constantly reacting...that place is almost like a space that I have opened, and it scares me and intrigues me too much...this act of giving myself a space is finding the place for expressing, has been very difficult.⁵⁴

Mitrani continues to perform her own questions for her own eyes to see while having fun with herself and others, exerting a double take on the obvious, on what is taken for granted when body surfaces are being adorned or trained. Transforming what an artist sees as traps is one of the ways she performs. Using previous tools continuously to set these new traps is a good choice of material, because it is pre-understood and then overturned. Her desire is to expose femininity as a constructed stereotype that she seems to both reject and enjoy at the same

⁵⁴ Personal interview; New York City, October, 2011.

time. Thus Mitrani does enjoy living her so-called femaleness while undoing it. She seems to “...invent new images of thought that can help us think about change and changing constructions of the self.”⁵⁵

In 2012 Jessica Sofia Mitrani took another step towards the destabilization of images of womanhood. This time it was a short film she named *Headpieces for Peace*. With this piece she won the MK2 Grand Prix (2012) at the ASVOFF Festival⁵⁶ at the George Pompidou Center in Paris, France. The jury president, renowned artist Orlan, was very intrigued by Mitrani’s fashion film.⁵⁷ It was a fictional short film with faceless women wearing fabrics designed by threeASFOUR,⁵⁸ an avant-garde collective based in New York that experiments with fashion. One can have fun reading the ironic description of her fashion film project. The following statement, which serves as the “abstract” from the film, evidences the artist’s access to the latest academic trends of so-called developed nations. It also shows how close she feels to feminist theories like Braidoti’s:

(It is) ... an imaginary non-hierarchical, nomadic organization on a tandem that seeks to initiate free political action from all unitary and totalizing paranoia. Its members work to promote difference over uniformity and an understanding that singularity and collectivity are no longer at odds with each other. We can be individual and related. The organization consists of 11

⁵⁵ Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 157.

⁵⁶ *A Shaded View on Fashion Film* (ASVOFF), 2011, <http://www.asvoff.com>.

⁵⁷ *Headpieces for Peace*, (2011) can be viewed at <http://vimeo.com/51124773>.

⁵⁸ threeASFOUR, last modified 2014, <http://threeasfour.com/>.

interchangeable and fluctuating members who believe that collective expressions of desire are possible.⁵⁹

Mitrani is making fun while playing not only with fashion but also with what one can see as fashionable ideas and the names people use to identify themselves. In the five-minute short, one sees several women labeled: Orthodox Jew – Catholic Nun – Muslim – Orthodox – Christian Buddhist Catholic Muslim Jewish Nun – Galactic Stewardess – Bald Semite – Missionary Nurse – Turban – Homeless and Farah. Eleven spoken texts in diverse accents unite these women in absurd explanations of why they joined the organization *Headpieces for Peace*. At the end they set off on a multiple-seat bike toward the moon in a clear reference to the movie *E.T.* Other cultural references used in the video include songs from the musical *Hair*, *Fiddler on the Roof* and Lou Reed's *Walk on the Wild Side*, sung by ladies whose faces are covered by beautiful fabrics. We see completely covered bodies, all in outrageous headdresses, as seen in figure 19.

All of the women in the video leave their preconceived notions of life and embark on a happy journey together, a journey to a ridiculous, unknown and non-existent territory. The eleven women, who end up pedaling on a fake bike with eleven seats, point toward the artist's need to play with surfaces, as if screens and bodies were all part of the same game. It is a game she plays in order to disrupt other orders: narratives, religion, cinema, theatre and visual arts. Jessica has

⁵⁹ Mitrani, Jessica, in "Wild Profile: Jessica, Buddah and South Park," by Guillaume Bouvez, *The Wild Magazine*, Nov. 15, 2011, <http://thewildmagazine.com/blog/wild-profile-jessica-buddah-and-south-park/>.

actualized the passionate intuition and then later the conscious concept that a “crazy woman” must have a name that can change, a territory that can move with her as she desires, a subjectivity that is based on movement, because being on the move is about being a nomad, a subject that is never complete, that does not need to be named by others or even to finish by finding the right name.



Figure 19. Photograph taken during fieldwork while witnessing and collaborating in the shooting of the short film *Headpieces for Peace*.

Gisela's Dolls

Gisela Sencherman now uses her second husband's last name, Savdie, which she deems has a better sound to accompany her first name, a more suitable artistic cadence. Savdie works with images of dolls disassembled and assembled in

different positions and in relationship with diverse objects. For several years she has been working on a series of photographs and installations entitled: *We are all broken dolls*. Through these pieces she addresses the traffic of women and the violence against women and the enslavement of countless people all over the world. This is a problem that dismays her, since it seems so difficult to eradicate.⁶⁰

Savdie relates how the slogan used in the revolts in France during 1968, “We are all German Jews,” inspired her. Her work is a clear citation of the work of Hans Palmer, (1902-1975), a German photographer, sculptor, writer and painter. His *We* is an inclusion of his persona into an identity he was not supposed to claim. Gisela is Jewish-Venezuelan-Colombian. She is an outsider-insider in Colombian society. She was also inspired by similarly positioned Greek-American artist Diamanda Galás (1955) in choosing the *We* pronoun, which expresses identity as a form of solidarity. An avant-garde composer, vocalist, performance artist and activist, Galás tattooed her hand with the phrase “We are all HIV+.” Gisela takes on Galás’ activism, this time against the trafficking of third world women, by arranging Barbie dolls’ parts for staged photographs.

The series *We are All Broken Dolls* is an exercise, a constant mimetic game of sorts that allows the artist to encounter this “other,” the objectified woman whose body is a commodity. In figure 20 the small legs of a doll fit, separated from the body, on a shoe. It is the artist putting herself in the shoes of these others but detached from the reality that those others, the women who are prostituted, have to

⁶⁰ Personal interview. December, 2011.

live. Prostitutes have no face; they usually have to remain anonymous behind new names used only for their work, hiding behind makeup and clothes that identify them as part of a world trade. Their lives as regular women with homes and children are separated or mostly negated. Here the dolls can be anyone, even the artist or any of her friends. Body parts are what matter, not names. Here the “We” acquires a different connotation: A body that is not hers is the surrogate for the objectified bodies of other women whose trafficking she wishes to denounce.

In a repetitive track, she heals her own memories of the country where she grew up as a middle class, privileged woman who fears she might have given her own children images of woman as inessential objects of desire. “These are the dolls I never played with, and now they play with me...it is the first image we are shown, an ideal to fulfill,”⁶¹ she says, as she remembers her parents’ command to become educated and self-sufficient. Her body joins millions of bodies marked by femaleness at birth, even in distant places and times. This is the same *We – Nosotras* – used by women of the feminist movement that was brewing in the seventies in places like Colombia, echoing western ideas from a supposed “first world.” *We* is a pronoun that attaches itself to the need to put oneself in others’ shoes whose experiences we cannot live, but that we can denounce nonetheless.

⁶¹ Personal interview. December, 2011.



Figure 20. Photograph from the series *We are All Broken Dolls*. Provided by Savdie during fieldwork. Miami, December 2011.

Before moving to Miami, Florida, Savdie had become a prominent professional in the field of doctoral dental sciences in Colombia. A book she wrote on the neurophysiology of occlusion is a text used in universities across South America. The World Health Organization has declared it an official text on this subject for Hispano America. However, she probably never forgot one of her readings as a very young student. There was something in the background that she needed to address; something Beauvoir had written was there, untouched in her professional work:

Woman thus emerged as the inessential who never returned to the essential, as the absolute Other, without reciprocity. All the creation myths express this

conviction that is precious to the male, for example, the Genesis legend, which, through Christianity, has spanned Western civilization.⁶²

This professional woman, after twenty-seven years of dental work, decided to immigrate to Miami, changing directions in order to become an artist. She proceeded to study a new career obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Fine Arts and later a Master of Arts. After moving to Miami with her husband and three daughters, instead of manipulating patient's mouths, she began manipulating those images of women that dolls are able to suggest as inanimate objects receiving all kinds of projections. As an object, not a subject of desire, a doll is almost like the woman—or girl—who plays with it, locked in a mirror in order to survive, trapped by a received image, a multiplicity of images she has to imitate in order to understand her femininity, that supposed essence of a woman.

All of Gisela's dolls are alone but in relationship with everyday objects, as if thrown about and just left there without the power of movement. They are entrapped and paralyzed in different positions. The artist states, "There is always something of me in each one of these dolls..."⁶³ Savdie's dolls are posing for that other she needs to see in a new contorted shape, where a new image of woman can hopefully emerge. Is it that she needs to be in the shoes of all the other women, but she never truly can be? In figure 21, a four-legged doll shows more extremities than one is capable of assuming. The artist does not intend to say she is like the women

⁶² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Random House, 2011), 160.

⁶³ Personal interview. December 6, 2011.

who suffer sexual enslavement, but she is creating images that dismantle the idea that a body is whole, showing that integrity is something that can be un-done too easily.

One can see in Gisela Savdie's acts of disassembling and reassembling dolls the intention to comprehend diverse scenarios for women to explore possibilities, of dealing with a *We* in need of deconstruction. The possibilities can only emerge as images can be taken apart. Other women she does not know but feels she needs to address, and the others she can become, are conflated in images that disturb her sense of complacency with the life she has been fortunate to enjoy. The only way to transcend is through an-other, in a woman's case maybe her own other – one she creates in order to confront herself and her world. Maybe her voice will come from being a woman who is constructed but who also has the power to construct. But a question still stands: will this woman, who has also been so culturally constructed, be able to avoid executing another construction by objectifying yet an-other? Sometimes doubt arises, and she needs to work through that inner voice that keeps her at home, even though she is presenting her work at art exhibitions.



Figure 21. Gisela Savdie, *Te espero* [I wait for you], from the series *We are All Broken Dolls*. Retrieved from the artist's website on July 14, 2014, <http://www.giselasavdie.com/todas-somos-mu327ecas-rotas.html>.

Savdie decided that photography was the best medium for manipulating what she really wanted to address: the image of woman. What troubled her came to fruition as an art practice at an older age, after fulfilling all of the appropriate roles she was supposed to perform by and for her family. She had already become a successful professional woman when she decided to destabilize her footing. Something else was asking to surface, and something happened as the image of herself started to shift, something that resembled what she does with the dolls that

end up in a strange positions, with parts that do not naturally fit together, all in unsuspected places.

These dolls shift and turn as they become something other than regular Barbies; they give the grown woman who handles them and indexes these new images of plastic “femaleness” a new image of inessentiality. Possibly this is an image she can start to comprehend in all its power. As she had done before in dental reconstruction, following the lead of Man Ray, Gisela invented a special technique for some of her photographs. These are not intervened digitally but digitalized through placing the doll’s body parts and other objects typically defined as feminine on a scanner. This act ensures a manipulation that actually uses the materiality of the objects and her own hands as if the machine were the frame and the eye that looks into the void, a huge and noisy object that contains the void in itself. These photographs are mysterious and difficult to discern or grasp.

Using Barbie dolls in order to look into her own image as a reflection of all the other reflected creatures who perform femininity for an-other, Gisela seems to gain mastery over material means that will enable her to play and find what she needs to see. There is a space that the mere act of creating opens, and then something emerges as a possibility for a *We* that is as stubborn as broken dolls. In Figure 22 we can intuit an incomprehensible construct called femininity. In the photograph, not even the void imagined by the construction the photocopier has managed is possible. Parts of what looks like a woman are struggling to come together in order to perform some kind of sense out of the *mélange*. The body parts

of the dolls are the surrogate parts of the other women she does not know personally. Breaking dolls and arranging them in photographs that are then placed on walls of other people's houses or in places that house art is an act of solidarity that appeals to the imagination of those who observe that enlarged sense of being the inessential, the other, the body that is always open to violence.



Figure 22. “Memories Forgotten”, photograph from the series *We are All Broken Dolls*. Provided by Savdie during fieldwork. Miami, December 2011.

Gisela mirrors absolute otherness in order to establish a stronger inessentiality. Savdie's body has not experienced the position-situation that these other women suffer. Her sexed body did not have to encounter violence and enslavement due to the fact that those were born in the sexed body of otherness.

Once woman sees how she is deemed by culture as inessential, she can start to undo this idea by finding the power in it. Thus she encounters absolute inessentiality but empowered by art and protected by art, which has given her the window from where to explore and multiply inessentiality. Through her art practice, Gisela is an-other that can be on the shoes of others and stand her won ground at the same time. As a woman, she is any woman. As the absolute Other, she understands otherness and can act on it. In this sense, Levinas has stated in a conversation with Bracha Ettinger:

Woman is the category of the future, the ecstasy of the future. It is that human possibility which consists in saying that the life of another human being is more important than my own, that the death of the other is more important than my own death, that the Other comes before me, that the Other counts before I do, that the value of the Other is imposed before mine is.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Emmanuel Levinas and Bracha Ettinger, *What Would Eurydice Say?* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1994), 27.

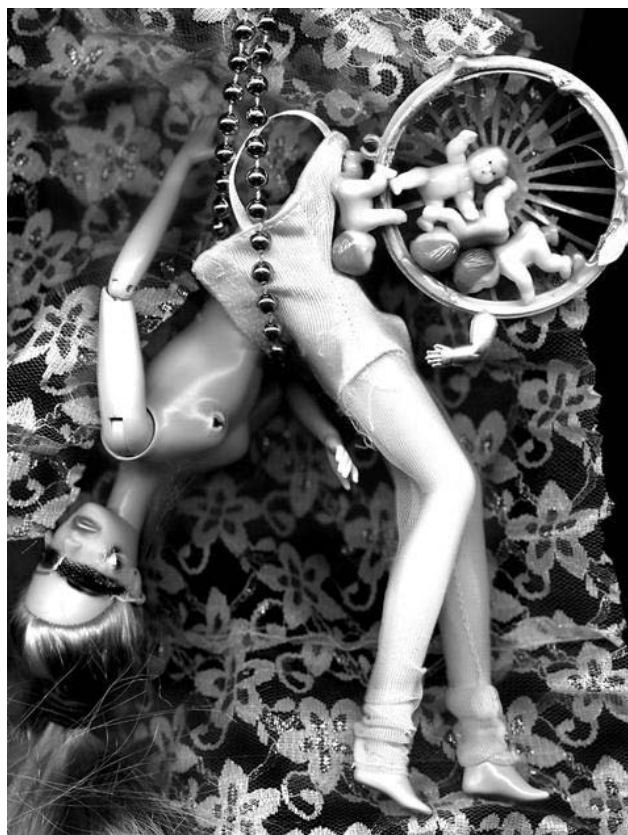


Figure 23. “Letra Menuda”, photograph from the series *We are All Broken Dolls*, provided by the artist during fieldwork in Miami, in July 2013.

Conclusion

Women artists in Colombia like Gisela Savdie and Jessica Sofia Mitrani are re-thinking phallogocentric colonization of their imaginations and have begun to disrupt the structures of patriarchy by small acts of re-in scripture, as Helene Cixous has declared: *“Woman must write her-self.... must put herself into the text-into the world and into history-by her own movement.”*⁶⁵ Gisela’s hands, via doll body parts are writing other texts. Her eyes, through a camera, are using the technologies

⁶⁵ Helene Cixous, “Feminine Writing and Women’s Difference,” *French Feminism Reader*, ed. Kelly Oliver (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 258.

available in order to look at the construction of what a woman is supposed to be. Jessica is multiplying stereotyped images of femaleness in order to serve as a fragmented mirror that discloses the inessentiality of what are thought of as essences of femininity in Colombian society. She works with surfaces that need to be adorned: body, home, pots and pans, beds, supermarkets, film. Both artists use dolls as sites where femininity is marked. They tear apart what they name and then leave an open space for our reconstruction as well as theirs. These two artists use “the woman problem” as a trigger for strategies that can disrupt the occidental universalizing codes of femininity. Gisela’s dolls offer a call for alarm and action. As human surrogates, her broken dolls connect us with the toys we identify with as children and remind us we are all possible broken pieces in a global-scale economic machinery. Jessica plays on the global economic industry of fashion, garments and luxury home tools and furniture in order to remind us of the futility of everything that marks us in everydayness as women in a consuming society.

INTERLUDE 1: ROSSINA

I think a woman that makes art has to first think what it means that she is a woman. Man, as the universal subject has no problem; he does not have to think what it means to be a man. I am sure he does think about it, but it is more common in women. I started questioning myself as a woman inside a system. Then I tried to leave the system and question it from the outside. As a little girl I started drawing a lot. I drew intensely--it was my hobby, my way to let go. I used to draw my surroundings, and I created something similar to comic strips of stories about my classmates. I was involved with all the arts in school; I participated in all the theatre, dance and poetry activities.

As an adolescent I decided I was an artist. I grew up in a very conservative atmosphere, surrounded by women. I went to an all girls' school. Masculinity was absent, my father was not there, and my brother had gone away. My mom became very religious; our home was decorated in stereotypically feminine style: flowers everywhere, pink, pastels, lots of princesses and teddy bears, and religious themes were omnipresent. On school days I attended catholic mass daily. On Sundays I attended evangelical church with my mother. My art is an intrinsic part of my being. But I started very early to question how religion dictates very specific roles to what is feminine or masculine. God is a man, a male. Our referents as women are Eve and the Virgin Mary.

The patriarchal tone of the Bible is what made me question this religion I was living on a daily basis. Women have everything to lose; it is terrible to read the Bible.

And it seems quite ironic that I am now able to present seventeen paintings and a video in an exhibition at a little colonial church here in Bogotá that is now a colonial art museum. Santa Clara Museum used to be an enclosed convent, conserved perfectly, near the Nariño Presidential Palace. My Shaman Woman, my Black Virgin with a Barbie, and all of these religious-contemporary images will appear in the chapel alongside the real deal: iconic catholic images on the walls of the colonial chapel.

This collection, which has taken me two years to paint, is entitled The Holy Beauty Project. In the series I establish a parallel among the strategies of persuasion in paintings of women in catholic religion, and the strategies of contemporary publicity.

The protagonist is always a woman and the target of seduction, either for religious purposes or for selling products. I do not think it is easy to respond to the question of why it works this way for me, but I am working on these questions through painting and also by performing these painting with my own body for video. A lot of the women depicted in my paintings are created using my own face, unrecognizable, disguised in a way (figure 24). Other paintings are done with models that I use for this purpose. I take pictures of myself in order to paint the particular piece.



Figure 24. Rossina Bossio, photograph of the painting *You Can Have Me*, Retrieved on July 19, 2013, <http://www.gimnasiomoderno.org/rossina-bossio/>.

Then, while making the video, other aspects come forward because it is a totally new work, where I am disguised as all of the women in the paintings work on images of seduction used in too many music videos.⁶⁶ It is as if these women come alive and acquire movement in space and time. They become characters that appear in a painting with color and texture. In the videos these ideas and characters are explored through movement, music, spaces, costumes, editing. But I still feel that the same questions persist in the different media. No matter how I approach them and how they take shape, the questions fueling the work are the same.

Some themes have evolved and I have worked on a few of them in a parallel fashion. I think that *The Holy Beauty Project* is like the last stage of a process that had started in 2008 about women and representation in our culture. I had started

⁶⁶*The Holy Beauty Project* (2011) can be viewed on Vimeo, posted October 12, 2013, <http://vimeo.com/44985274>.

from a very personal place: the things I lived, the colors that surrounded me. As I fed the process with images of women in magazines, on the Internet, on film and television, it grew out and moved towards something that was behind the surface.

I tend to work on series. Before this one, I made one called Casa de Muñecas (Doll House) that focused on the representation of woman, based on ambiguous female figures that cannot be discerned as adults or still girls. They are also androgynous, with a latent and perturbing beauty. The intention was to deconstruct femininity and subvert stereotypes by taking clichés to an extreme. I created it while studying at the Ecole de Beaux Arts de Rennes in France, while separated from the expectations that were set on me in my native Bogotá.

Once in France I was able to confront and analyze what I was taught and came to understand why I was not comfortable with the status quo. I never make a painting thinking, "This is what I want to say." There are different thematic concepts and a diverse array of curiosities that intermingle and inter-exchange with a whole bunch of contradictions that become just one image at the end. Before that I had created a series called Falopitis. This title was the name that encompassed a group of female portraits linked to the spaces where I grew up (figure 25).

It was a dark, cold series of bodies with colors affected by time. It was a timid, muffled subject; it was a beginning for me. The project evolved while I was studying the first part of my art undergraduate degree at the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. There I had acquired most of my technical training.

This is the first series of paintings marking my insistence on doing paintings of women only. Most of those women are sort of my own incarnations. I paint about my life experience, so it is almost a given that I would tend to use myself in order to incarnate different forms of being a woman, while questioning my position in the world.

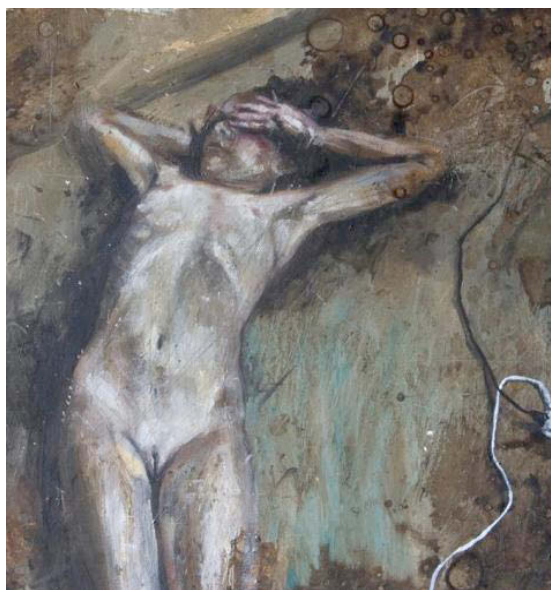


Figure 25. Painting from the series *Falopitis*. Retrieved from the artist's website on July 20, 2013, <http://www.rossinabossio.com/selected-works/>.

I also have a desire to perform these women I paint for a camera. But also after the painting, to re- incarnate them in a performance video is like effecting yet another transformation. I feel intense pleasure in the theatrics involved in this whole process. I love it because people usually do not recognize me out there. I usually do not say it is me. Nowadays I am not so much preoccupied with my own personal role. I have been exploring that for a while. Now I am more interested in

women in general and even men in the sense of gender performance. Through the whole process of art making I think I have been able to perform another way of being. The constraint I felt has eased.

There are many roles one can play. I like to cross disciplinary lines; I experiment with fields because I am the product of a generation of artists who belong to the second half of the twentieth century. Since the twentieth-century concept is central to art, you do not need to find a niche and fight for definition as either a painter, a sculptor, or a dancer....you can take from here and there and find the most efficient way to communicate.



Figure 26. Painting from the series *Doll House*; retrieved from the artist's website on July 20, 2013, <http://www.rossinabossio.com/selected-works/>.

Interlude 1 Note



Figure 27. Screen shot of Rossina Bossio from ethnographic material; interview videotaped in Bogotá in January 2012.

The previous text was constructed from the artist's words as videotaped during fieldwork in Bogotá in January 2012. Rossina Bossio (Bogotá 1986) talks about how art as a practice that has allowed her to move away from the values of her upbringing. This move gave her the distance to be able to see differently and then make decisions according to what emerges. Thus she finds new ways of being. She believes that art has transformed her immensely. By painting and performing her own paintings, she has developed a practice that questions her upbringing as a devout Christian girl. She is continuously challenging her cultural identity as she rethinks what it means to belong to a new generation of Colombian women in a country still adhered to its catholic, patriarchal, conservative principles.

CHAPTER 2: SITUATING

Oikos, home in western thought, is par excellence the place of immanence.⁶⁷ In her book *La otra política de Aristóteles* (1988), Amparo Moreno Sarda gives a detailed account of the Greek word *oikonomia*, from which the word economy springs. The modern science of economy has its beginnings in the administration of domestic matters, and it involved everything that became a patrimony within the structure of a family.⁶⁸ Household management was embedded in the social and political values of ancient Greece, and everything under the household, including slaves, women, children and livestock, were the domain of the patron. Sarda argues that the history of economics has chosen to forget that the word *oikos* denotes a permanent habitation, an occupation of a specific place that needs to be administered and regimented. This Greek word, the etymological root of economics, is also a substantive that means home, temple, prison and brothel. When the discussion centers on Aristotle's economic statements, it avoids looking at the basic elements of the patrimonial system that places the private realm in a position that is difficult to understand, unless one understands the relationships within the *oikos*--the home--the basis of the economy that belongs to the public realm.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Immanence in this chapter employs the term as used by Simone de Beauvoir, not the later philosophical development by Deleuze, which is very different.

⁶⁸ Commentary found in Victoria Sendón de León, *Matria: El horizonte de lo posible* [Motherland: The horizon of the possible], (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2006).

⁶⁹ Amparo Moreno Sarda. "La Otra Política de 'Aristoteles:' Cultura de Masas y Divulgación del Arquetipo Viril" [The other politics of 'Aristotle:' Culture of the masses and disclosure of the manly archetype], last modified 1988, <http://amparomorenosarda.es/es/node/422>.

Moving forward to the mid-20th century A.D., Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* arrived by the late 1960s in Colombia, interrogating this patrimony and was widely read by the new class of educated women.⁷⁰ This chapter does not enter into a discussion of Beauvoir's universalizing gestures when referring to women in general. Instead, it concerns itself with the book's inaugural aspect for many women in Colombia, who saw in it and through it a way to continue thinking about their place in their specific society. Her ideas are vital to understanding the work of the women discussed in this chapter.

According to *The Second Sex*, a woman maintains her sense of a feminine essentiality as long as she perpetuates the myths that sustain the projections an absolute subject—man—gives her. For Beauvoir, immanence relegates women to a single space of habitation and action: the home. She presents a relevant discussion about life in the home that proves the previous statement, simplifying her issue as the immanent place of home for a woman as opposed to the transcendent space of public life for the man:

The woman confined to immanence tries to keep man in this prison as well; thus the prison will merge with the world, and she will no longer suffer from being shut up in it: the mother, the wife, the lover, are the jailers; society codified by men decrees that woman is inferior: she can only abolish this

⁷⁰ Personal interview via telephone with Gabriela Castellanos, one of the most recognized feminist researchers in Colombia, in March, 2014.

inferiority by destroying male superiority. . . . The existent considered as inessential cannot fail to attempt to reestablish his sovereignty.⁷¹

In this chapter we see two artists, Raisa Galofre and Clara Gaviria, who construct new forms of subjectivity by working on the idea of home means to them. Through their art practice, they seek new ways to see this supposed natural place for a woman that is her home. Giving a second and many looks at home and inside their own homes, they question how a purported feminine nature has been performed in this specific place of the Greek *oikos*. A brief look at a predecessor, Debora Arango (Medellín 1907-2005), an artist who revolutionized her home, the Republic of Colombia, will give the reader an idea of how life changed dramatically for women in Colombia in just a few decades. Only very recently has Arango's work begun to be fully appreciated and studied. Initially she faced effacement and oblivion at a time when a woman painter was thought to be more like a decorator of walls with pretty things who should fit within the *oikos* realm assigned to her. Arango was instead painting the reality she saw around her native Medellín, destroying myths about woman in the way. The three artists who compose this chapter belong to a class of newly educated women. Arango came of age and lived during these important political shifts for Colombian women. Still, despite these changes, her native Medellín was not ready for a woman painter with her ideas.

Due to the many myths that surround "woman" and "home," examining these ideas is imperative to understand one's own position as a subject named and formed

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 754.

within a culture that perpetuates these concepts as *essential* to the continuation of society. The artists examined in this chapter are privileged in the sense that they were born well into the 20th century, and that fact influences their performative and artistic practices. Also, they belong to an urban middle class environment and thus had access to education through the University level. According to Stella Melo,⁷² between 1957 and 1973 middle upper class women and upper class women gained access to higher education and composed almost 35% of the student population in Colombia's main private universities. In 1933, a decree by then president Enrique Olaya Herrera allowed secondary school for women in Colombia. Later, universities were opened for females in 1937. In 1938 Gloria Glottman, the first female to study medicine in Colombia, entered the Universidad de Antioquia.⁷³

Recently Gabriela Castellanos⁷⁴ published an article that discusses the relevance of *The Second Sex* for our times. Castellanos believes that Beauvoir's ideas are useful in a society like that of Colombia, where discourses about feminine identity are still in need of contestation. Beauvoir was a novelist, anthropologist and philosopher, well qualified to approach the theme that she needed to investigate: What is a woman? Is she an abstraction? Where is Woman situated? What is her place? This chapter looks at artists who begin as Beauvoir did: by looking at the

⁷² Stella Melo, *Participación de la mujer en el proceso de Educación Superior en Colombia* [Women's participation in the higher education process in Colombia] (Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, Departamento de Sociología, 1974).

⁷³ Alicia Giraldo Gomez, "Los Derechos de la Mujer en la Legislación Colombiana" (Women's rights in Colombian legislation), *Repertorio Histórico de la Academia Antioqueña de Historia* 38, no. 250 (1987): 12.

⁷⁴ Gabriela Castellanos, "Releyendo El Segundo Sexo" [Re-reading The Second Sex], *La Manzana de la Discordia* [The apple of discord] 3, no. 2 (2008): 38.

culture that surrounds them. They situate themselves at their home as the place from which to start an investigative practice for another way of being. Debora Arango died at an old age; she witnessed all the political events that have marked Colombia for a violence that has lasted six decades, and she saw a new generation give her the merit of a pioneer. As this chapter opens by honoring her, one should take into account that presently her home has become a museum. It is poignant that the majority of her work is owned by the Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín where her work is not regularly displayed, and her home, the museum situated in a small adjacent town to Medellín in order to cash into her fame, displays mostly just her household articles and possessions. It was the oasis of a reclusive woman, full of mementos, religious figures, beautifully arranged rooms, furniture and gardens. This is what we are allowed to visit—her home.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ KienesKien, “¿Qué Guardaba Débora Arango en Su Casa de Envigado?” [What did Débora Arango keep in her Envigado house?], KienyKe, last modified October 1, 2011, <http://www.kienyke.com/historias/%C2%BFque-guardaba-debora-arango-en-su-casa-de-envigado/>.

Debora's Republic



Figure 28. Francisco Mejía. “Debora Arango,” 1940. Acetate, 9x12 cms. In *Franco Mejia, Fotografo* (Bogotá: Banco de la Republica, 1985).

Debora Arango (1907-2005) touched on forbidden social themes with her brush, producing images that were very shocking in a country where it is better not to see or if you see, not to tell. Her insistence on painting exactly what she wanted to paint, including naked bodies, got her in trouble often. By the time Debora was fifteen years old, in 1922, Law 8 had given married women the right to administer whatever was part of the marriage determined in the capitulations and the free use of their personal goods: dresses, trousseau, professional tools and jewelry. Even though these rapid changes were occurring, it is surprising that she decided to be an artist and not a housewife, her assigned role.

Arango has become a mythic painter in the twenty-first century. She erased myths of womanhood and femaleness with her own hands. She defied conservative familial tradition; she never married or had children, dedicating her life to art. Her situation in time did not allow much of her work to be recognized until much later. She could not even be called an artist in her own right, as the profession was completely dominated by males. Her femininity, linked in Colombia to virginity and motherhood, was questioned. Hers was not a way for any woman to paint; it was outrageous behavior for a young lady. In *La República* (figure 29), the naked body of a dead woman is being devoured by vultures, in a scene suggesting a gender inversion of Prometheus, placing the body of a martyred woman as a metaphor for the body of the Colombian Republic.

Luis Vidales, a vanguard poet of Arango's times, claimed that her painting was masculine and that her stroke was audacious. Interviewers were reportedly amazed when getting to know Debora, the woman that some newspapers had "varolinizado" (likened to a male); she seemed a woman like any other, with just one added value: courage.⁷⁶ What she did with courage was to perform her subjectivity in a different way. She dared to continue her painting of "non-womanly" subjects and considered her art very seriously even when others denied that place to her art. By the time Debora turned eighty, the country had come to its senses and recognized her work in exhibitions and publishing books about her entire legacy.

⁷⁶ As qtd. in Londoño, Santiago. "Paganismo, denuncia y sátira en la vida de Débora Arango" (Paganism, Denunciation and Satire in the Life of Débora Arango), *Boletín cultural y bibliográfico* 22, no. 4 (1985): 1.

Florence Thomas, a French-Colombian feminist activist, speaks about the artist as the woman who painted the 20th century. Here is a fragment of Thomas' speech at the National Museum in Bogotá in 2012. It is worth citing at length:

To talk about Debora Arango is to talk about a woman that was born in alien times, a time that was not prepared for free spirits, for naked bodies, for political denouncement, but most of all, a time that was not prepared to be seen through a woman's eyes... I want to remind you that when Debora was twenty years old, women were not citizens yet, that is, they could not vote or be elected. They could not administer their own assets. Not being the subjects of rights, most had no access to formal education, none to higher education and they also were not equal to men under the law. Married women were under the yoke of marital guardianship. Better said, by the forties, in Colombia women were under the tutelage of the father, the husbands or the brothers.⁷⁷

Debora Arango was definitely a woman of the future. The 21st century embraced her work with the passion of recognition. Fifty of her pieces curated by the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín in 2012 went on an international tour. The exhibition started at the National Museum in Bogotá, then went to the MOLAA in Los Angeles, then to the Mint Museum in North Carolina to end at the Museo del Barrio

⁷⁷ Cited from "Débora Arango, Una Mujer que Pintó el Siglo XX," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1K1IzRf2vA>. My translation. To view more of Arango's work: <http://www.pintoreslatinoamericanos.com/2012/07/pintores-colombianos-debora-arango.html>.

in New York in September 2013. Arango was heralding a new kind of Colombian woman, a border-crossing, daring mestiza like the one Gloria Anzaldúa described:

*En unas pocas centurias, the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness.*⁷⁸



Figure 29. Arango, Débora, *La República*, watercolor, 77x57 cm. Museum of Modern Art of Medellín (MAMM), Colombia. The date for this painting is uncertain. A recent article situates it between 1957-58: *Revista Arcadia* [Arcadia Magazine], January 23, 2014, “La Republica: Debora Arango,” <http://www.revistaarcadia.com/impresas/especial-arcadia-100/articulo/arcadia-100-la-republica-debora-arango/35042>.

⁷⁸ Gloria Anzaldúa. *Borderlands/Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lupe Books, 1987), 102.

Interstice 2: Eurydice's Situation

On her way back, led by Orpheus, Eurydice is invisible. She is possibly looking at his back. She even begins to feel that there is a second death coming. If he looks at her, she will lose the right—which was never hers—to be in the light of day again. Obscurity starts to fade in as she approaches a crack on the surface of the earth. This is her fissure to freedom from invisibility. Once there, they will see each other again. For the moment, Orpheus is another source of shadow. His presence does not allow for all the diminutive beams of light to reach her sight. Her body sighs for the sun. There is complete silence. He pauses. She knows he will execute his double take. She is doomed. Instead of facing his murderous eyes, she turns back and does a double take herself, before re-entering home.

Raisa's Poses

Using home as a starting point, Raisa Galofre (Barranquilla, Colombia, 1986) clicks her own camera on auto mode. Identity for Raisa is about finding out what being a woman is of solving the riddle of inessentiality posed by Simone de Beauvoir. Her camera is her mirror, a mirror that she can manipulate in her own search for images beyond the ones culturally acquired. A very young artist, she has dis-placed her self in an investigation that entails performing for a camera by placing herself in the spaces commonly assigned to the women of her family. Her series of photographs, called *Autoficciones (Self-fictions)*, was created in her parents' home, where she lived at the time (Barranquilla, 2010). She presently resides in Germany, while studying art at Burg Giebichenstein Kunsthochschule Halle. Having

been raised in a traditional family and gone through catholic school, she says that when she was finally able to purchase a camera, she started to confront her sense of self.⁷⁹

This statement indicates that for Raisa, this series of photographs is about identity, mostly the need to undo what she has been handed down. It is a material way to re-conform her self. Images of women are everywhere in such a conspicuous way that for young women growing up in many countries, including Colombia, detaching their identities from these images is not only difficult but painful. In this sense, Raisa is heeding Monique Wittig's call to action, using the same gestures she sees in magazines and TV commercials to disrupt her own image as an inhabitant of the home she was raised in:

[W]e have to destroy the myth inside and outside ourselves. « Woman » is not each one of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates « women » (the product of a relation of exploitation). « Woman » is there to confuse us, to hide the reality « women. » In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of « woman » including its most seductive aspect.⁸⁰

In the picture below (figure 30), Raisa Galofre places herself at the kitchen sink. She erases her face in a performative gesture that instead of dispensing with features raises questions about identity. One can see the melon, cut open over her

⁷⁹ Personal interview, January, 2012.

⁸⁰ Monique Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halpern (New York: Routledge, 1993), 106.

breasts pointing towards a biologically determined essentiality. The fact that this virtual space called vagina is a danger zone, open to violence of war and immediate family abuse, is all too present. Through a camera, Galofre is staring at the biology that determines culturally sanctioned violence against women. A knife, useful in any kitchen, could be a reminder to anyone living in the city of Barranquilla of the rise in what is now called “femicidios” due to its recurrence. Femicide,⁸¹ a feminist neologism, is now commonly used in local and national media to talk about the increasing number of murders of women in Colombia, though it is perceived as a global pandemic.



Figure 30. Digital photograph from the series *Autoficciones* provided by Galofre from her personal archives. Barranquilla, 2010.

⁸¹ Mexican feminist Marcela Lagarde constructed the Spanish term from two previous books on gender violence, after long debate: *Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing* (1992), ed. Diana Russell and Jill Radford (New York: Twayne, 1992), and Mary Anne Warren’s *Gendercide: The Implications of Sex Selection* (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 1985).

In December 2012, the gang rape and later the death of a woman sparked violent protests in New Delhi, India. Something very similar happened in June, 2012 in Colombia. Protesters took to the streets after the horrific violence perpetrated on Rosa Elvira Cely's body. Cely, a 35-year-old woman, was raped and murdered, her genitals impaled, at the National Park in Bogotá.⁸² On November 14, 2012, the National Net of Women announced a "plantón," a stand-still, of women in Barranquilla as a protest against the 28 violent deaths of different women in the city during 2012, mainly through intra-familial violence.⁸³ Female populations' vulnerability is rising everywhere. On September 15, 2013, *El Heraldo*, the main regional newspaper of Barranquilla, published an article warning about the increasing aggression and murders perpetrated by husbands in the city.⁸⁴ Even though these events occurred later and obviously did not influence the artist's choice, they form an incisive commentary on her intuitions about the body of women like her, always open, inessential, ready to change but subject to abuse.

Perhaps simply by roaming the streets of her hometown, Galofre has experienced the lurking violence behind looks and words that usually accompany

⁸² "Se Entregó Segundo Hombre en el Caso de Rosa Elvira Cely" [Second man surrenders in the case of Rosa Elvira Cely], June 3, 2012, Noticias Caracol, <http://www.noticiascaracol.com/articulo-266746-se-entrego-segundo-hombre-investigado-crimen-de-rosa-elvira-cely>.

⁸³ "Plantón, Este Miércoles por las Mujeres Asesinadas en Barranquilla" [Sit-in, this Wednesday for the women assassinated in Barranquilla], November 14, 2012, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-12377081>.

⁸⁴ Kenji Doku, "Alerta por agresiones y asesinatos de mujeres en el Atlántico" (Alert about aggressions and murders of women in the Atlantic), *El Heraldo*, September 15, 2013, <http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/alerta-por-agresiones-y-asesinatos-de-mujeres-en-el-atlantico-124744>.

any young woman walking by a man. These looks, gestures and words are the prelude that allows any woman of any age, in Colombia, to feel as if she is always a possible victim. It is poignant that on April 28, 2014, I found this direct citation of Beauvoir's work while walking the streets of Barranquilla (Figure 31). This is probably an intervention done by students of the nearby faculty of Fine Arts of the Universidad del Atlántico. The materiality of the words stenciled on the pavement speaks of the necessity to remind us, pedestrians, of the fact that essences linked to femininity are still part of the Colombian culture, and they should be resisted as a cultural act. Raisa is part of this culture and is well aware of seminal feminist writings like Beauvoir's, but she also had the possibility of reading about Ana Mendieta. She says⁸⁵ she started performing for her own camera, emulating the Cuban American artist whose death is still a mystery – possibly a result of domestic violence.⁸⁶ Raisa Galofre has not seen such tragedies in her personal life, but she is aware of the vulnerability of the female body and its metaphorical openness, an image appropriated by many cultures that permit the woman's body to be a site of a violence that speaks of domination.

⁸⁵ Personal interview, January, 2012.

⁸⁶ Her husband is unofficially suspected of throwing her from the balcony of their New York apartment building in 1985.



Figure 31. Photograph of the floor of a street in Barranquilla. The slogan reads “Woman is made, not born,” a sentence found on page 205 of Simone de Beauvoir’s *El Segundo Sexo*, trans. Juan García Puente (Buenos Aires: Debolsillo, 2007). There it reads: “No se nace mujer: se llega a serlo” (One is not born a woman, one becomes one).

In contrast with previous thoughts on the value of the “essential qualities of women,” Beauvoir shows how “the woman problem” is about cultural assumptions that have kept women from taking responsibility of their lives through placing their “naturalness” in the realm of immanence that is the home. By the seventies, women understood that the way they were participating in politics was an expression of the same values that had kept them at home. *Oikos* versus *Polis* is immanence versus transcendence, in a polarity that has divided humans into opposing realms since ancient times. But, just fifty years after obtaining the right to vote, women in Colombia became quite active in the public sphere, constituting one of the many profound changes in Colombia’s short history. Spanish colonization ended in 1819 and the final proclamation of the Republic as it is today by the Constitution of 1886.

In the year 2014 two women are presidential candidates from opposite sides, and they are confronting three male candidates of other political coalitions. Clara Lopez belongs to a faction of the left, and Marta Lucia Ramirez represents the conservative party.

Still, we hear news every day of acts of aggression towards women that happen inside the familial space and are becoming much too common. Even in a country plagued by violence towards all gender and ages, this fact stands out. In the March 20, 2014 issue of *El Heraldo*, the main newspaper of the North Coastal Region of Colombia, one can read this headline for a main article: "Preoccupation over Female Homicides and the Cruelty of These Attacks."⁸⁷ The photographs of two recently assassinated women accompany the text, which explains that the abuse and violence against women have increased tremendously, and nine women have already been killed brutally in only the third month of the year.⁸⁸ As the civil liberties that women have had access to increase, so does the backlash shown by violence against them. Cultural assumptions are not so easy to detect once they are located under the apparent reality of everydayness. One can infer that much of Colombian society has not finished digesting that a woman is not a possession to be kept under a domestic, private, immanent regime.

⁸⁷ Carlos Polo, "Preocupan los Homicidios de las Mujeres y la Sevicia de los Ataques Red de Mujeres" [Murders of women and cruelty of the attacks concern Women's Network], *El Heraldo*, <http://www.elheraldo.co/judicial/preocupan-los-homicidios-de-las-mujeres-y-la-sevicia-de-los-ataques-red-de-mujeres-146700>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

It is quite paradoxical to realize that the ideas that we reject today, those of definite feminine essences, are the ones that were used by the women who organized themselves as AGDA (Asociación General de Mujeres Colombianas- General Association of Colombian Women) in 1937 in order to procure the right to full citizenship. They had been able to organize because by the year 1932, Colombian Law Number 28 declared that women over twenty years old had civil rights equal to those of men. However, the right to vote was not granted until 1954 by a populist dictatorial mandate that needed “the feminine vote.” Females happened to be over fifty percent of the population, and their vote was expected to follow their husbands’ and fathers’ guidance while upholding catholic values.⁸⁹

With Legislative Act Number 3 of 1954, which reformed the National Constitution of Colombia, women were authorized to elect candidates and to be elected. Suffragists had already been asking for equal rights for several decades and were basing much of their argument on the “essential qualities of women:” that is, being able to care for people, being naturally prone to giving life instead of taking it; therefore, motherhood supposedly gave them the necessary qualifications to be as good for the “patria” as for the family. At that time, conservatives and liberals (the two main political parties bear those names) started to create a discourse that acknowledged women as important for the pacification of the country.⁹⁰ In a mostly Roman Catholic country, the construction of gender is embedded with notions of

⁸⁹ Lola Luna, “El logro del voto femenino en Colombia: La violencia y el maternalismo populista” [Achievement of female suffrage in Colombia: Violence and populist materialism], *Boletín Americanista*, 2001.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

virgins and mother-child relationships. Femininity has been proclaimed as a positive value, one that could be utilized in order to obtain a political right, as home and homeland were conflated to promote women as caretakers, assets for a nation in need:

Between 1949 and 1957 femininity and its essences revealed their political significance with greater clarity in order to justify the securing of the vote for women. The great sense of devotion to home as mothers now extended to the homeland for the purpose of action for peace.⁹¹

Raisa started her art practice by looking into the different selves she could be if she chose to follow local, familial customs, that is, the inherited ideas of a female essence. The fact that she studied Communications at a university implies the possibility of looking beyond the dishes she was served as a young Catholic Colombian girl. Born in the eighties, she should be part of what has been defined now in US academia as third-wave feminism. But she is not intentionally creating feminist art. That is, she does not consider herself as an activist, even though her artwork is completely intended for publication on the Internet, thus to be seen by anyone, touched by whoever can have access.

As a contemporary young woman, with the resources that technology has put in her hands, she could very well be standing on the supposed theoretical privileges of the others who went before her. But this is not so because, even in the twenty-

⁹¹ Ibid. "En el periodo de 1949 a 1957, la feminidad y sus esencias revelaron con mayor claridad sus significados políticos al justificar la obtención del voto para las mujeres. Su magnífica entrega y dedicación al hogar como buenas madres ahora se extendía a la patria en una acción propositiva de paz;" my translation.

first century, a girl who has access to higher education in Colombia will not be able to enter a liberal arts program where she will find gender or woman's studies courses or degrees, simply because they do not exist. Only recently has the National University in Bogotá, the main public university in Colombia, opened a post-graduate degree in Gender Studies.⁹²

This means that Raisa Galofre and other young Colombian females (that is, "third world women") are not aware of the rhetoric of academic feminism.⁹³ Yet, as Raisa has stated,⁹⁴ her main concern after graduating from college was to discover through a camera what she needed to explore: her identity as a woman. I find that that this question of identity, of needing to understand what a woman is supposed to be beyond cultural constructs and biological essences, is still important for a woman starting her artistic quest in the second decade of the twenty-first century in Colombia.

Women like Raisa today feel that a particular and yet very diverse oppression is still present in women's lives all over the world, as if they were a class apart. The body of a woman is a sign of difference that must remain marked. It is signaled by a crack, a fissure that divides humanity even though we are well aware of the implications of gender performance and the many possible identities. This crack is a virtual hole, a possibility the vagina holds as it folds unto itself. It is a crack

⁹² Escuela de Estudios de Género [School of Gender Studies], National University of Colombia, last modified November 28, 2014, <http://www.humanas.unal.edu.co/genero/laescuela/>.

⁹³ For a very complete study of the rhetoric of feminisms I recommend Charlotte Krollokke and Ann Scott Sorensen, *Gender Communication: Theories and Analyses* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

⁹⁴ Personal interview, January, 2012.

as material as a body and as imaginative as a myth. Posing in her own home, using the tools of marketing and communication and situating her own body in quotidian home spaces, the artist tries to accomplish something Wittig viewed as the task of a feminist:

Our first task, it seems, is to always thoroughly dissociate « women » (the class within which we fight) and « woman, » the myth. For « woman » does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while « women » is the product of a social relationship.⁹⁵

Only within this crack, understanding its existence, can woman reclaim a subject position akin to the one that was gained with the right to vote. If the construct called *woman* is imaginary, then imagination is the best weapon to take this task on. In this sense, Galofre is following Mendieta's experimentations with her own marked body. Like Mendieta's, Galofre's own image is fragmented in different roles. She does not know how or why to assume femininity in order to feel integrated to her culture. Raisa Galofre belongs to a mestizo nation and as such she is Caribbean, Spanish, Black, Indian and a woman with all of the others in her. Like Mendieta, she wonders where her identity lies and searches for a way to connect to all of the women before her in her lineage. Mendieta searches for goddesses of the Caribbean, Galofre for the mythical role that women in her own family have played. Mendieta bares her body in order to find these other women in her consideration of Earth, her home. Galofre clothes her body in order to pose in positions of the

⁹⁵ Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," 106.

“natural spaces for females” of a house, her house, many houses she knows.

Through this very private act, the artist imagines a jump into the public sphere of Internet and digital media. Like Mendieta, Galofre is reminding us of ideas of essentiality linked to women’s bodies: earth and hearth.

When Raisa Galofre stands in front of a mirror and surreptitiously uses her boyfriend’s father’s razor blade in order to take a photograph of herself in their bathroom in Germany (figure 32), it is as if she is remembering Simone de Beauvoir’s words: *“Here is to be found the basic trait of woman: she is the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another.”*⁹⁶ As she looks at her image, mimicking a grown man’s everyday ritual, her eyes seem to look at the other in the mirror who could be the one that she is being opposed to, the one she is supposed to reflect, that transcendent other, the male she is not. Playing within herself with a camera, she is not role playing but re-enacting any girl’s game of dressing up. Her look seems to be asking, what will growing up as an adult woman mean? Which roles am I allowed to play? Why am I worried about what being a woman means? It is as if Raisa was giving Simone De Beauvoir one possible image-like answer to her words:

What is a woman? To state the question is, to me, to suggest, at once, a preliminary answer. The fact that I ask it is in itself significant. A man will

⁹⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Introduction, xix.

never get the notion of writing a book on the peculiar situation of the human male...⁹⁷



Figure 32. Self-portrait from the series *Autoficciones*. Photograph provided by Galofre during fieldwork in Barranquilla, December 2010.

Women artists of diverse origins like Mendieta have always had this impulse to investigate what being a woman could really mean through their own bodies. The vacuous, essentializing gaze proposes the place of a woman as a space of projections, maintaining the relevance of this question in the present. Ana Mendieta had a similar idea when for her M.A. project; she asked a friend to shave his beard and then placed that hair on her face as if performing the non-otherness of this man could give her some cues to the same question.⁹⁸ This question seems to haunt

⁹⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁹⁸ For a more detailed account and review of this piece by Mendieta, see Jane Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity and Exile* (London: Duke University Press, 1999), 11.

Galofre through arduous hours of labor where her body, her clothes, her intimate spaces and her camera come into constant dialogue, circumventing it in a way that can sound this way: How am I a woman?

As the camera looks on and the light is about to become a fixed image, the shutter clicks, the mirror doubles that image. Now we see a single picture. This picture is a text answering the question. The answer is never complete or definite, since the game is kept on as long as she needs to perform it. Becoming is about never fixing her image, but the camera has already perpetuated it. Now the trick will be to keep a sense of inessentiality intact or in constant erasing actions. I argue that keeping inessentiality alive is part of the skill a woman can learn in order to be able to change, to become whatever she desires. In figure 33 below, Raisa has painted words on her family's garage wall the sentence: "Blessed you are." Her body becomes just one of the postures she has been performing. As always, she is alone; no one must look on as she plays with modes of being. She needs to be the sole owner and performer of the image that she will become.

This being here, against the wall, is about "being blessed," as in a prayer to the Virgin Mary, one she heard over and over in school when growing up, afraid of doing anything wrong that would disturb the nuns' peace. The words painted on the wall, more than a catholic prayer she was taught, are a mantra for her experimentation. Afraid of the look of domination as perceived throughout her life, now it is her own camera that looks on but she is the master of that look. She could be asking if she is the master of the diversity of postures in life as a woman, before

she fixes them by choosing just one image. Here a doubling is effectuated as an event that erases itself as she poses for a self that has a mechanical eye that will then return the image once begged by the question, until a new image arrives in a next double performance.



Figure 33. Self-portrait from the series *Autoficciones*. Photograph provided by Galofre during fieldwork in Barranquilla, December 2010.

The doubling in Galofre’s work is later accentuated in a collaboration she started with a woman she does not know personally, someone who caught her attention on Flickr.⁹⁹ They started a dialogue through photographs: one would send a photograph, and the other one would complete it. They posted the pictures with titles like “In Between” and “Double Dealing,” as an investigation on likeness across ocean and land, performing a gesture that seems to point towards a possibility of

⁹⁹ Flickr is a website where people share their photography world wide: www.flickr.com

sameness in difference:¹⁰⁰ “...*There you can see two women who want to communicate and want to do it with their bodies, even if we have never set eyes on each other...*”¹⁰¹ Through their joint performance they are recognizing not an essence that comes with being born a woman, but a likeness that springs from life practices and of experiences. Looking in this way is about a doubling that happens within a camera but on a surface that is a computer and across a virtual space that allows these two women to exchange bodies in re-cognition.

For Raisa, taking photographs of herself is about inhabiting the spaces where the other women in her life (her family) are being projected in order to understand them and consequently, her own self. This is a deconstruction in order to do again, to re-do in order to learn something new. She returns home using her own body in order to deepen the question of what a woman is, becomes a question about inscription of the body in the realm of immanence. It is as if the transcendence the artist aspires to could be achieved through reminding the observer of her poses, as if the lived body were not an object that occupies space but an inter-subject that inhabits and transforms space. On this subject, Amelia Jones states, using Merleau-Ponty’s work:

Unlike other objects in the world, the body cannot be thought as separate from the self, nor does it signify or “express the modalities of existence in the

¹⁰⁰ Photos may be viewed at Raisa Galofre’s Flickr site, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/raisagalofre/5437622708/in/photostream>.

¹⁰¹ Personal interview, January, 2012.

way that stripes indicate rank, or a house number a house: the sign here does not only convey its significance, it is filled with it.”¹⁰²

One of the first things Galofre did once in Germany was to invent a character that she called Aline. This name was inspired by a novel written by Herta Muller, a surrogate self for Raisa, the stranger in another land. In order to continue taking those self-portraits she had to become someone else. The camera that had seen her before, while playing in her household in Barranquilla, was noticing the estrangement brought by a new country, another home, a possible other woman. The same camera, now situated in Germany, needed to help her understand spaces uninhabited by previous women of her own family and help her create new metaphors for possibilities she was probably inaugurating within her family while stretching the borders. Thus, in another form of doubling, she is continuing to auto-fictionalize but this time as what she is, a foreigner. Still, aren't women the absolute others? Are they not foreigners in their own world? Thus the name Aline, one that actually translates as “the stranger,” gave Raisa Galofre the freedom to yet again become an-other in order to investigate possibilities of being, executing a double distancing that would allow for what a camera does with the eye that is not an eye but that nonetheless acts as one. Performing in this way is indexing a new kind of reality, maybe one that is desired or one that helps interrupt the image she has been allowed to have by her situation.

¹⁰² Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 39.

Through the eye of the camera she observes the empty space her body will later fill. The empty camera, the one without her eye, sees the space given by the body. The index returns another possibility that was neither one nor the other, but one that nonetheless gives back, in turn, multiple possibilities. Roland Barthes explains the double action and the defeat of “reality” in photographs in a way that can be applied to Raisa’s poses: “Now, once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of “posing,” I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform my self in advance into an image.”¹⁰³

Raisa Galofre is reclaiming the imaginary status of inessentiality by continuously placing herself in spaces that are thus opened to investigation. She re-constitutes herself through posing. Before posing she must re-imagine the space her body will occupy and re-constitute. She performs subjectivity in such a way that it displaces a fixed sense of selfhood. Inessentiality, in Galofre’s tool kit can be seen as a tool for becoming, in accordance to the places she needs to master. Playing with the idea of inessentiality realizes the openness of desire. However, the first thing that a woman is to attain by re-creating herself is the reclamation of her body. If she can talk about her unbound desire, she can return to the knowledge of her own body, a body that wants to be heard and that exists as knowable material. For Cixous, this return “will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories...”¹⁰⁴ Raisa’s body is an image that can never achieve fullness or substance unless she constantly remakes it, shuffling its inessentiality.

¹⁰³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 262.

The instability of photographs that allow the artist to compose and perform her basic otherness is a key material to play with, and Galofre knows it:

There is something that happens at the moment when I decide to take action and choose a place and everything takes me to an image or maybe the space or a certain object calls me...I feel that this is the moment when I can reinvent myself or recognize other ways of being...and then I see the product and I see other shapes and images that question me...there is a null moment when I cease to be who I think I am and then I know there is a search for something that I need to say through these performative photos...¹⁰⁵



Figure 34. Self-portrait from the series *Autoficciones*. Photograph provided by Galofre during fieldwork in Barranquilla, December 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Personal interview, January, 2012.

In a similar way, Jane Blocker has shown how, in the photographic work of Ana Mendieta, those pictures that document her performance really denote that “no true identity exists prior to the act of performance.”¹⁰⁶ In the same sense, Raisa’s poses re-take the spaces of her home with her own body, creating a multiplicity of statements. These statements open myriad possibilities that do not fix an image as the camera does. She lets us see these spaces and her identities as multiple possibilities of being, according to location, situation and desire. As such, Raisa’s auto-performances are a contestation of essential-ness through a play on inessentiality. When she pretends to cut her mouth (figure 34) in a pose that imitates a sexy photo in any Colombian newspaper full of women in similar attitudes, the blood stains our gaze, raising the question of whether these poses are what a woman like her really wants. We stare in silence as we think, what is a woman throwing back to us when she takes a picture of herself as if injuring her mouth while sensually posed on an ornate, antique chair?

Clara’s Boxes

The assigned place for women, the home, is also a place of violence, a hidden violence, because it purports to be private. Home is the link between all of the seemingly isolated cases of violence at the heart of the country’s population. The place given to women in the developing nation of Colombia was quite clearly stated by the law upon the creation of the nation as an independent Republic. It is exactly

¹⁰⁶ Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta?*, 25.

the domain of the *Oikos*, home, where women supposedly belong. Public life belongs to citizens, who are male. The 1886 constitution states the following in Title II:

Article 15: Citizens are those male Colombians older than twenty-one who practice an art, profession or a licit occupation or any other known means of subsistence.

Article 18: The quality of citizenship is a previous condition to be able to elect or exercise any electoral function, and public posts that have implicit authority or jurisdiction.¹⁰⁷

Clara Gaviria (Barranquilla, Colombia, 1973) started to build shadow boxes out of carefully assembled everyday objects that are culturally associated with femininity. In an ironic miniature exploration of the role of women in her society, Clara collects objects that she relates to past and present images that supposedly represent womanhood. One could say that she builds dollhouses out of her memories and mementoes of women in her family. The resulting boxes are almost like frozen domestic instants. They are collages of imperceptible moments or imaginary spaces inhabited by fantastical creatures: grown up girls who still dream of perfect houses (Figure 35). The minute archaeology of everyday images that Clara collects end up like items displayed in a toy store collection of framed, objectified desires. Free associations, chance, humor and much patience play together in the

¹⁰⁷ Artículo 15: Son ciudadanos los colombianos varones mayores de veintiún años, que ejerzan arte, profesión u oficio, o tengan ocupación lícita y otro medio conocido de subsistencia. 18: La calidad de ciudadano en ejercicio es condición previa indispensable para ejercer funciones electorales, y poder desempeñar empleos públicos que lleven anexa autoridad o jurisdicción.

time the artist dedicates to her craft, time stolen from “real-life” domesticity. But dreams in Colombia are broken continuously as violence against women becomes more prevalent.



Figure 35. Photograph of a shadowbox provided by Gaviria in Barranquilla, June, 2011. Measures 20 by 20 cms.

Most of the violent episodes against women happen at home and have to do with relationships. In the last few years there has been an alarming increase in chemical acid attacks that disfigure a woman’s face, mostly due to jealousy and other relationship issues. Figure 36 shows a group of women who came to support sixteen-year-old Laura Charry, who was attacked at home by her boyfriend; he beat her and cut her face, saying as he left, “If she is not mine, she will be no one’s.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Francisco Argüello, “Si No Es Mía, No Es de Nadie” [If it isn’t mine, it’s no one’s], kienyke.com, June 13, 2012, <http://www.kienyke.com/historias/si-no-es-mia-no-es-de-nadie/>.

The episode that galvanized the country crying for judicial reforms in response to criminal acts committed with chemical agents was perpetrated on March 28, 2014 against Natalia Ponce de León, a thirty-three year old woman, in front of her home. Presidential candidate Martha Lucia Ramirez has stated that there should be life sentences in prison for acid attackers and rapists in Colombia.¹⁰⁹



Figure 36. Photograph of a street protest against violence against women in Huila, Colombia, 2012. See footnote 108 for reference.

The National University of Colombia is reputedly the most important center of thought and investigation in the country, and it houses much of the student population, who conceive Colombia's future as that of a nation still in the process of becoming an inclusive society. On the wall in figure 37, the graffiti states that a woman must start loving from her strength, not her weakness, in order to find her

¹⁰⁹ "Proponen 'prisión perpetua' para violadores y atacantes con ácido" [Life sentence proposed for rapists and acid attackers], *El Tiempo*, April 11, 2014, <http://www.eltiempo.com/elecciones-2014/presidencia/proponen-prisin-perpetua-para-violadores-y-atacantes-con-cido/13821179>.

self rather than searching for herself in another, and that love should not put her in mortal danger. This is a clear reference to the rise of gender violence episodes in the nation, expressed through a citation of Simone De Beauvoir's work.

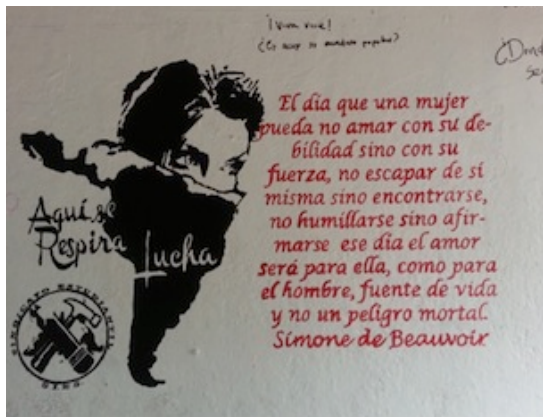


Figure 37. Photograph of a graffiti at Universidad Nacional, taken in Bogotá in April, 2014 during fieldwork.

The ideas presented by Beauvoir in 1949 are still applicable to many women who are laboring to provoke change in countries like Colombia. Many seem to be urging women, empowered in civil life after the right to vote was granted, to dare to create their own representations of the world, debating old myths and creating new ones, becoming subjects of choice, of change. Artists like Clara Gaviria, an educated woman, constantly perform themselves anew through their various practices. Clara graduated as a psychologist in 1997. As she started working with patients in a mental hospital, her artistic interest emerged when confronted with the possibilities that artistic processes yield for healing. She decided to start again, studying art, which became her therapy.

Married to a successful artist, she has two sons. Gaviria sees herself as a homemaker who is also a professional woman and an artist who works from her home. When her grandmother died as the result of a violent home intrusion, she had a revelation. When the family started to re order the house after the burial, she realized that her grandmother had collected all sorts of little objects in little boxes. She also found texts her grandmother had written about handicrafts she had located in various magazines destined for women, texts about “frivolities.” She was starting to understand this need she had had for many years of accumulating all sorts of things, little insignificant everyday objects. This was the beginning of the shadow boxes she then started to create. She did not know what to do with those apparently useless objects, which later became the seed of her future artwork, a continuous line of boxes she produced and filled with these small collectibles.¹¹⁰

Clara’s studio consists of a tiny room next to the kitchen, the room reserved for the live-in maids in most of the middle class apartments in the country. Clara does not have a maid, so she uses the tiny room reserved for this purpose in most homes in Colombia, as her studio. Meanwhile, her husband, who is “the serious artist,” has a larger room in their three-bedroom apartment for his artwork. As we speak in her studio, looking at the material for her artwork, her son is nearby; he finishes her sentences and we laugh. She is well aware of how he is empowered by the patriarchal culture in Colombia. In a way, he is in possession of his mother’s

¹¹⁰ Personal interview, May, 2012.

body, her home spaces and her words. It is no joke then, the ironic title that she gave to her first individual exhibition, *You Can Kiss the Bride*.

One of her collages, as seen in Figure 38, reads: *Your Husband, That Unknown One*. Who is she talking to through this box, one wonders. Is she addressing all of the other women who visit the exhibition? Who is this mysterious creature, the husband? Clara does not take her art very seriously, although her artist husband is her greatest admirer. Aware of the culturally sanctioned implications when people refer to her as Clara the artist, Marco's wife, she mocks his public self and overlooks who he is in private; or, one can say she gives a second look in order to place herself on equal footing. Thus she is posing a question about her own identity as mother, wife, and artist. If she is the absolute other and he is the transcendent subject who through his craft is able to move beyond domestic walls, why could she not make art that places him as the mysterious other? When he becomes the myth, she is not, anymore.

Gaviria seems to be bound to domesticity by her culture's collective imagination, and thus she encases her art within four walls that can be admired. She and her husband admire each other's work, but who is publicly acknowledged, and who is bound to domesticity? She has filled the spaces designed for her femininity with lots of little found items in an attempt to overcome the gaps, avoiding the cracks in feminine assumptions that could be about to open, possibly shattering her almost-perfect world. Taking her craft lightly, Clara is delicately (in a womanly way?) pointing towards the difficulties of relationship across genders when one is

labeled an inessential creature and the other one the assigned, transcendent maker of meaning. What meaning can little everyday objects have, found in any wife's house?



Figure 38. Photograph of a shadowbox provided by Gaviria in Barranquilla, June 2011.

Gaviria intentionally places these seemingly meaningless little items as a sort of insignificant barrier that shelters her from the local culture and its common beliefs about femininity. Within her apparently simple, kitschy and cute boxes, she tells the hidden story of growing up as a girl in Barranquilla and the nostalgia that comes with no longer playing at being a woman in order to later welcome home the strangeness of becoming a mother. As a matter of fact, she believes her work consists of just “exercises;” she reiterates, “Well, maybe it is all about being afraid to

give myself some importance...this is what they teach us, to be modest....” And she continues, “.... in these boxes I try to reconcile all the women that are in me: the cook, the devout mother and the one that wants to do whatever she pleases...”¹¹¹

There is a clear bottle among white ones, and this clear one shows a dark object inside of it. The image created by Clara with this box, is that of a difference disrupting the sameness. She inverts the mystery, the myth of woman and brings otherness home, signaling her husband as the Other in that milieu. It is an image that points toward a similar understanding that Beauvoir had when critiquing Levinas: “When he writes that woman is a mystery, it is understood that she is a mystery to a male. Thus this description that intends to be subjective is in truth an affirmation of masculine privilege.”¹¹² In a very subtle way, in the same way that she situates herself within a relationship with the nuclear family, Clara critiques the position of privilege her husband has, when he is taken seriously in the institutional art scene while she is usually identified as “Clara, Marco’s wife.”

The white bottles in the box seen in figure 38 beg for an association with old milk bottles. They were actually filled with soap bubbles, blown by the guests at their wedding. The male body is implied within the only transparent bottle. This is not a collection of objects of personal significance arranged in a pretty way. The artist makes boxes that can decorate her house and also those of the buyers of her art, with the added ingredient that her pieces have the distinct look of an intelligent discourse that situates the artist somewhere else other than home. As the image

¹¹¹ Clara Gaviria, personal interview. Barranquilla, May, 2012..

¹¹² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 6.

suggests, she references marriage as a defined ritual that cannot be escaped, framing the new as the little dark blue rock at the bottom of the transparent bottle; the old is the lace that covers the box but is not seen in the photograph. The borrowed are the white bubble soap bottles that scatter and disappear as the moment the event happens.¹¹³ Clara frames, within a box, a set of meanings she can hopefully subvert in her own daily life, while still fulfilling the roles assigned.

Masquerading behind new miniature versions of possible spaces she can inhabit, Clara Gaviria is not thinking lightly about situation. Another of Clara's pieces, shown in figure 39, consists of twenty white coffee mugs, each one stamped with a letter. When lined up together in a cupboard, they read: *Lo Personal Es Político* (The personal is political). These aligned coffee mugs constitute an ironic comment on an issue still unresolved in Colombian society. It definitely is a statement about her seemingly unimportant artwork, one that could resemble any wife's menial everyday work at home.

¹¹³ Related by the artist during personal telephone interview in May, 2013.



Figure 39. *The Personal is Political* by Gaviria in a private home. Photograph taken during fieldwork on June 2013.

“The personal *is* political” becomes a subtle but very strong statement, spoken by a woman through mugs that should hold the country’s main export. Coffee is a drink ingrained in the whole community as a source of pride, and it is linked to everydayness. The same can be said about any minute part of a woman’s day played out in domesticity. Why, one may ask, is a young wife making art that directly addresses the same question that second wave feminists posed defiantly?

Clara states:

I believe that we young women have not really understood the feminist slogans, and we have also misunderstood the legacies of our mothers and grandmothers... I want to remember, to reflect on these things.... otherwise,

how is it that we are now more than ever, in this city, seeing so much abuse, so many feminicides?¹¹⁴

Thus Clara completes within her boxes an ethical act of continuation and contestation even if her practice from a home-space may seem un-pretentious. Making small boxes filled with mementos hung on walls reflects what woman like Clara might consider her tiny position as a woman in her society. Instead, she takes the use of a material that belongs to a culture of handicrafts seriously; those handicrafts have defined womanhood in her family. Looking twice at everyday trivial objects and arranging them in ways that transform their status, as she did with the ordinary white mugs where each letter is not meaningful by itself, creates a repetitive row which forces one to read carefully. It converts those clichéd phrases into something that deserves a second look, brings us back to the shared strength of early feminism and long forgotten slogans, lost amidst today commercially appropriated ones.

It is poignant that Clara constructed the shadow box seen in figure 40 in 2008, sixty years after the United Nations urged the countries that had not declared female suffrage legal, to do so. On the back wall of the box, a barely readable text discusses the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, on the front, fashion items. Again, she is playing with the traditional ways that most cultures accent women's otherness through clothing that at the same time becomes a masquerade via another game: seasonal fashion statements that maintain women

¹¹⁴ Personal interview videotaped during fieldwork in Barranquilla, in May, 2012.

occupied keeping up with the trends. The convention for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women is thus obstructed from view by the little cut out dresses, bags and shoes girls play with. Behind the fun pretty cut outs, a question emerges: is this what postmodernity is really all about? Furthermore, culture, like fashion, presently stands in the front line of a utopia, forever renovating itself in order to obscure the truth of imminent death as the stuff of life. In the midst of a liquid modernity, as Zygmunt Bauman has shown, the meaning of life is a problem kept at bay by forgetting past utopias while we are pursuing other, others are more graspable, like perfect homes and passing fashions.¹¹⁵ Fashion passes, Clara seems to say, but transcendence, that is, finding meaning beyond everydayness, is elusive.



Figure 40. Photograph of a shadow box provided by Gaviria. Measures: 24 by 26cms.

¹¹⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

In one of a series of boxes that Clara exhibited in Barranquilla in 2013, she takes issue with racism and feminism in a similar manner. Again the viewer sees a collage where the background is a printed page, in this case, the book *Guerrilla Girls Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*.¹¹⁶ At the top of the photocopied page is another box that blocks our complete view of the text. In its subdivisions, the artist has placed cutouts from magazines for crafts and other objects. A paper girl with outstretched arms is trying to hold a three dimensional baby doll, a wooden butterfly is crushing a cloth flower and the lower half of the body wearing pants is without a head, where instead we see a comic-book-like bubble with an eraser glued in the middle (figure 41). This could be a parody of Clara's own situation: as her head is erased, the woman with face sets her eyes on the baby doll, and wings are encased and saved for further pondering: this is the time for love and home while her art books are barely visible and she only has time for making cute little boxes that hide the message. To the viewer, the message comes slowly after the initial attraction the craftiness of the box has provided. Delusion starts to fade as we wonder about our own situation.

¹¹⁶ *Guerrilla Girls* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).



Figure 41. Photograph taken during fieldwork during an opening of her work on November 14, 2013 in Barranquilla at the Foundation Círculo Abierto. Measures 23 by 16 cm.

Conclusion

When women like Clara and Raisa disrupt images concerning immanence as the woman's place in the world, they call into question the space that should offer safety and love, a place that can nonetheless be easily violated and the source of insecurity. Clara Gaviria's delicate boxes play with insignificance and the apparent fragility of that space, while making strong covert statements. Raisa Galofre uses her own body to create images that confront the culture she grew up in, one that privileges the corporeal image of a woman even when applying for any job. Violence can be obvious or it can be like the decoration of the apparently safe place of a beautifully kept home. Violence can also be as subtle as a glance that commodifies your body, perpetuating the objectifying gaze.

These artists determine their world through the material they choose to manipulate. They put into effect something that Braidoti has been asking for in *Nomadic Subjects*, where she calls for the creation of new figurations or styles that will “express a way out of phallogentric visions of the subject.”¹¹⁷ One such vision would appropriate the public sphere through disruption of the private world where society situates the role of woman. Even today, when three waves of feminism have been named by academia, in a sense implying that each previous one is obsolete, one can easily find examples of how this phallogentric vision Braidoti refers to, is not gone.¹¹⁸

For Simone de Beauvoir, subjectivity is linked to action upon the world, one culturally assigned to men. Women must also reach this point where they can go beyond the place where have been confined, the place of immanence: home. Artists like Raisa Galofre and Clara Gaviria are acting upon their worlds, just as Beauvoir posed, but they are going even beyond acting, they understand the power hidden behind the assumptions of inessentiality. Not doomed to immanence anymore, they confront assumptions in order to outpace the culture that still want them confined.

¹¹⁷ Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 1.

¹¹⁸ August 22, 2014: I listen to the radio every morning while I prepare breakfast. As always, *La W* station keeps me informed with its live news-commentary program. The very well know anchors in Colombia based in Bogotá are having a discussion, half joking, half seriously about a visitor they have on the premises: a naked beautiful woman who just won the latest *Soho Magazine* contest and is the promoter of the magazine’s upcoming issue. The two women journalists are furious, the male journalists, loving the situation, ask about the women’s discomfort with the naked beauty as she delivers an invitation. To see a record and the photos of the visits Natalia Silva paid to a few radio stations during the publicity stunt, consult Soho.com’s online gallery, <http://www.soho.com.co/web/galeria/natalia-silva-ganadora-del-concurso-soho-15-anos-en-radio/3515>.

They have learned Beauvoir's lesson and get ready through their art making to become transcendent subjects:

The individual who is a subject, who is himself, endeavors to extend his grasp on the world if he has the generous inclination for transcendence: he is ambitious, he acts. But an inessential being cannot discover the absolute in the heart of his subjectivity; a being doomed to immanence could not realize himself in his acts.¹¹⁹

The Second Sex, with its literary value and its excellent ironic tone resulting from profound anthropological, philosophical and historical research is still a work that holds its presence for Colombian feminists. Beauvoir was a novelist, an artist who knew how to transform the material of her work, the text. Thus she was able to approach the theme that she needed to investigate: what is a woman. Is she an abstraction? Where is Woman situated? What is her place? Her questions linger and make more women reaffirm their position in their world:

It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold. "Where are the women?" asked a short-lived magazine recently. But first, what is a woman?" . . . Certainly woman like man is a human being; but such situated.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 684.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 754.

The idea of *situation* was a key concept for existentialism during the time Sartre and Beauvoir developed their relationship as thinkers and partners. This concept implies that there is a place where a subject is situated, and this place precedes its existence, therefore predetermining much of what s/he does. These existentialist philosophers believed there was no essence that preceded existence. Existence is always a situated process. Within this context, Beauvoir decided to look at the fact of women's existence as she was able to directly observe or read about the topic in various literary and philosophical texts. This chapter looked at artists that begin at home, as the philosopher did: looking at the culture that surrounded her, inferring about other cultural practices. The artists reviewed here situate themselves at their home as a place to start an investigative practice for another way of being. If women can see beyond the walls that enclose them in a home full of projections, they can act and actions that change things are political.

Raisa Galofre clearly mocks the essential qualities of femaleness she was taught at home an intimate gesture fraught political intentions. By taking control of her own image, one she undoes while exposing the failure behind essential femininity and converting this failure into fortitude. In this way Raisa transcends home borders. As she poses an otherness for the mirror, she is aware of the many others she is addressing. Awareness of otherness stems from a very familiar place, a home. Clara is building rooms of her own while looking for the metaphorical spaces created by boxes where she attempts to reconcile inherited images of femininity with her present situation as a woman in an everyday search for meaning. Encased,

boxed projections of femininity are buildings within a building. They are made-up spaces for breathing within a culture she both enjoys and questions. Tiny possibilities of meaning arise from her imagination and meaningless objects allow her to flee from known places, while building others that she can call home, if only temporarily. In the meantime, it does not hurt to laugh about herself and other women like her, while exposing, very demurely, personal and definite political views.

Even though much has changed, images of women and essentialist views on femininity have not changed much even in 21st Colombian society's everydayness. Nevertheless, younger generations of Colombian female artists are following the roads paved by the courage of artists like Debora Arango who transcended the destiny of remaining within the moral codes of Colombia of the beginning of the 20th Century dictated. Female artists are using creative discourses that help them see other possibilities for becoming and understanding what it means to be a woman, beyond the projections. Honoring the connection of the personal and the political is a vital ethical value for a Colombian woman aware of her place in the world as a creator of meaning. Starting from home is beginning a way to a new road, a key that opens the door to new possibilities of being.

INTERLUDE 2: PIEDAD

As a little girl I was fascinated by words. My mother taught me with little drawings on cards. I had a rebellious adolescence; I felt repressed by masculine prejudices, restricted by a religious education. The way to channel this energy was by developing my intellectual side. I knew I was not a beauty, and my narcissism needed some escape. Writing was the most visceral of escapes. Intimacy needed a territory to call my own, and literature became the saving element.

My first poem started like this: "I was born a woman in a place of closed doors..." Then I started to deliberately undo the femininity imposed on me by my family and educators. A rebel, I wanted to be like a man--no makeup, no frivolities, just an intellectual to be taken seriously. In order to send poetry to be reviewed in contests or publications, I would use a male name. I was at the same time completely conscious of being a woman, with a poetic voice that belongs to a woman.

My novels always touch on subjects that interest me as a woman, but I am no militant. I hate ghettos, and I do not consider it interesting to enter into gender issues when writing. I write from a place of disinterest. Masculinity, as the Other, is a subject that is interesting to me, but I do not see my writing as guided by gender identity.

One could say I am a late bloomer; I credit my fears, my insecurity and the need to work and raise a family. But I did need to assemble a room of my own, one where all the fears, phantasms, and uncertainties could cohabit with me.

The cultural world assigned to me proved to be too narrow; I needed a refuge from which to construct a new world, one that I could then share with others. However, I do not believe in “confessional literature.” I still expect to also talk about others, and my craft is about finding an audience who wants to hear this voice that so needs to communicate.

My first book, *De Círculo y Ceniza* (1989), was published almost without my awareness. The university where I work, after I won a poetry contest, published it. When I saw it as a book in published form, I realized I was really a writer, and then I could envision writing as my trade.

I had been trained to be a professor. I was a professor, wife, and mother who used writing as a refuge. I crafted a minute version of paradise that happened after hours. Then I passionately wrote my next book, *Nadie en Casa* (1994). That was also published because a friend showed it to a friend who had another friend who was a publisher.

After this second published book I realized I needed to dedicate more time to just writing and wrote the third, with which I won a National Poetry Prize. This one, *El Hilo de los Días*, was published in 1994.

Paradoxically, my fourth book is about the body, it is my most “feminine” one. *Ese Animal Triste* (1996) is about maternity, desire, conception, menstruation, babies, written from and with the only body that I know.

I realize that I am diving, searching, using artistic creation in order to know myself, to stay connected with themes that spring from my own experience but that reach other people.

In one of my novels, *El Prestigio de la Belleza* (2010, figure 42), for example, what is of interest to me also attracts many others: the intensity of beauty as a value attached to women in our country. The interest stems from my own need to understand my feelings when I was growing up. It is also about the others who can identify with its seriousness and its humor.

In this novel I am eminently in feminine territory, but I do not think of gender as a problem to be tackled with my writing, even though when writing I am totally aware of the problematic nature of gender. This is why many of the feminists in this country do not like me. They think I do not write about certain issues, but I think they have not read me. I write as a woman who has been encountering her own voice, and in this finding there is an un-doing that happens as well.



Figure 42. Cover of Piedad Bonnett's, *El Prestigio de la Belleza* [The prestige of beauty] (Bogotá: Alfaguara, 2010), <http://www.alfaguara.com/es/libro/el-prestigio-de-la-belleza-1/>.

As I write, I undermine the false foundation I was given when growing up. This is a very long, difficult process since assumed truths have to be debunked painfully. Literature has allowed me that, to write my own way, a way of transformation. And so I follow every new way that appears, and I undo many things, including a very well-built suit of armor.

Life is about dis-arming, and time is always reminding us that we did not truly understand before, and that there is always much more ahead to be understood. We build and undo certitudes day by day. This action, in my case, is writing.

I can recognize my self in my writings as always the same and also as always different. There is a self that continues, and there is another one that is in constant mutation. This is what is interesting about art: you are never still.

One of the things I dread is to stay identical to my own self. This is why I am not into stylistic proliferation. Look at García Marquez and his magical realism or Botero, always keeping the round figures. They are stuck in the same pattern, trying to always go back to that place they inaugurated. If you do not know how to undo, you will not change.



Figure 43. Cover of Piedad Bonnett's, *Lo que no tiene nombre* [That which has no name], cover art by Daniel Seguro Bonnett (Bogotá: Alfaguara, 2013), photo retrieved from Hector Abad Faciolince (blog}, March 20,

Interlude 2 Note



Figure 44. Screen shot of Piedad Bonnet during fieldwork in Bogotá in January 2012.

The narrative above is a construction from videotaped conversations with Piedad Bonnet (Bogotá 1951), which took place during fieldwork in 2012, in her Bogotá apartment. She is considered the most important female writer in Colombia. Her work spans poetry, novel and essay. The power her words have acquired, in a sense, asks other women to keep writing and not to accept obscurity. But as she herself relates, sometimes it is not about will but about taking the chances that appear and letting them flow with a large dose of tenacity. Her latest book, *Lo Que No Tiene Nombre* (That which has no name), published in 2013, has become a non-fiction best seller. It is a wrenching account of her son's mental illness, which resulted in suicide. The news of his flight to death from the rooftop of the building where he was living as an art student in New York City came exactly the same day as the announcement that she had won the prestigious Casa de América Prize of

American Poetry from Spain for 2011.¹²¹ As a woman writer, Bonnett has achieved recognition beyond Colombian borders. As a mother, her pain brought her to the worst depths of a despair that she transformed, beautifully.

¹²¹ "Piedad Bonnett ganadora del XI Premio Casa de América de Poesía Americana" [Piedad Bonnett winner of the Eleventh Casa de America Prize for American poetry], *La Estafeta del Viento* [Post office of the wind], January 24, 2012, <http://www.laestafetadelviento.es/actualidad/noticias/piedad-bonnett-ganadora-del-xi-premio-casa-de-america-de-poesia-americana>.

CHAPTER 3: CONSTRUCTING

In Colombia there is a historic fight for land ownership, which is an important aspect of the confrontation among classes that fueled the current situation, one that has been part of daily life since the 1950s. Since the 19th century, that is, since the constitution of the Colombian Republic, the most important conflicts have been fought around territorial property. Peasants and owners of large estates have been at the center of constant struggles present in all the civil wars that have ravaged the country.¹²² There is a tendency for landowners to amass large portions of productive land for cattle pasture, and in contemporary times, to develop industries like palm oil and mining that produce destitution and displacement via many factors disguised under military, paramilitary, drug trafficking and guerilla interventions on towns whose inhabitants then flee and abandon whatever they have.

Diverse attempts of agrarian reforms have failed to modernize the country and in the last fifteen years the concentration of land in the hands of a few has increased due to the activities of all sorts of illegal bands of criminals, narcos (drug traffickers), mafias and paramilitary groups. This is not new for Colombians; it is a repetition of the past, as in the first decades of the 20th century it was a common practice to expel farmers from their territories using illegal bands of so called

¹²² Santiago Perry Rubio. "Las Luchas Campesinas en Colombia" [Peasant struggles in Colombia], in *El agro y la cuestión social* [Agriculture and the social question], ed. Katherine Legrand (Bogotá: Ministerio de Agricultura. T.M editores, 1994), 230.

“pájaros” (birds).¹²³ The last sixty years have produced a humanitarian crisis of huge consequences, one that is being tackled via government programs that are designed well but that are difficult to put into practice, since the cultural and social problems associated with the causes of the displacement are still intact. In September 2010 an editorial of one of the major national newspapers in the country states that 52% of the land is in the hands of the 1.15% of the population. Colombia is one of the most un-equal countries in the hemisphere in land distribution:

News from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), to be officially released tomorrow, reveals not-so-nice statistics: 52% of the land is in the hands of 1.15% of the total population. This statistic exposes a reality known to the majority, but much more terrible in concrete numbers: the GINI coefficient (the one most accepted by researchers to measure inequality) reaches 0.85 on a scale of 0 to 1, thus converting Colombia into one of the most unequal countries in this hemisphere.”¹²⁴

I contend in this chapter that a woman who tries to speak, about femininity as a space to be possessed, explored, reviewed and redefined via her artistic practice is doing important political work to end this inequality. This artistic work is paralleled in social movements all over the country, where women are reclaiming

¹²³ The Colombian imaginary is immersed in these episodes. In 1983 *Les Condors Ne Meurent Pas Tous Les Jours* [Condors do not die every day], a film directed by Francisco Norden based on the novel *Cóndores no Entierran Todos los Días*, published in 1972 by Gustavo Alvares Gardeazabal, relates exactly the situation the country has lived through since 1949.

¹²⁴ “La Tenencia de la Tierra, el Eterno Problema” [Tenancy of the land, the eternal problem], *El Espectador*, September 26, 2011; my translation, <http://www.elespectador.com/opinion/editorial/tenencia-de-tierra-el-eterno-problema-articulo-302060>.

their right to land and to creating safe places for their families and their productive lives. In February 2014, in Cartagena, The Commission for Truth and Memory¹²⁵ presented the document entitled *The Women's Truth* publicly.¹²⁶ This publication is about the possibility for the construction of peace in the country, when the voices of the many women affected by the sixty-year-old internal conflict can be heard via their narratives. Their narratives are about unimaginable violent acts against their bodies, their land, and their families. They all have something in common: they lost their homes. The *Women's Truth* and the commission are part of the work of *La Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres*, a feminist movement that works towards making women visible within the context of Colombia's internal conflict. The purpose is to contribute to the construction of a feasible peace process where truth, reparation and reconstruction of memory are duly taken into account.¹²⁷ The idea of constructing peace in Colombia is currently linked to finding a way home for all of the displaced, and women are at the core of this process.

Women like Beatriz Camargo are constructing a feminine space for their work. I contend her artistic work equates to what the women in *La Ruta Pacífica* and others like them, are constructing. She has created a space to study, cultivate,

¹²⁵ "La Verdad de las Mujeres Víctimas del Conflicto Armado en Colombia" [The truth about women victims of the armed conflict in Colombia], Asociacion Santa Rita Para la Educacion y Promocion, last modified February 20, 2014, http://www.funsarep.org.co/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1392907406&archive=&start_from=&ucat=16&.

¹²⁶ Comisión de Verdad y Memoria de Mujeres Colombianas [Commission of truth and memory of Colombian women], *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* [Peaceful route of women], retrieved May 15, 2014, <http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/descargas/comisionverdad/memoriaparavida.pdf>

¹²⁷ Ibid., Executive Summary, retrieved May 15, 2014, <http://www.rutapacifica.org.co/descargas/comisionverdad/resumenejecutivo.pdf>.

educate and compose original dance-theatre pieces. She built *La Maloca* in the early 1980s; it is still at present a place of investigation, a source of creation and a space for performance. *La Maloca* is a structure that Beatriz has built and maintained for the past thirty years in order to feel a sense of belonging. It is also a place she owns, which she deemed a much-needed feminine space for creating theatre pieces with a community that dwells and experiments in a sort of sacred space that has become a metaphorical matrix.¹²⁸ The artistic investment in a territory that has been maintained for decades as a place to eat, sleep, generate and perform speaks of a profound necessity to procure a place for the feminine, in a plane not of exclusion but of *metramorphosis*, as Bracha Ettinger proposes: “The metramorphosis is a co-affectivity and co-activity on the level of a borderline that opens between subjects and between subject and object.”¹²⁹ This chapter looks at the possibility an artist has to shape such a space where the feminine is included and possibly becomes that borderline that opens, a space from which to start new ways of being. This chapter also opens a space, in which Maria Teresa Hincapié comes to mind, one of the first recognized performance artists in Colombia. She was also looking for a sacred, feminine space to work in, one she definitely created, evident in her legacy.

¹²⁸ Matriz in Spanish=uterus

¹²⁹ Roy Boyne. “Uterine Self-understanding and the Indispensable Other: Editorial Reflections on the Work of Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 3.

María Teresa's Trace

María Teresa Hincapié (Armenia 1956- Bogotá 2008) was a pioneer of performance art in Colombia. She was aware of the need to expand the space that she occupied by living art through her own body in such a way that it became difficult to extricate her everydayness from her art practice. She was born in the middle of the 20th century, one year before the right to vote was made effective in the first election in which women participated as subjects in Colombia. She was also born at the time that the fight for land was to become more acute. Just a child, she was probably absorbing the images of women her culture provided: certainly motherland, homeland, patria. One of these images is represented in an iconic painting of a ravaged, pregnant woman. In 1962, Alejandro Obregón (1920-1922) painted the swollen dead body of a woman depicting the violence that has not ceased in a country marked by what the title, given by the artist, announces: *Violence* (figure 45). In the painting one can see that Woman is equated with the land and the nation of Colombia. Her sacredness is desecrated daily. Her body suffers all the horrible wounds of a violence that does not seem to cease. She is the land that keeps growing in pain.



Figure 45. *Violencia*, Alejandro Obregón. Image retrieved on December 20, 2013 from “Biblioteca Luis Angel Arango,” Cultural Activity of the Bank of the Republic, <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/textos-sobre-la-coleccion-de-arte-del-banco-de-la-republica/alejandro-obregon/violencia>.

María Teresa Hincapié, after working in theatre, decided to walk a different path. She wanted to walk the land, to place her feet where so many people were suffering displacement. In 1995 Maria Teresa walked the distance between Bogotá and San Agustín, an important archeological site in Huila in the southern region of Colombia, for almost a month.. This was a long duration performance entitled *Divina Proporción*. The title references the Golden Ratio, that irrational number that repeats itself endlessly. It constitutes a wink to the sacredness of the repetition of walking, step by step, as though in a mystical journey to the land of Colombia’s past, as it was before the Spanish Conquest. San Agustín was a necropolis, a sacred place for pre-Columbian people of the region. In the same year as the performance, Unesco declared the site of San Agustin a Patrimony of Humanity. As she walked, María Teresa encountered passersby who became occasional spectators of her

performance. In her pilgrimage she lived on little food and slept where she found shelter. It was the mystical journey of an urban woman who was trying to connect to the spiritual life of her ancestors with her body. At the time she did this walk, it was dangerous for a female body to cross the territories already marked by the diverse actors of violence: paramilitary and guerrilla.

Daring to expose herself in a gender biased country where any woman alone is seen as prey, she just walked and walked. Her goal was to reach San Agustín, which allowed a multiplicity of metaphors to come alive. It was about the thin line between life and death, the blurred borders of life and art, the crossing of imaginary borders within a supposedly unified nation, the precariousness of a second-sex body that is always a surface for violence and finally the strength of her will, the will of a woman. Therefore it is quite poignant that after two decades of her “pilgrimages to the sacred” or “urban pilgrimages,” as she called these walking performances, one can view archival images of Hincapié on various internet pages and contrast them to a very recent newspaper article stating that Colombia was the country with the most landmine victims in the year 2013 (see note for figure 47). The simplicity of her walking actions is still a reminder of the complicated consequences everyday citizens, mostly rural and military people, have to endure all of their lives in a country ravaged by a violence that is rooted in access to territory (figures 46 and 47).



Figure 46. Photograph of Maria Teresa Hincapie's feet performing *Divina Proporción*. Sol Astrid Giraldo E., "María Teresa Hincapié (2): La Mujer, los Pies, el Espacio" [Maria Teresa Hincapie (2): The woman, the feet, the space], Ciudad de las Mujeres (City of Women), Retrieved on July 2013 from: <http://ciudaddelasmujeres.blogspot.com/2013/01/maria-teresa-hincapie-2-la-mujer-los.html>.



Figure 47. Photograph of a soldier recuperating from landmine wounds. Retrieved on January 2014 from: "Colombia Fue el País con Más Víctimas de Minas Antipersonales en 2013" [Colombia was the country with the most victims of anti-personal mines in 2013], *El Heraldo*, April 3, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.co/nacional/colombia-fue-el-pais-con-mas-victimas-de-minas-antipersonal-en-2013-148145>.

This work, called *Caminar es Sagrado* (Walking is sacred), seems to have given her the initial impulse to do more research on pre-Columbian spirituality. In her later years, before she died of cancer, she had moved to the Sierra Nevada, an enclave of one of the indigenous peoples who still reside in the now foreign land that used to be their ancestral place. There she built her home and started to develop new work. In 1990 she created a piece called *Una cosa es una cosa* (*A thing is a thing*), with which she entered the Colombian art scene in force when she won first prize at the National Salon. In this performance piece María Teresa constructed a sacred feminine space by a long ritualized performance piece where her body simply and methodically transferred everyday home objects to a public space, such as a gallery or a museum. In a gesture that lasted up to twelve hours, the artist's body painstakingly performed a demarcation of a territory that became inviolable for the observer.

While performing *Hincapié* looks at each object, caresses it, walks with it and places it according to some sort of momentary logic. The ritualized time erases our observing gazes, our presence. She is creating a new territory, one linked to the very old one where the roots of the national territory have also been erased, lost from memory. As her body, now buried, becomes undistinguished materiality, the territory that she so wished to recuperate, shines with a new purpose, a new imagined light. This light is a purposeful political and spiritual action-gesture.

Hincapié was undoing the violated national image of woman-land by the use of her own body's movement. She was reinstating the personal space in a public

place, disrupting these borders that signal where life really happens: everywhere. Thus, she was constructing with her actions a possible land where women's feet could walk fearlessly.

In her own words, Hincapié situates everydayness in the sphere of the possible. Those invisible things that we manipulate every day, those that we do not pay attention to, become all-important in her performance, thus regaining the sacredness of the moment simply by paying attention to them, each one in its own particularity. Inscribing regular everyday objects in the public sphere via a rectangular spiral on the floor of each particular space designated for the performance piece, she turns her gaze that searches for infinity into a reminder that the quotidian is a territory of sacredness and that all aspects of our lives deserve respect:

My life is constructed by objects, these with which one sleeps, eats, material things...there is great beauty in each object and each one is a universe...each one is and as such, it deserves respect....¹³⁰

Maria Teresa's work was one of continuous experimentation with the construction of woman as a natural category shaped in everydayness. In 1989 she had staged *Vitrina* (*Window display*) in a commercial street in Bogotá, where she worked for the same eight hours required of laborers by law. She stayed in a

¹³⁰ El Vicio Producciones, "Performance: Lo que puede un cuerpo" [Performance: What a body can], June 3, 2012, fragment of an interview with the artist, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8JLGjCHy4Y>. My translation: "Mi vida la construyen los objetos, con los que uno duerme, se alimenta, las cosas materiales...Hay una cosa muy hermosa con cada objeto y cada uno es un universo...cada uno es y merece respeto ..."

durational performance, within the small window display, for everyone to see how the body of a woman is stereotyped as she went about the business of everydayness: putting on make-up, sweeping, clearing the window, writing questions on it, washing her body with detergent and smearing it on the window, leaving kiss marks, and many more gestures. In 1992 Hincapié created a piece called *Esta Tierra Es Mi Cuerpo* (This land is my body). In Spanish, *tierra* and territory have the same etymological roots. Tierra is not only dirt and soil; it is also the land. Here she is directly quoting the cultural assumption that Colombia is a woman's body. But she reclaims it within the realm of domesticity and an anonymous simplicity. In 1996 she again won first prize at the National Salon with *Divina Proporción* (Golden ratio). For this performance piece, Hincapié stayed for days within an industrial complex inserting small plants in between the floor plan. She only walked around the place and watered the plants, creating a personal-impersonal garden that spoke of sacredness in nature and in human construction.

One could say, based on Ranciere, that a political action is antagonist, as it disrupts with many actions that re-represent and redefine a space, thus changing the destination of that space, allowing us to listen to particular sounds of a discourse that before sounded like mere noise.¹³¹ The noise is the distraction; we do not hear the sounds. It is a paradox that needs a reminder. Noise prevents us from understanding what territory really is: a demarcation by consensus that is replete with dissent. And that is where bodies end up in a war. The feminine space, linked to

¹³¹ Jacques Ranciere, *El Desacuerdo: Política y Filosofía* [Disagreement: politics and philosophy] (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1996).

intimacy, to immanence has lost the battle too many times and it needs to be re-inscribed within the public discourse. This is why María Teresa Hincapié sought to put her own body back. That body which is forgotten in phallogocentric visions of progress is her body, the body of a woman. Yes, she is nature and nurture, Hincapié seems to be saying, but she is also sacred, something forgotten within the noise of a discourse that erases dissent.

Interstice 3: Eurydice Stays on the Brink of Space

Who is this other who decided I am the absolute Other? Does it matter? Why should that matter to me? Yes, I am subjected to limbo, but this dwelling will become the source of my desire. To rise consciously is one of the desires. Why does anyone have the power to kill me with a look? Where is submission accepted? Not in limbo where everything is still possible. Brimming I choose to stay at the border, voice rising through the crack, permitting space to become pregnant with vibrations. Action is the movement through the passageway. This is my land. I need to look back, not look at his back.

Beatriz's Territory



Figure 48. Photograph of *La Maloca* provided by Camargo during fieldwork. Villa de Leyva, January 2011.

Sitting at the *Maloca* (figure 48), Beatriz Camargo, born in 1946 in Bogotá, tells a story of being so influenced by her readings of Virginia Woolf a few decades ago that she decided she was going to build a place of her own. She did not know how, when or what kind, but she knew she had to leave the work she had been doing as an actor at the La Candelaria Theatre for five years and find her own way.¹³² With humor she relates how, while walking in the street after a performance, a boy looked at her and asked, “Are you a boy or a girl?” She took this question as a wake-up call: she was so good at playing male roles for the theatre group that she was becoming something she realized was not really her calling. She later asked permission to leave and began her own quest. Santiago García, the now

¹³² Personal interview. Villa de Leyva, Boyacá, Colombia. January 2012.

legendary man at *La Candelaria Theatre Collective*, told her, “You can go, but make sure you are good at what you do next.” This marks the beginning of the story of her journey to create her own space and her own theatre group. *Teatro Itinerante del Sol* celebrated thirty years of investigative and innovative labor in 2012 (figure 49). It has been a labor of love that has produced an impressive number of completely original works as well as a particular methodology for creating performance pieces.

Beatriz studied philology and literature at the National University of Colombia, where she formed a reading club. Later she taught in schools and decided to study at the newly founded National School of Dramatic Art. Being a married woman with a little daughter was becoming a bit suffocating, so she studied theatre, becoming a teacher in dramatic arts as well as an actor. She worked with the main players of the field in Colombia in the early seventies, when a very interesting political theater movement developed and flourished. By the time she left *La Candelaria*, the iconic theatre group, it was 1982. With her ex-student and lover Bernardo Rey she founded the *Teatro Itinerante del Sol* in order to start looking for a new way to create dramatic pieces. In 1984, with a grant from the French Government, she left to study at the École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris. Next came a period of contacts with many theatrical practitioners: Ludwic Flaszen, Japanese master Shiro Daimon, Roy Hart and Molik from Wroclav Lab Theatre. She spent two and a half months in Bali, learning about Balinese dances,

and then lived and worked in Dusseldorf, Germany, where she created a piece of theatre called "EVA-IO" and travelled with the Odin Teatret in Denmark.



Figure 49. Photograph of the invitation to the celebration sent by Camargo via email in October 2012.

All of this experience led to a return to Colombia, where she searched for a piece of land where she could live away from the metropolis, Bogotá, to isolate herself and her vision from other methodologies. Creating a method for the development of dramatic art pieces ran parallel to the re-forestation of the land which now houses *La Maloca*. It is a habitat for theatrical practices where people from all over the world come to do residencies and where many species of native trees, birds and wild animals have taken residence at the same time. This place, a room for her artistic practices, has become a cultural center that is consistently supported by grants from the Ministry of Culture of Colombia. *The Maloca* is the epicenter of what now has become a sort of natural reserve and has veered Camargo towards an ecological centered work that goes beyond theatre. Lately the

methodology she has developed, called *Biodrama*, has become *Biodharma*, and her latest project after thirty years of theatrical work is called *The Ark for Biodiverse Memory*.

Beatriz Camargo sees *La Maloca* as a botanic garden offered to humanity, a protected ark for experimentation, research, recreation and documentation of the diversity of cultural Colombian and World memory. Almost seventy years old, Beatriz she is a recognized master of theatre in Colombia. Her contribution to the arts is as unique as the space that she has constructed. This is how Beatriz Camargo describes her dramatic space and how she got there: ¹³³

It could not be a black box, with reflecting lights... I wanted to talk about something else... I wanted to look profoundly into my ancestors, the precolumbianas...I found this place in Boyacá, completely connected to Iguaque, the primordial lake from where the Muisca culture said that the Goddess of water emerged with her own son to populate the valley...I decided to play homage to the lakes of the Muisca mythology....so I studied the Kogi malocas (because the Kogi people are from the same branch as the Muisca). They are round spaces, opened at the top of the roof. So I devised my own space combining information from other mythologies and created a feminine space: round space with a smaller circle in the center, a miniture lagoon that can be covered with a plank or filled with water depending on the needs of the moment. There are twelve columns sustaining the celing, each

¹³³ Personal interview, Boyacá, Colombia, January, 2012.

dedicated to a Goddess according to an astrological Tarot version I like.

There is a thirteenth element that I see as a column: this is a cosmic column, a ray of light that enters from the sky – the sacred yang phallus – to impregnate the maloca which is a uterus, through the small lagoon in the center of the space. There is a door towards the east where one can see the Iguaque Mountain, and there are the windows to the West where one can see the Valley of Zocanzipá where the Muisca had their astrological observatory. I see this maloca as a bridge between these two points: the sacred lake and the phallic observatory.¹³⁴

Beatriz Camargo has created a matrixial space for her life long project. From this space all of her pieces have sprung as research stories that combine a diverse cultural heritage that tries to encompass not only the Colombian but also the Latin American cultural memory as an exercise in re-positioning. Her creative dramaturgical material is taken from a multiplicity of themes that inspire her: the origins of Greek tragedy, the Dionysian cults, pre-Columbian initiation practices, masks, gods and goddesses from many cosmologies of the indigenous American peoples; stories of the Spanish conquest and colonialisms, Latin-American

¹³⁴ For further information on the Muisca peoples and the region Camargo is referring to, see: “Colombia: The Chibcha Culture - Forgotten, But Still Alive,” Galdu: Resource Center for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. November 30, 2007, <http://www.galdu.org/web/index.php?odas=2400&giella1=eng>, also more specifically about the phallic observatory, “El Infernito,” Pueblos Originarios, n.d., <http://pueblosoriginarios.com/sur/caribe/muisca/infiernito.html>.

independence narratives, quixotic¹³⁵ endeavors and literary canonic pieces. In a sense, Beatriz has created a room of her own, a space where the fluid borders of her imagination can be contained. *La Maloca* is a space where anything can happen because it is seen as a fertility space where energies combine to create new energy. Camargo's methodology is a long sustained spiritual search that gives fruition every time a new performance piece arises.

With this move to create a concrete territory that she constructs while allowing artistic shapes to form, Beatriz, born a decade before women first became practical subjects in Colombia through the action of voting, is taking action towards the formation of a subjectivity that can look back in order to regain power and look forward in hopes of creating new forms of relationships that can rearrange, the same way land is rearranged, patriarchal modes of relating to others and to life.

Bracha L. Ettinger describes this rearrangement in *The Matrixial Borderspace*:

From a phallic angle, *The Woman-Other-Thing* that carries the vanishing gaze is an archaic point of support for *the object*, which, at the backside of the subject, must be erased. What meaningful construction may we propose in order to conceptualize the idea that from a matrixial angle this very Woman-Other-Thing is becoming a borderspace of support for *the subject*?¹³⁶

¹³⁵ In the work by Miguel de Unamuno, quixotesque (pertaining to *El Quijote*) is seen as a philosophy of life that envelops a way to religiosity, a form of logic, an ethical approach, a kind of metaphysical madness. See his *Tragic Sense of Life* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

¹³⁶ Bracha L. Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 50.1.

Ettinger sees the action of an-other gaze as all-important in the formation of subjectivity. This is the gaze that the woman as other can offer and actually needs in order to construct a place from which to work creatively. In this sense I see Beatriz Camargo contesting the male-dominated world of Colombian theatre as a territory to conquer through other ways of creating original pieces, where backward glances can give clues to forward actions. For Camargo life is not different from art. Her way of doing drama is intimately weaved into quotidian life. Quotidian life, when giving a backward glance, is linked by Camargo, as in Hincapié, to the rituals that may help a return of the sacred, and this center is the image of a woman's body. Even though she has created a "Center" where people arrive in order to create pieces, as Ettinger thinks, this place is a non-place at the same time. *La Maloca* is a metaphor that is concrete as a place to dwell and to labor in. However, it is also a metramorphic¹³⁷ form of consciousness, one without center, moving constantly in the margins. Camargo lives there, but the piece of land where it sits is on the border of the capital of Colombia, where most of the cultural activity that seems relevant happens. Her work, and those pieces that develop in that space of *La Maloca*, are also never in the mainstream of visible artistic activity, and it has definitely never been a commodity.

She directs actors in a peculiar way that entails immersion in everyday activities that honor the earth and direct contact with the elements in the Valley of Tunja as if on a cosmic journey. The actors who come to work with her do

¹³⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger, "Metramorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace," in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. John Welchman (London: Macmillan, 1996), 125-126.

everything together during their residence as part of the creative work: waking up, eating, walking and laboring by the land, thinking and writing about their dreams, finding proposals to bring to the dramaturgy of the piece being investigated, improvising, talking, sleeping. One of her students and collaborators has written a published interview honoring Camargo. In it he explains how recently she wants to be called Cántara Abasenzuca. With this name, she is also re-constructing her self within a matrixial space that used to belong exclusively to the indigenous peoples those who had all the now almost-forgotten rituals that were a reminder that nature is the source from which all knowledge springs:

Her vision of theatre is quite different from all the “consecrated masters;” she just wants to be called Cántara and lives in her humble home with her dogs...the sixty or more species of trees...silent and in waiting at *La Maloca*, the creative center that she calls “the cunt of knowledge.” What knowledge? The knowledge of theatre with capital T...that is Biodrama....a celebration of life that integrates all the arts to find a place for the ontology of nature, a place that performs a creative pedagogic exploration and experimentation into memory as simultaneous past present and future... Biodrama is the act of being nature...a territory called culture.”¹³⁸

By building *La Maloca* and constructing a method for theatre around this center, Cántara (Beatriz) has created a territory: a complex web of land, animals, people, dramatic actions, a creative method, and also just simply life, adding some

¹³⁸ My translation of fragments from an unpublished essay provided by the artist.

imagined cosmic knowledge. She has expanded the room of her own to a mythical place for humanity where ancient knowledge can give way to very contemporary issues. In the pieces created at *La Maloca* and through *Biodrama*, there is always a return to corn, for this plant is part of the origin mythical story of the Mayan and Aztec people of Central America. Her matrixial place, without her knowledge, is a paradigm of what Ettinger calls the matrixial gaze: a vision that transgresses borders, that has no interior or exterior, a space for new subjectivities to appear, take shape and transform. This seems to be a natural course for Camargo's construction as a Colombian woman who saw, while entering her adult productive years, a radical transformation in Colombian society. This transformation came with modernity, the female vote, and female education, while always anchored to the need to understand her circumstances beyond occidental paradigms. Cántara's change of name, to one that signals an ancient vessel for corn, points to the construction of a subjectivity that does not need to be fixed, one that is porous and organic. As Gloria Anzaldúa saw it, Cántara is looking deep into the culture she comes from in order to find a space where she can be comfortable and create:

Indigenous like corn, like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn-- a female seed-bearing organ--the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. "¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103.

The piece *Flor de Amate-Cun* (*The Amate-Cun flower*) was created by Cántara in 1997, inspired by the book *Men of Maize* written by Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner Miguel Angel Asturias. In it she writes the story of a blind man who pursues an image of his perfect woman, never realizing his own wife is that woman. This wife is a metaphor of the forgotten “real woman.” She follows him from fair to fair, from town to town, until she is finally able to cure him of his blindness. She has true knowledge; she is a healer, a wise woman, the primeval woman. But he only recognizes her at the moment of his death (figures 50 and 51). The various pilgrimages that the man pursues are the excuses for the apparition of a diversity of characters that enter and leave the stage in a constant doubling, not only of the actors but of a time and space that do not follow a linear line. The fluid borders of Camargo’s work as a dramaturge, actress and director have the intention of relating to other stories in order to construct stories of the others, to break away from what she sees as patriarchal ways of making theatre.



Figure 50. Photograph of a performance of *La Flor de Amate-cun* provided by Camargo during fieldwork in January, 2012.



Figure 51. Photograph of a performance of *La Flor de Amate-cun* provided by Camargo during fieldwork in January 2012.

Figure 52 illustrates another piece, *Solo Como de un Sueño de Pronto nos Levantamos* (*Only as if from a dream we suddenly wake up*) (2008), in which two characters who talk all night while preparing corn tortillas are the excuse for the text to unravel into a mythical ever-present narrative full of implausible characters who come to the fore. Guadalupe (Space) and Don Lucio (Time) keep each other

awake by telling stories about their lives and events they have witnessed. As if in a dream, they recount sagas out of Mexican history, literature and myth. Onto the stage enter Quetzalcoatl, Cuauhtémoc, Cortés and characters from Juan Rulfo's short stories. This piece was created through a grant given by the Ministry of Culture and the National Fund for Culture and the Arts of Mexico. Carefully investigated, this theatre work presents the culture shock between the ancient pre Columbian cultures and the Conquistadors.

As Space (Guadalupe, a woman) and Time (Lucio, a man) prepare corn meal and drink corn liquor inside a temple consecrated to invocation by song, a diversity of characters incarnate. The play replays the fecundity of sex, the union of yin and yang that Camargo has imagined at the Maloca. The sacred and the profane, the metaphysical and the material coexist. Logical dramatic lines are eschewed, as Time and Space become humans, and gods, and other humans, and fictional characters, and historical characters. All sorts of places are invoked by sound, mask, costume, smell and language. Life doubles and redoubles itself in constant, fluid apparitions. But Camargo's intentions go beyond apparent spiritual statements about a loss. She is not mourning the lost indigenous civilizations. Within the remembrance that is like a dream awaiting the right time to re-emerge lies a question for the future: Will transgenic alteration of corn seeds destroy present day cultures? Dress, gesture, color, rhythm and design are all references to anthropologically visions of the peoples of the Americas before the Conquest. Again Anzaldúa offers clarification of Camargo's dramaturgy in these pieces where she explores stories from America's

indigenous peoples: “She communicates the rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. . . . Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a *nahual*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person.”¹⁴⁰



Figure 52. Photograph of the performance of *Solo como de un sueño* [As if from a dream] provided by the Camargo during fieldwork in January 2012.

Cántara’s work is not about a simple identification in order to glorify the past. The mestiza is quite aware of all the races in her. Her gaze is not umbilical, turned inwards as a woman or as part of a continent that was de-sacralized. Camargo is not re-sacralizing, she is questioning her audience as she questions herself and the actors that work with her. Through careful dramatic labyrinths the signal is sent: indigenous beliefs and ways of being have been lying in waiting under masks of submission and corn, corn being an ancient metaphor for the bones of the people of the land that was taken, ravaged, colonized, torn apart. This land is in

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 104-5.

danger of a new, more potent colonization, thinks Camargo. Her fears now have to do with how corn has been under siege by international corporations that are changing it genetically. What can happen if the hidden bones of the corn-people disappear completely? She sees a metaphorical genocide in the way corn is being genetically modified.

In Camargo's work, earth is equated with life instead of death. Corn, origin, territory keep mutating in dramatic pieces that are spaces from where to embrace what is lost in the land of abjection: woman-the other- earth- death-womb. There is an incessant re-creating of dwelling spaces for the lost stories that Hispano-America has forgotten during the construction of the various nation states. Time and Space envelop one another as in shamanistic traditions of the different indigenous cultures encompassing the Americas. They envelop the stories that Biodrama-Biodharma workshops create in a border crossing that makes no excuses for romanticizing the past. *Teatro Itinerante del Sol* seems to purposely romanticize the past, but what they are doing in the pieces that result from the Biodrama, now Biodharma method, is to speak about the present--a present state that is, precisely, a result of not being able to look back, to know about these stories that had been erased by the Conquistadors, stories that are thus told anew.

Going back to the "original" beliefs, even by idealizing them, is an effort to make visible the darkness that has misplaced ideals of tri-ethnicities used in official discourses. In fact, one can understand her work as a form of the same type of work that feminists later rebuked as that of "essentialists" in "the first world" during the

1970s and 80s. If we can understand this look into the past that can be seen as an ideal romanticized in postmodern theory, as a way to reclaim the power for those who can re-present their stories, we can see the value of such practices in the arts as valuable political statements. The Indians and the blacks continue to be second rate citizens in most of the “developing world,” and it is development that, for Camargo, needs to be addressed by listening to the voices of the under-privileged: their wisdom could possibly be of great use in this era of technology. She does not take indigenous myths lightly. She is using them to pursue a political statement that must emerge from a subjectivity that reclaims its past instead of erasing it. As Klein writes,

The essentialism of feminist spirituality was one that was progressively employed to challenge equally essentialist, patriarchal assumptions regarding acceptable roles for women. What is more, the writers and artists who were interested in feminine spirituality make it clear that their “essentialism” was fabricated from the tools at hand in order to challenge the social inequities that confronted them at every turn. These writers and artists were well aware that their worldview was one that they needed to invent and they had a lot of fun doing it.¹⁴¹

Beatriz Camargo is reinventing herself while she also reinvents a mythology she deems necessary for her time. This is a time that needs her, that needs her dramaturgy, her skills as a performer and a director. She is a teacher, a wise woman

¹⁴¹ Jennie Klein, “Goddess: Feminist Arts,” 592.

whose bones are also from corn, maize, *tierra*. In the piece *Nierika* (figure 53), created in 1997, a Huichol¹⁴² ritual provides spiritual visions, constructing a journey to another realm where dreams and ancestral memory are held. In this realm a sage woman has access to the land of knowledge, beauty and magic. Bodies, earth, music, masks, food, fabrics, seeds and baskets are all elements that remind the observers of Cántara's staged contemporary rituals. There is something that was lost irrecoverably but that can be imagined and thus not materialized but sustained on another plane of existence: the imagination. Then, imagination is also about shaping new identities, about crossing borders, erasing limits and finding new words and gestures that can bring restitution. Restitution is about loss and coping through fighting metaphoric battles, not about trying to get back what is no longer there.



Figure 53. Photograph of Beatriz Camargo during a performance of *Nierika*, provided by the artist on January 2012.

¹⁴² For more about Huichol spirituality: "Nierika," Wixarika Research Center, retrieved April 17, 2014, <http://wixarika.mediapark.net/en/assets/pdf/Nierika.pdf>.

Law 1448, is the Law of Victims and Land Restitution created in Title IV of Chapter II. It is a legal procedure for victims of forced displacement to seek recourse for restitution created in 2011 by the Colombian government.¹⁴³ Even though this has been a slow process, some progress has been achieved despite constant threats to destitute populations and selective murders of leaders.¹⁴⁴ It is a constant fight that leaves many bodies in the way, many of those the bodies of women.¹⁴⁵ It is precisely women who have had a hard time gaining access to restitution, even though under the law they have not only rights equal to those of men under Law 1448, but also a supposed preferential status as single heads of family. In June 2013 Hoyos' article about the status of restitution of land for displaced women states that there is, at the practical level, a huge inequality in restitution for these women:

While in June of this year the Victims' Unit had almost six million cases, 2,950,546 involving men and 2,976,806 involving women, only 45,825 people have applied to join the registry of Land Restitution; only 17,736 of those cases involve women. That is to say, while the participation of men and women in the Victims Union is almost 50-50, in the Union for Land

¹⁴³ Restitución de tierras, retrieved April, 2013, <http://restituciondetierras.gov.co/?action=article&id=4>.

¹⁴⁴ "Reina impunidad en asesinatos de líderes de tierras" [Reina impunity in murders of leaders in land [restitution]], *Semana*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/reina-impunidad-asesinatos-lideres-tierras/256131-3>.

¹⁴⁵ "Hay poca tierra devuelta y muchos muertos': líderes de restitución" [Restitution leaders: Little land returned and many dead], Medellín Editorial Desk, *El Tiempo*, February 4, 2014, http://www.eltiempo.com/colombia/medellin/ARTICULO-WEB-NEW_NOTA_INTERIOR-13449643.html.

Restitution, women represent only 35% of the applications. . . . In the sentences handed down by the judges specializing in land restitution, the situation is similar. In September of this year, the Union for Land Restitution passed down 137 sentences involving 536 people, and of this total, 480 cases have turned out favorably for the victims, including only 161 sentences in favor of women.¹⁴⁶

Hoyos also discusses the reasons for this failure of access to restitution: long bureaucratic processes, fear of presenting the claim, lack of time and money, plus the difficulty of knowing the exact details of their rights. Cultural reasons have a bigger influence on the participation of women in political matters such as land restitution: they do not perceive themselves as subjects with rights. Most of these destitute women, whose husbands were most probably killed in the conflict, do not know the meaning of terms such as possession, property or land occupation. Traditionally land has been in the hands of men due to a strong division in gender roles. After the traumatic events that displaced them, these women do not even wish to go back to the same places or even face the authorities that they do not trust to be on their side. On the opposite side, many government bureaucrats lack trust, doubting that women would be able to administer land and farms.

However, women in Colombia have always shared this same matrix, the land.

As such, history can be re-told, re-appropriated, re-incarnated by the past in order

¹⁴⁶ Maria Paula Hoyos, "Así va la restitución de tierras para las mujeres" [So goes land reform for women], *La Silla Vacía* [The empty chair] (blog), December 19, 2013, <http://lasillavacia.com/content/asi-va-la-restitucion-de-tierras-para-las-mujeres-46339>; my translation follows.

to present the future to come with its diversity of possibilities. Feminist associations, usually led by educated women, are helping less fortunate displaced women, who have usually had less access to education, to reclaim and rebuild, starting by the simple act of telling their stories. Cántara/Camargo is reclaiming the space of the feminine through art. She believes that through her doing, the memory of a time when perhaps women were not destitute can heal present day fears and let courage express itself. For Ettinger, a theorist and artist, art can say something about that impossibility to understand the feminine, because it can be linked to maternity. Maternity is not this body that lies like ravaged land, it is not just a feminine place for impregnation and then delivery, but a direct, materially-based way to question absolute otherness. Thinking of maternity as a place of “trans-connectedness” and thus woman as the body that allows this never ending intra-inter-subjectivity, speaks of continuity and gives art a privileged place to start reconstructing:

Art in my view can bring forth something as the art aesthetics also addresses the beyond of being...Art as both a transport-station of trauma and as a potential pregnant time-space for transformation is relevant to ethics as it meets it in the least expected sphere.¹⁴⁷

Thus, art can trans-*port* and inter-relate as Beatriz does, new stories that seek an entrance to other ways of seeing, to ways of seeing that which probably belongs to a

¹⁴⁷ Bracha Ettinger, “Rethinking Subject through Theology, Psychoanalysis and Levinas,” European Graduate School, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlSxiM_69l8&feature=youtu.be_gdata_player.

lost, unrecoverable world. These stories, invented by the need to rebuild identities that, like land, home and family, were lost for ever can come alive and be re-lived, with words, music, and movement on a new stage.

Another way Camargo trans-ports and inter-relates is by appropriating canonic literary texts. She re appropriates their stories in such a way that they then allow for an entrance into a lost world. In this way they become like an encounter instead of a clash. Clashing is not necessary if stories that are common to these cultures are recognized as such. Yet, the clash can be encountered in the present, with the danger of losing the right to indigenous crops as global corporations grab the local production of goods. In the theatre piece from 2008, *Solo como de un sueño de pronto nos levantamos (Only as if from a dream we suddenly awaken)* the sixth sun of Aztec mythology is announced and with this new sun, a new breed of the people of corn will be born. They will be dedicated to the arts, to taking care of the land and to bring peace to the world (figure 54). With this sun, the heralding of a new era is performed through peoples of the past whose visions she borrows. New human beings that live harmonious peaceful lives are finally able to appear, saved by the threads of the dramatic story. Thus, the bones of humanity (corn) are able to return to their original state. In *Voces de la Tierra (Voices of Earth)* (2010),¹⁴⁸ the structure of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* is used to recount the story of Colombian Independence and the love story of Simón Bolívar and Manuelita Saenz, all against a

¹⁴⁸ The video "Voces de la Tierra: XIII FitB" contains a clip promoting the presentation of this piece during the XIII Festival Iberoamericano de Bogotá, posted February 16, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z70TV-MQCc0>.

background-backdrop of paintings by Guayasamín, a principal Ecuadorian artist.

In this work, Occidental canonic text meets mythic Colombian love story attached to ideas of nationhood inside a womb of colors from Ecuadorian iconic major painter.



Figure 54. Photograph of the performance of *Solo como de un sueño...* [As if from dream...] provided by the artist during fieldwork in January 2012.

Taking liberties with canonical texts in literature and history, Camargo places Bolívar in three circles, where he encounters first his conscience, then the people in his life and finally, in the third circle, his lover Manuelita Saenz, who guides him to a love realm. As in *Nierika* and most of her works, it is the woman who is the guide, mentor and the possessor of knowledge. In Camargo's dream-drama, one that crosses spaces, times, characters, texts and three decades of re-petitions appear. Thus she is doubling the appropriations she executes, looking twice at other texts

and stories that have guided a common cultural American heritage in order to extrapolate them and put them to her own use. As in many of her plays, love is the final answer, and it is linked to nature, to animals, to ancestors, to women. Manuelita Saenz, a woman defamed in her time, a married revolutionary woman, did not have an easy life as the lover of Simón Bolívar, who named Manuelita “the liberator of the liberator”¹⁴⁹ (figure 55).



Figure 55. Photograph of a performance of *Voces de la Tierra* provided by Camargo in January 2012 during fieldwork.

In 2006 the *Biodrama* workshops yielded *El Testigo o el Libro de los Prodigios* (The witness or the book of prodigies) (Figure 56). It is a piece based on a long poem by Juan de Castellanos who was a poet and chronicler born in Spain in 1552 and who died by 1607 precisely in Tunja, where *Teatro Itinerante del Sol* operates. His literary work is an extensive poetic chronicle of historic expeditions and events

¹⁴⁹ “Manuela Saenz, ‘The liberator of the liberator’ at the Bolivarian Hall,” Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, November 18, 2011, <http://venezuela-us.org/2011/11/18/manuela-saenz-the-liberator-of-the-liberator-at-the-bolivarian-hall/>.

he or others witnessed. Here the dramaturgy of Camargo exposes the vertigo of two cosmo-visions placed in contact by a violent intrusion of an other- the witness, part of the Spanish conquering delegations, Juan de Castellanos- who in turn is seeing the indigenous peoples he encounters, as the others. The reversal in the text of the chronicler is ironic because his desire is part of the conquest syndrome that infantilized and feminized the indigenous American peoples in a way that persists more than five centuries later.

A woman theatre director like Camargo in a patriarchal country seems to be asking not only herself but also the “fathers of la patria” if the aboriginal gaze we encounter today is somehow similar to the one the Spaniards had. Who are the witnesses in the present and how or in what manner do we witness the realm of the feminine, the absolute, and immanent other? *Cántara* brings to the sacred ground of the present moment a theatre of other times, other wars, and other spaces. Absent, phantasmal, they become a location for a memory that is completed by imagination. Her writing happens as the drama is being constructed by bodies of actors who improvise not on theatrical grounds but on concrete everyday ground. *Cántara*’s plays are published after they have been performed. The process seems to end in constant experimentation that is as incessant as the doubling of the characters in each production. Masks tend to repeat their presence in new plays. The subjects and the characters reappear as if in mythological nightmares that need to be pacified now as staged dreams.

Nierika, for example, is a play that had a previous incarnation entitled *Muysua*. Speaking about how she keeps doubling and redoubling in order to construct and reconstruct, Camargo says, “This play is very flexible...I can do it alone or with plenty of other people, mainly dancers. In its present incarnation I am changing its name to *Hycha-Va*, a Chibcha¹⁵⁰ phoneme that means *Who am I*.”¹⁵¹ This “who am I” seems to mirror the question “What is a woman;” however, her *I* is ambitious; it is encompassing not only her own but multiple subjectivities that enter into question and formation; it is questioning her country, her people. These people are the present day others situated in Colombia. Among them, the many women who could be asking themselves the same question in displacement and anguish: who am I, where do I belong, what is my territory, my land and what happened to everything I had constructed? These questions come implied when your ravaged body, that body that can be, as Ettineger has said, a metaphor for metramorphosis, for encounters, discovers that her children are gone.

¹⁵⁰ Aboriginal language of a tribe in what is now the land of Colombia. For more about this important culture, refer to “Chibcha,” <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/110298/Chibcha>.

¹⁵¹ Personal interview via Skype. June, 2013.



Figure 56. Photograph of a performance of *Testigo* provided by Camargo.

Donde Están Mis Hijos (Where are my children) (1999) is the title of a piece that immediately links these many women and men in numerous places on the planet who are asking the same question as violence and wars destroy their land and families. Doing, taking action through an artistic practice that spans over thirty years, like theatre, is a way of keeping alive what cannot be regained. A memory for the future of the continent is concomitant with a memory that will not allow more disappearances of sons who are desecrated by a war that uses them as “false-positives”¹⁵² or as pawns for negotiation from all sides of the Colombian conflict that has spanned six decades. Beatriz Camargo’s nightmares are not imaginary. They have been happening in front of her eyes and ears since she was born. But present day themes are part of a continuous line of happenings. It is not about

¹⁵² Further reading: “Colombian Soldiers Convicted in ‘False Positives’ Case,” *Latin American Herald Tribune*, March 31, 2012, <http://laht.com/article.asp?CategoryId=12393&ArticleId=485990>.

looking at the past. It is more about making possible a re-visualizing of a past that continues violently in the present. It is almost like invoking new incarnations that could, like avatars, help diversify present day Colombian subjectivities capable of changing their condemned future, the same one that Gabriel García Marquez sentenced through the famous last line in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a line that all Colombians seem to know by heart: "...because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth."¹⁵³

During the Spanish Conquest there were sacred bones of corn scattered across land and water. During independence from colonialism there were the scattered bones of creoles. Now there are bones of many sons buried under stones of silence of a never-ending violence. Cántara insists on stepping on ancient-present stones while speaking about how we are all the sons and daughters of maize, equally nature, in a space of the four elements of water, air, fire and earth. She wants to bring into a present moment the audience-inhabitants of a continent now called America, hoping that they can see themselves as an embodied memory of ancestors. This is not as simple as it sounds: a body that remembers its lineage can encounter ways of resistance that have been silenced for centuries under oppression. These bodies must allow their otherness to reincarnate in ways needed for the future to become something different than what it seems destined to be. If Cántara wants to sing and use her own voice for a dramaturgy that seems to recover myth, she is doing so in hopes of proposing that another more "feminine" way of looking at living

¹⁵³ Gabriel García Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa. (New York: Harper, 1991), 422.

is needed for a return to a more harmonious coexistence between humans, other animals and the planet.

Camargo wants her artistic work to respond to the question: Who am I in a fluid possibility of subjectivities that do not stay indefinitely in sacred land when practicing recognition of lost memories? As such, it is a de-centered, non-logical *I* that is part of other *Is* connected by a common absence encountered in "...a mask from the infra-world... and from this world, woman whose memory is reborn, as the sacred bones of maize..."¹⁵⁴ If Beatriz Camargo's dramatic rituals seem very similar to one another, it is because she is in continuous *differance*.¹⁵⁵ Her imagined world keeps enveloping the previous and the next one in an unending defiance of western ideas of theatre and logic that at the same maintains its own logical process as a bridge between past, present and future. Let us remember the three re-incarnations of a piece that was initially full of the pain of "the Conquest" first performed in 1991, with the name *Muysua* as a homage to the Muisca people of the now Andean Colombian region of South America.¹⁵⁶ It is a piece that later became *Nierika* in 2007, signaling a spiritual quest that paid homage to the Huichol people of Central America, and that now she is naming again as *Muysua*, with the intention of making it a celebration ritual, a festive piece that keeps asking "who am I": *Quien soy yo*. It is a question she poses to everyone who is intent on standing somewhere on the

¹⁵⁴ Personal interview with Camargo via Skype, June, 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Borrowing Derrida's concept. See: Peggy Kamuf, ed. *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

¹⁵⁶ "Meet the Muisca, the Urban indigenous people of Bogotá," BBC News, Latin America and Colombia, January 24, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-21062727>.

surface of invisibility with the capacity of vision and re-vision. As such, this is one of Camargo's ways to answer:¹⁵⁷

Soy alada serpiente y vengo de la estrella. Soy la mujer espacio. De los cuatro rumbos, vengo. Del junto y del lejos, vengo. Vengo del más acá y del más allá, del arriba y del abajo. Y aquí, en el justo medio, donde el sueño es posible, a ofrendar mi corazón vengo.

I am winged and I come from the stars. I am the woman space. From the four ways I come. From near and far I come. I come from the nearer and the farther, from above and below. And here, just in the middle, where dreams are possible, to offer my heart, I come.¹⁵⁸

Beatriz Camargo, now in her older years, frequently using her new self-assigned name Cántara, has been trying for decades to look at the world from the possibility of a feminine gaze, starting by recreating stories of beginnings. In the photograph below, she is receiving a medal in a ceremony planned by the Ministry of Culture to honor her dedication to the performing arts.

¹⁵⁷ Beatriz Camargo, *Nierika* in *Teatro Itinerante del Sol: Treinta Años*. Colección Grandes del Teatro Colombiano (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2012), 193.

¹⁵⁸ My translation.



Figure 57. Looking at Beatriz Camargo is Mariana Garcés, the Minister of Culture of Colombia during a ceremony honoring the artists. Bogotá, May 2014. Photograph provided by Juan Lopez Otero.

Conclusion

The notion of a feminine sacred space exists among many indigenous cultures of the Americas, a space that is never fully determined and never fully accomplished. It is an unknowable territory that is not yet what it is, nor what it can be. It is a place to explore-walk-build in order to find more possibilities of being. One example is the *matria* of Mapuche indigenous people of Chile, who consider their dwelling to be mother earth. At present they are using this notion in order to declare that vindication of rights, justice, equality and respect start at home, a home that they equate with a *matria* that plays against a *patria*, a word that is a reference to fatherhood.¹⁵⁹ Women artists like Beatriz Camargo and Maria Teresa Hincapié

¹⁵⁹ Llanca Marin, La Matria Mapuche y el patriarcado occidental, <http://rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=7005>.

return to these ancient notions in order to explore possibilities for constructing subjectivity creatively, in ways that do not fix, nor essentialize. I believe with Klein that it is unjust to say that art that intends to rescue a space of the feminine, whatever that maybe, is useless or worse, a form of essentialism.¹⁶⁰ Many contemporary Colombian female artists have interrogated their relationships to land, to territory, to space, knowing their gendered bodies have been related to it in so many ways. They have chosen to research the fertile connotations within the notion of a feminine space, but they also know that in order to go beyond essentialist notions of womanhood, those same notions need to be deconstructed or used as material to construct other things.

Through a borderless imagination that creates new ways of myth making, Beatriz Camargo has recovered a lost world without intending to recreate it, in the sense of believing there is an original or essential one. In a sense Camargo has been trying to re-establish a feminine path and method for creativity that starts by building a space that, like a matrix, can contain and allow the birthing of new subjectivities. Actively creating a matrixial gaze,¹⁶¹ a past is renamed in the name of the present day challenges to contemporary civilization. Camargo's body, her voice, her ideas, mediated by other bodies, artifacts, lights, sounds, costumes and masks, transform the return to the gods and goddesses of indigenous American cultures into a voice of reason against destructive technologies that threatens their future.

¹⁶⁰ Jennie Klein, "Goddess: Feminist Art and Spirituality in the 1970s," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 3 (2009): 575-602.

¹⁶¹ Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace*.

She constructs a world mediated by imagination, by shamanic artifacts, not by a technology like genetic modification, that destroys crops. Her pieces are profoundly ethical; she is able to go back to the trauma of disappearance and dispossession and move towards hope for a future that holds a tiny space in a tiny town in a single country within a continent that was sacked. Thus, reaping the fruits of intense theatrical labor is a harvest that parallels the land she reclaimed, as she says, “converting this desert into a forest.” This realm of the feminine that she searches for and works within makes immanence powerful. It acknowledges its power to generate and uses it.

Maria Teresa Hincapié was another inhabitant of this feminine sacred realm who extended her feet and legs and arms in order to extend the power of this sacred feminine space, in this case by encompassing the whole of the Colombian territory through her performances on streets, highways, homes, museums and shopping malls. Everything she touched in performance was ritualized, made sacred, as a way to reconnect the bleak everydayness of her contemporary world to the utopian world she envisioned. Her powerful imagination aimed at a reconstruction of a utopian space that could envelop the people of her country, a Colombia that could heal and go beyond violence.

Each of these artists is a subject “...ex-centric with his/her conscious self-- because of the importance of structures such as unconscious desires, the impact of historical circumstances and the social conditions of production.”¹⁶² As Braidoti

¹⁶² Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 149.

suggests, they consciously de-center the vision of a culture that is the result of a mix of other cultures that met under violent circumstances (indigenous peoples, African slaves and white Spanish conquerors). Beatriz Camargo labors to create a territory and a space where she can live as an artist who does not cease to research and create stories that take into account Colombia's diversity in cultural heritage. Her aim is both architectural and theatrical: it begins from a womb-like place that is built from scratch, in order to look into the past that will allow future generations to think about their future. It follows with the gift of giving space for others to create original dramatic pieces that constantly look back in order to push the borders of time, space and memory.

Camargo and Hincapié are retaking the space of the feminine in a matrixial work that reclaims a material place where trans-connecting is not only possible but also necessary in order to construct an ethics of transformation, one the nation needs desperately. While Beatriz's matrixial space still shifts and bounces and slithers, María Teresa's sacred walks and rearrangements of intimate spaces are now a guiding star for new generations of performing artists. They are both shape shifters, *chamanas* that reclaimed, reshaped, constructed and keep performing new ways of being.

INTERLUDE 3: MONICA

When I finished school I told my father I was going to study art. His fist thundered on the table as he said, "In this house there will be no hippies!" Later he asked again, and I said I was going to be a journalist. His fist hit the table again as he said, "In this house there will be no martyrs!" So I entered an architecture program, then went into graphic design and created my own work designing ceramic tiles.

Meanwhile I was writing and reading, a lot. I was basically exploring life, learning about mountaineering, becoming a marathon runner, learning about ecology and astronomy. A few years ago everything started to pull together. I wrote a children's book called Laila. It means night, in Hebrew.

I belong to a family of Sephardic Jews who come from Egypt. This book was illustrated with a collaborator. Half a dozen publishers have rejected Laila, but I have read it in special gatherings, schools, festivals, and summer camps.

I dress as the Night (Laila) and throw little stars to the children as I tell the story of how the night went away because people forgot about her. The night is sad and one day decides to leave with her black cape into infinite space. Many things happen on earth, in people's dreams, and children need to find out how to recuperate her because time started to dissipate.

Even though it is very recently that I have been able to erupt into the art world in a more stable manner, for me life is about creating, not separate from art. For my children I write songs. As I climb I also write songs for the mountains.

My daughter Isabella does not even know of these seven books I have done about her life. They are hidden, waiting for the moment when I will give them to her. My son Ilan also has his life-books. They will save them from psychoanalysis; they will not have to talk to anyone in order to uncover the ghosts from their childhood.

For another one of my sons, who is not really mine, I wrote a book called *Viajes Paralelos* (Parallel Journeys)¹⁶³. It is about two stories that unfold in parallel: two journeys that have only these things in common: a fateful date, a chapter and myself (figure 58).

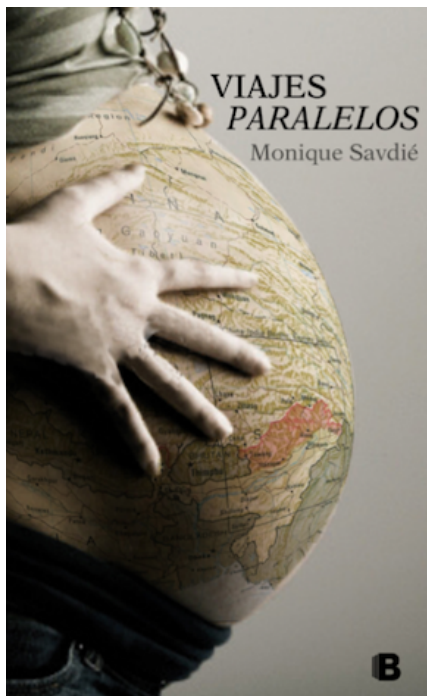


Figure 58. Cover of the book *Parallel Journeys* retrieved from Savdié's webpage, accessed on July 3, 2014, <http://www.monicasavdie.com/>.

¹⁶³ Recently published (2013) by Editorial B in Barcelona.

In this book I pay homage to Julio Cortázar and his book 62: Modelo para Armar (62: A Model Kit).¹⁶⁴ My book has 63 chapters. In chapter 62 I have the reader intervene the book, separate the two parallel stories and reshuffle them into a spiral of time where the chapters complement each other.

The game is in the index. Two stories that have something in common: the day I was able to enter the Tibetan region, something very difficult for a woman travelling alone, and the day my brother's and sister-in-law's embryo was implanted in my uterus to carry to full term.

The book joins the work I did as a reporter for the newspaper *El Tiempo* about the national expedition to Mount Everest in 1999, with the journey that started in my belly on a day marked by my magical intuition as a success because the procedure was done on May 18, 1997.

In Judaist numerology five is luck and eighteen is life; therefore I knew everything was going to work. On May 18, 1999, aided by a group of military men from England, I was finally able to see the Cho Oyu Mountain. I was fertilized and was given a gift for the gift of love I had given.

My brother offered me a trip anywhere I wanted. The gift I chose for myself was to travel to the Himalayas and after a lot of difficulties I finally arrived to see the summit on the same day-date: May 18!

¹⁶⁴ For further reading on Cortázar's book, see the Kirkus review, <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/julio-cortazar-3/62-a-model-kit/>.

This is why I believe firmly that life has everything to do with art. In chapter 61, called “Landscapes,” there are instructions to separate the chapters, and I talk about the diversity of times: the one that is folded, the lineal time and the one that happens as a spiral. The reader must remake his or her own book in order to find new correspondences. It took me seven years to finish these two works.

I was also writing *La Partida* (The Match). This book (figure 59) was inspired by a poem written by Jorge Luis Borges, where a player is a prisoner of black nights and white days. It is the story of a kidnapping narrated through a chess game. In 47 paragraphs I narrate the true story of Dani, my son’s father. They are the 47 movements of the classic game called la Siempreviva (Evergreen), like that plant that never dies.

The book has a black page that faces a white page, and each happening leading to Dan’s freedom is a movement in the game. During his time imprisoned by the FARC, he found a way to pass the time: he carved all of the pieces of a chessboard.



Figure 59. The author posing with her unfolded book: Savdie, Monica, *La Partida*, (Bogotá: Icono Editorial, 2011). Promotional photograph provided by the artist during fieldwork in February 2012.

The commander who watched him, once he saw he had finished all of the pieces, challenged him to a game. The book is an object that one can open and unfold in order to reread the short chapters and imagine new ways to develop the story.

While I was working on both of the previous book projects, before *La Partida* (The Match), I was developing a project called *Examen de Visión 20/20* (Vision Exam 20/20). This work gathers twenty witness statements regarding the armed conflict in Colombia (figure 60). I use their testimonies in order to design a text similar to an optical exam because we do not want to see these testimonies. Colombians are so used to them that they have become invisible.

Initially I took paramilitary massacres and arranged the texts of the witnesses taken from the article entitled “Colombia Looks for its Dead” published in

*El Tiempo*¹⁶⁵. I used red and green lines because in vision exams they measure issues of color blindness and astigmatism. I was using depictions of dismembered bodies that were found buried in common graves; therefore a red line is under a green line. There were thirteen testimonies.



Figure 60. Photograph of the exhibition of Savdie's piece *Examen de Vision* at the *Parque el Renacimiento*, next to the *Central Cemetery* in Bogotá, 2008. Retrieved ed from the artist's Facebook page on July 8, 2013.

I had to interrupt this process because people who saw it complained that I was only talking against the paramilitary. Then I felt the project needed a new turn. This happened when I was invited to exhibit the project with the theme of the effects of land mines, a common guerilla practice all over the national territory.

For this exhibition I used six texts and the lines are red over green because of the damage inflicted on bodies of people that are still on the surface, alive. There is

¹⁶⁵ Luz María Sierra, "Colombia busca a sus muertos" [Colombia searches for Its dead], *El Tiempo*, April 24, 2007, <http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/MAM-2466248>.

one testimony, which is the most recent one that talks about the false positives: that horrible reality we came to when we learned that the military forces abducted innocent youth to kill them and claim their bodies as trophies in the anti-guerilla war.¹⁶⁶

This one is in grey and black because the horrifying theme implied by this subject in Colombia is not yet completely disclosed. Optical exam charts always start with the letter E and I noticed most of the accounts started with the same letter. The ones that did not, I manipulated to create the charts where you have to read the descriptions aloud in order to understand them, thus forcing people to hear and see at the same time.



Figure 61. Photograph of one of the plaques of *Vision Exam 20/20*. Provided by the artist during fieldwork in Bogotá in February 2012.

¹⁶⁶ Michael Evans, "Body Count Mentalities: Colombia's 'False Positives' Scandal, Declassified," *Semana*, January 9, 2009, <http://www.semana.com/international/articulo/body-count-mentalities-colombias-false-positives-scandal-declassified/98935-3>.

Throughout this work that I have been able to do so far, I have realized that there is this need in me to narrate horror aesthetically. In life I always want to see what is beautiful next to what is horrible. My creativity was forced to the background for so long due to familial pressure. Art allowed this path to unfold, this one I chose not to follow in the past.

I was able to start letting it flow through the ceramic design and then by writing about mountain climbing and reporting on so much beauty in the Colombian landscapes. I would pack my bags and go to report on the beauty of a place where just a few days ago there had been horrifying news. I would narrate a walk, an ecological story about caves, even about “red zones” where one could find the most beautiful snowcaps.

After four years I realized I was lying to myself and decided to stop this travelling to counteract what was really happening and overwhelming us all. I did not want to see, most of us don't want to see, so let's have a vision exam performed.

Interlude 3 Note



Figure 62. Screen shot of Monica Savdie from videotaped ethnographic material; recorded in January 2012 in Bogotá.

The previous text is a narrative constructed from video taped conversations during fieldwork in Bogotá in 2012 with Monica Savdie (Bogotá 1963). She has developed a spiritual practice using her creativity in a very interdisciplinary way by simply following the need to communicate. She is an artist who has woven her own net out of everydayness. She wonders about her status as a Jewish woman in a Catholic country where the Church held power through the State until the 1991 Constitution, through an arduous self-education that seems to have no end. Her intricate art practices involve very intimate matters as well as overtly political statements. In order to create her own territory for her needed creativity to unfold, she has chosen to disrupt all familial modes of behavior and has put herself in the shoes of the others that suffer injustice. She is still figuring out to build the multiple spaces her journeys have shown her. Restless, she navigates motherhood and art in her native Bogotá.

CHAPTER 4: HEALING

Colombia, at present, is in a serious peace process that is very fragile as victims of all different factions of society are asked to face the perpetrators, forgive, accept retributions and move on. The Colombian situation is very complex because the country has been in a constant state of internal war for more than six decades; thus the continued turmoil has become normalized. This conflict involves many factions and actors. This chapter analyzes how art shows Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas a way to deal with trauma. Art can face trauma, either to allow it to give a new presence to the event that happened or to execute a double look that can free the artists for at least a few moments, despite awareness that life can continue being filled with new scars. Although trauma can be historical, political, familial and individual, in a country like Colombia all of these meanings are entangled and connected. In a sense, they are inescapable. All Colombians are implicated in one way or another.

It is very difficult to find in Colombia a person who has not been touched by the pain of losing a loved person, either by extra legal execution by paramilitary forces, by common delinquency, guerrilla attack or military abuse. It is also probable that kidnapping for ransom money in order to finance either guerrilla or paramilitary forces has happened to a Colombian family. If the family is that of peasants or belongs to the lower class, the kidnappings happen in order to take children and adolescents into the battlefields. During the most active times of the drug trafficking cartels, in the 1980s and 90s, bombs could explode anywhere;

civilian planes were brought down, politicians assassinated. Displacement by the thousands has been the consequence of massacres perpetrated by guerrilla and paramilitary forces. The disappearance of people has been a regular practice executed by all the factions of this conflict, including the State, a fact presented in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Healing is about overcoming in order to survive. It is not about forgetting or evading; it is about being able to face, look and work through. But “working through” is not as easy as it sounds. It may not be possible at all, at least, not as a process that leads to closure. Judith Butler asserts while analyzing *Eurydice*, the work of Bracha Ettinger:

There is a transmutation of trauma that is not the same as its full and knowing articulation. It is a rare event, nearly impossible. It is relived, repeated, as trauma, not precisely ‘worked through’ in the repetition, but nevertheless animated in a new way.¹⁶⁷

I argue that art making is not only an attempt to work through trauma, but also a way to retrace and repeat events in a manner that makes us think about them by being able to look through them, to look past them, towards what can come beyond that moment that tends to be fixed in memory. Traumatic memories remain as scars, imprinted in our bodies, even though the recollection of the events may be fragmented. It is a known therapeutic practice to work with a patient’s feelings or

¹⁶⁷ Judith Butler, “Bracha’s Eurydice,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 99.

sensations of his-her body in order to find a healing awareness of the events. In an essay about her psychiatric practice with PTSD patients, Allison Crawford explains:

The biological underpinnings of the traumatic stress response, with associated hormonal and neurochemical assaults on memory structures such as the hippocampus, prevent the development of coherent autobiographical memories of the traumatic event. The event is then recollected in a fragmented way as predominantly bodily or sensory 'memory.'¹⁶⁸

The body is fully implicated in the creation of works of art. An investigation on how trauma can be addressed is interesting due to the fact that the creation of new images and thus memories, beyond trauma, is healing; Vasquez art serves this purpose. Traumatic events stored as memories in the body can come forth in a different form, can have a healing presence as the event itself gains a new significance. The fragmented way that the event is recollected is expressed as another type of fragmentation, this time by a conscious manipulation of the materiality found in quotidian life. This process allows a second look that heals and does the mending without re-victimization. It plays with repetition and normal everydayness to access other ways in which to look at events that otherwise would be forgotten and lost.

This chapter looks at the artistic experimentation Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas has devised in order to address traumatic injuries. It is a chapter that

¹⁶⁸ Allison Crawford, "If 'The Body Keeps the Score': Mapping the Dissociated Body in Trauma Narrative, Intervention, and Theory," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (2010): 707.

holds hope for the future of Colombia even though there is a constant reminder of trauma in the news. One simple example is the recent story published in *El Herald* on October 8, 2014. Under the heading: “Expara (exparamilitary) kneels and begs his victims for forgiveness” we learn how this man who used to be in the paramilitary asked for forgiveness in a public event in a locality in Santa Marta, where a representative of the victims listened to him.¹⁶⁹ Acts like these can be seen as mere empty vessels of gestures, performed in order to find a deal with the justice system. Still, they are public and they denote an intention to heal. In the cited article there is a dangerous assumption. A quote by the chief of staff of the Advising Office for Peace of Cesar (a province of Colombia), reads: “ We hope that many of the wounds that existed among the families here will be healed after this act.”¹⁷⁰ I believe acts like these are useful and necessary, but the necessity remains to do serious work with individual victims and perpetrators.

In order to examine how contemporary female artists like Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas deal with trauma, in this chapter I will first give a brief account of the events that have led to the present state of affairs in Colombia, when President Juan Manuel Santos was recently re-elected by a slight majority that believes in the peace process he had started during his first term (August 2010-August 2014). The other half of the country is set on vengeance and non-tolerance for peace arrangements

¹⁶⁹ “Expara pide de rodillas perdón a sus víctimas” [Ex-Para asks forgiveness from his victims], *El Herald*, October 8, 2014, <http://m.elheraldo.co/judicial/expara-pide-de-rodillas-perdon-sus-victimas-169174>.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, my translation.

that will have perpetrators facing victims in everyday life.¹⁷¹ It is interesting to see how art works for someone that is surrounded by national and historical trauma at the same time that she deals with personal familial trauma.

It will also help to envision the Colombian conflict and the road ahead to encounter and honor a poet like María Mercedes Carranza, who died from an utterly broken heart, one consumed by the witnessing of too many injuries to her family and the whole country. Nothing, even poetry, helped her heal the wounds inflicted. Carranza was situated in a scene she could not escape. One could substitute Maria Mercedes name for Bracha's in the following sentence by Judith Butler: "Bracha has also taught us that trauma is not rationalized through beauty, it is not redeemed through beauty."¹⁷² Butler saw clearly what working through and with trauma does; there is "a field of appearance and of art, beyond foreclosure and redemption."¹⁷³ This chapter is not a prescription about trauma and artistic interventions. Instead, it gives a careful look into the work of one young artist: Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas. In her actions there is something to be learned about the process of working with trauma through artistic processes in a country in the middle of a peace process that is not easy.

Historical Context

Peace in Colombia is an ever-present wish that has eluded us up to the present time when peace negotiations are ongoing in Cuba with the main guerrilla

¹⁷¹ "Juan Manuel Santos: Chronology of Coverage," *New York Times*, June 20, 2014, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/s/juan_manuel_santos/index.html.

¹⁷² Butler, "Bracha's Eurydice," 99.

¹⁷³ Butler, "Bracha's Eurydice," 100.

faction, the FARC (Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia: the armed revolutionary forces of Colombia). Guerrilla organizations are the direct result of the violent political and economic processes that started in the 1940s, precisely as the country was becoming modernized. At the beginning of the 20th century Colombia had a population of almost four million. By mid century it had tripled due to the modernization of public health policies and education. In the 1940s the majority of the population (70%) lived in rural areas where the economic life of the country was taking place.

This equation starts to change in the 1960s as the urban areas that became the administrative centers of the economy began to grow. Slowly many farmers were being displaced by the increasing violence that followed the assassination of the popular leader and presidential candidate, Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, in 1948.¹⁷⁴ Politically marked, this infamous year was the beginning of what was called The National Front. This was a coalition of conservative and liberal leaders that alternated in governing the nation between 1957 and 1974 in an attempt to subdue the violence that had been ripping the country apart. The National Front was implemented to avoid a military dictatorship because Gustavo Rojas Pinilla was trying to remain in power. His was a military populist regime that had come to power in 1953 via a coup d'état in order to try to restore peace after the violence that erupted in 1948 when Gaitán was assassinated.

¹⁷⁴ Amparo Murillo Posada, "La Modernización y las Violencias (1930-1957)" [Modernization and acts of violence (1930-1957)], *Historia de Colombia: Todo Lo Que Hay Que Saber* [History of Colombia: Everything there is to know] (Bogotá: Colección Punto de lectura, Santillana, 2011), 265-310.

FARC, a Marxist-Leninist group, was formed in 1964 as the armed group of the communist party. In its relatively recent history, it was declared internationally as a terrorist group. They have terrorized all kinds of populations, but mainly farmers in rural areas when their actions became entangled with trafficking in drugs; Colombia's main export since the 1980s. Another important guerrilla faction had also been born in 1964, inspired by the Cuban revolution. This group, the ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional- National Liberation Army) is similar to a common movement in the Latin America of the sixties and seventies: Liberation Theology, a Christian-inspired political ideology.

One of the first attempts at peace with ELN happened when president Alfonso Lopez Michelsen (1974-1978) opened the possibility for them to enter a peace process, however they had also begun kidnapping and drug trafficking so negotiations thwarted. On April 7, 2014, the editorial on the ELN web page is illustrated with a photograph of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. It talks about the "same dilemma lived seven decades ago when three quarters of the population was dedicated to agricultural production,"¹⁷⁵ and it goes on to readers of all of the agrarian reforms that have failed to be implemented. Gaitan, a symbol of what was never allowed to happen, returns as the phantasm that never lets go.

Gaitan's daughter Gloria was only ten years old when her father was assassinated. Belonging to the later-created Gaitanista Movement, she was elected member of the House of Representatives of the Republic for the Risaralda

¹⁷⁵ "Gaitan Otra Vez" [Gaitan again], Voces del ELN, Comando Central, last modified April 7, 2014, <http://www.eln-voces.com/index.php/en/voces-del-eln/comando-central/864-gaitan-otra-vez>.

Department (a specific region) in the 1970s. In 1982 she was ambassador to Rumania and later became a presidential candidate. In the 2000s she decided to run for mayor in Bogotá and also begun a campaign to enter the congress both to no avail. In October 2012 Gloria Gaitan wrote an open letter to both President Juan Manuel Santos and the guerrilla commanders of FARC and ELN, asking to become aware of various points of possible real agreement, mainly regarding an amnesty for the guerrilla. In this letter she talked about the history of violence and guerrilla factions having started with the event of her father's assassination on April 9, 1948.

In order to understand a third important faction of guerilla warfare in Colombia, one must now mention that Rojas Pinilla returned to politics gradually after The National Front ousted him; he run for presidential elections again in 1970. On that election day, April 19, 1970, supporters of Rojas Pinilla decided their options were limited under a fraudulent democracy, since at the last moment the new president was announced as conservative party candidate Misael Pastrana Borrero after a very tight vote. Pinilla's supporters, a very young group of leftist intellectuals, formed a new guerrilla movement: Movement April 19 (M19). This movement gained a lot of attention. They ran a very active modern urban guerrilla that used impressive publicity stunts to attract public attention One example borders on performance art: they stole the famous sword that belonged to Simón Bolívar from the museum where it was held.¹⁷⁶ It was a symbolic gesture that

¹⁷⁶ "Gaitan Otra Vez," Voces del ELN.

captivated the people that Bolivar had “liberated” in battles that led to Independence.¹⁷⁷

M19 committed one last act that seems to have been financed by drug lord Pablo Escobar, in order to destroy all the archival papers bearing evidence against the criminal cartel. They took hold of the Palace of Justice in Bogotá on November 6, 1985. Thirty-five guerilla men and women asked for then-President Belisario Betancourt to be present to be judged. They held more than 350 people hostage, including simple laborers, magistrates and civilians who were in the building. Due to an overly forceful response by the military, a day later the Palace was destroyed. Ninety six people were killed, among them eleven high magistrates. This traumatic national event is still under investigation. It still horrifies the nation that many people who left the Palace alive never returned home. It is believed that many were tortured and disappeared by the military force later that same week. By 1990 a debilitated M-19 demobilized and became part of the democratic game. Their members have held many public office posts and have become part of the Congress. One of Colombia’s most recognized contemporary artists, Doris Salcedo, created an installation to commemorate this event on the walls of the newly renovated Palace of Justice (Figure 63). She was nearby and witnessed how the Palace burnt down.

¹⁷⁷ Christopher Minster, “Biography of Simon Bolivar,” Latin American History, about.com, last modified 2014, <http://latinamericanhistory.about.com/od/latinamericaindependence/a/simonbolivarbiography.htm>.

Every year Colombians remember this as a holocaust day.¹⁷⁸ The wounds have not healed.



Figure 63. ¹⁷⁹ Photograph of Doris Salcedo's public space sculpture *Las Sillas*. Retrieved from: "Doris Salcedo," New Acquisitions of the Bank of the Republic, Museos del Banco de la Republica, 2003 <http://www.banrepcultural.org/nuevas-adquisiciones/doris-salcedo>.

¹⁷⁸ "Doris Salcedo," New Acquisitions of the Bank of the Republic, Museos del Banco de la Republica, 2003 <http://www.banrepcultural.org/nuevas-adquisiciones/doris-salcedo>.

¹⁷⁹ "Doris Salcedo," ColArte, retrieved on April 19, 2014, <http://www.colarte.com/colarte/conspintores.asp?idartista=1438>.

Maria Mercedes' Pain

Maria Mercedes Carranza (Bogotá, 1945-2003) was born the daughter of one of Colombia's most recognized poets: Eduardo Carranza. In the 1980s she was in her prime as a poet, journalist and poetry promoter. She lived in privilege, both as an upper middle class woman and as an influential intellectual figure. As a child she lived in Spain, where her father was the Colombian cultural attaché during Franco's regime. Because of her father's position, her home was an intellectual and social hub. In time she became the most important advocate for poetry in Colombia. In 1986, when Belisario Betancur was president, and a close friend of Maria Mercedes Carranza, *Casa de Poesía Silva*, an institution dedicated solely to the promotion of Colombian poetry, was inaugurated in Bogotá. Betancur is the same president who faced the M19 assault on the Palace of Justice.

In 1991 Maria Mercedes was an integral part of the Constitutional Committee that created the new Constitution that rules Colombia at present. She was a representative of Movement April 19 in the proceedings. One year before, one of Carranza's main hopes, candidate Luis Carlos Galán, was assassinated in the middle of his presidential campaign. This charismatic leader, founder of the New Liberalism Party, beloved by the country, was gunned down. He was fighting against corruption and the drug cartels and was as far ahead in the polls when Pablo Escobar, the head of the drug cartels, ordered his assassination.

Maria Mercedes directed *Casa de Poesía Silva* until 2003, when she committed suicide. Her death sent shock waves throughout the country. José

Asunción Silva (1865-1896), the poet whose life the poetic institution honored, had committed suicide in the same house. A country used to violent deaths was nonetheless amazed at the poet's suicide. Her broken heart could not be healed by her own words. By the mid 1980s the armed conflict in Colombia had intensified, becoming more complicated as different guerrilla factions, the military, drug traffic lords and paramilitary groups positioned themselves in the public eye. Urban and civilian as well as the traditionally rural menaced population were involved in many acts of horror. Most members of the Patriotic Union (the political branch of the armed FARC guerrillas) were consistently eliminated. Living in such a country made Maria Mercedes all too fragile. She could not find peace when her family became direct targets of all of this violence; her brother had been kidnapped for months, and there was no hope of finding him alive.¹⁸⁰

Maria Mercedes Carranza lived right in the middle of Colombia's turmoil, which helps us understand her writing. Her poetry is direct and to the point. It broke free from previous poetic canons in Colombia. With few words she gives name to indescribable horror. Her collection *El canto de las moscas (Song of the flies)* was first published in 1997 in the poetry magazine of her friend Mario Rivero. This poetry collection names concrete massacres; it is dedicated to Luis Carlos Galán, the New Liberal Party leader who would have been president in 1990. Carranza was hit by all of these events so harshly that Daniel Samper Pizano, renowned columnist,

¹⁸⁰ Carranza killed herself on July 11, 2003. Her brother was presumed dead just a few months later: "Muerto: Carranza Coronado Ramiro Eduardo" [Dead: Carranza Coronado, Ramiro Eduardo], *Las voces del secuestro* [Voices of the imprisoned], last modified 2014, http://www.lasvocesdelsecuestro.com/protagonista_ficha.php?id=415.

repeated these words from the poet in his eulogy: “Ay, este país nos está matando (Oh, this country is killing us).”¹⁸¹

Contrary to her father’s style (called *pedracielismo*), her aim was to talk about everydayness without adornments. Her themes were urban, her words simple, and a profound skepticism underlined every poem that tended to avoid emotionalisms. In the following poem, published in 1979, she treats her pessimism with humor.

Upside Down with Life

I will die mortal,
that is having passed
through this world
without breaking or staining it.
I did not invent any vice,
but I enjoyed all kinds of virtues:
I rented my soul
to hypocrisy: I have trafficked
with words
with gestures, with silence;

¹⁸¹ Daniel Samper Pizano, “La despedida de Maria Mercedes Carranza” [Farewell to Maria Mercedes Carranza], Teatro Oficina Central de los Sueños [Central Office Theatre of Dreams] (blog), July 11, 2003, <http://teatrooficinacentral.blogspot.com/2012/05/la-despedida-de-maria-mercedes-carranza.html>.

I yielded to lies
I have yearned for hope
loved love,
and one day I even pronounced
the word Homeland;
I accepted deceit:
I have been mother, citizen,
daughter, friend,
companion, lover.
I believed in truth:
two and two are four,
Maria Mercedes must be born,
grow up, reproduce and die
And here I am.
I am an example of the 20th Century.
And when fear arrives
I go and watch television
in order to act in a dialogue
with my own lies.¹⁸²

¹⁸² Maria Mercedes Carranza, "Patás arriba con la vida" [Upside Down in Life], *Golpe de dados: Revista de poesía* [Throw of the dice: Poetry magazine] 7, no. 60 (1979): 67-8; my translation.

The poem is imbued with nihilism, yet hope faintly lingers. It is the voice of a woman who believes life is not precious anymore, a woman who has seen how easily it can be taken away. She does not want to be a heroine and makes fun of her passage through life. Her life is almost as inessential as a woman's subjectivity. The "deceit" lies in believing in citizenship, agency, feminine roles and homeland. By 1997 her somber voice becomes a prelude for the scene of her own death. Making a collection of massacres, she names eighteen of the places Colombia has collected as sites of horror for a traumatic memory in search of peace.

Ituango

The wind

laughs in the jaws

of the dead.

In Ituango,

the corpse of laughter.¹⁸³

Soacha

A black bird

sniffs

the shadows of life.

It could be God

¹⁸³ *Golpe de Dados: Revista de Poesía* [Throw of the dice: Poetry magazine], 25, no. 60 (1977): 117.

or the assassin:

all the same.¹⁸⁴

Her words are a hard blow. The rest of the country seems to be anesthetized. She tried too, and she perished in the process. No life of privilege, no political action, no artistic gesture was enough to save María Mercedes from pain.



Figure 64. ¹⁸⁵ Photo of Maria Mercedes Carranza retrieved on June 2014 from: <http://www.fundacionsantillana.org.co/display.php?accion=detalle&cat=&id=244&info=1>.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 120.

¹⁸⁵ Santillana Foundation, retrieved June, 2014, from <http://www.fundacionsantillana.org.co/display.php?accion=detalle&cat=&id=244&info=1>.

Margarita's Gaze

Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas (Bogotá, Colombia, 1978) is obsessed with taking second looks and visualizing new stories that arise in the middle of looking. Her interdisciplinary artistic practice is a way of facing traumatic experiences, from a very intimate perspective. It seems that the doing of art is an attempt to achieve some sense of identity that has to do with forms of consciousness in a country where women attained full citizenship through access to vote in the middle of the 20th Century. I believe this is an imperative practice for a woman with questions about too many contradictions between her life, her culture, her sense of self and the images she is supposed to uphold in the middle of the emptiness constant turmoil expects. Anzaldúa accurately portrayed artists like Margarita Vasquez when she stated:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. ... She has a plural personality, she operates in pluralistic mode...nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradiction, she turns the ambivalence into something else.¹⁸⁶

Two decades after that first female vote, Margarita was born. Not before, nor since has violence in the country subsided. Margarita's art may not be explicitly political, but I contend that any act that begins by trying to respond creatively to national traumatic experiences or intimate life experiences is an act of transformation that can affect the doer and others who come in touch with the work

¹⁸⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

of art. As such, art is an event, something that artist-theorist Bracha Ettinger has contemplated in her various writings:

The artist becomes responsible for an event she didn't produce, and by joining in and transforming it into an artistic working through, the original event of the other or the cosmos, which can be traumatic for the other or for a world, becomes a source of meaning and knowledge within a joint psychic sphere and for whoever can join this sphere immediately or later on.¹⁸⁷

Having been born in such a country where violent events are not under the artist's control becomes a valid form of construing subjectivity and thus having an agency on her world. To practice art making in such a way that psychic spheres, as Ettinger says, are co-joined is about doing something that helps an artist like Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas feel some sense of control. Many of the things she does, like going through a second master's degree in art administration, have been about this artistic working through that has the intention of touching others in an even more practical way. *Paramus* is an organization for the arts that she created with a partner in Colombia. Through this organization they create opportunities for other artists to develop and show their work.¹⁸⁸ This is a way to compensate for the opportunities that she feels are lacking -in general, not only for women- in order to be sponsored and supported in creative processes. *Paramus's* aim is to help people come near creative processes by having dialogues with working artists, thus erasing those virtual divisions between "normal life" and "artistic life." Vasquez says:

¹⁸⁷ Bracha L. Ettinger and Akseli Virtanen, "Art, Memory, Resistance," *Ephemera* 5, no. X (2005): 696.

¹⁸⁸ Paramus, last modified May, 2014, <http://www.eparamus.org/sitio/index.php>.

The idea is to work with others, with groups...I think working in collectives is very nourishing-here in Colombia we need spaces to create exchanges with other artists-this is something I started with my friend David Anaya, inspired by experiences I had with a collective whose vision I encountered in Cleveland, called Spurse¹⁸⁹-Our organization is a creative ecosystem where the objective is to activate an encounter between art and society, in the sense of allowing other people to perceive art as something very close to everyday life.¹⁹⁰

Here she evidences a concern for education and opportunities to educate others. This means that it is people like her, in the midst of artistic processes, who must open up spaces for others. Upon graduation from the art faculty at Los Andes University, Margarita started to wonder why is it that even though the majority of the art students at the University are women, later they disappear from the art scene? Are they not practicing their art anymore? Or are they invisible in the Colombian art scene, still dominated by patriarchal practices?¹⁹¹ How is it possible that a woman of the 21st century worries about education and professional life when by now education is an equal right in Colombia?

¹⁸⁹ Spurse, last modified May, 2014, <http://www.spurse.org>.

¹⁹⁰ Interview during fieldwork in Bogotá in April, 2012.

¹⁹¹ In March, 2013, *Time Magazine* devoted its central pages to Sheryl Sandberg's ideas on women and career success in North America. She is Facebook's CEO. Reading these pages can bring some interesting points to the question on women's perception of themselves when it comes to careers. These points are pertinent to this narrative for further inquiry but are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

See Belinda Luscombe, "Don't Hate Her Because She's Successful: Facebook's Sheryl Sandberg and Her Mission to Reboot Feminism," *Time*, March 18, 2013, 36-45.

Since colonial times women in Colombia have participated in the political life of the country, but they are not considered as equals until well into the first half of the 20th century. This also means that access to education and civil rights was limited and limiting. Culturally, the division of spheres in everyday activity between males and females has been marked by gender differentiation. In actuality, these practices are yet to be shadows that disappear completely. Social and economic mobility was almost impossible until the time women in Colombia were able to vote. Before that, men represented women: fathers and later husbands under whose complete tutelage she lived. A young artist like Margarita Vasquez is still living the consequences of Colombia's status as, fundamentally, a patriarchal nation:

Woman is subordinated to man as a consequence of customs, culture and an ideology that did not change for centuries, something one can see in the 1886 constitution where there is no freedom at all, as she was not considered a citizen, just another living being, more or less like animals or servants; her opinion or participation was not taken into account, and she had no liberty to look for ways to procure her basic necessities.¹⁹²

More than a century has passed since the 1886 Constitution but patriarchal modes of functioning still linger. In war and in regular life, a woman's life in Colombia is always perceived to be in danger. It has nothing to do with better opportunities and education or the right to vote, when any woman is prey in regular

¹⁹² M. Velásquez, "Condición Jurídica y Social de la Mujer" [Judicial and social condition of women], *Nueva Historia de Colombia* [New history of Colombia], Vol. 4 (Bogotá: Planeta, 1989), 38-39; my translation.

streets if walking alone. This is a fear instilled so deeply that it has been normalized. Even though suffrage has been possible since 1954, and that statistics show enormous changes in gender education equality, just being female in Colombia is living in a constant state of alertness comparable to post- traumatic stress. There are many forms of invisibility that come with cultural assumptions about what it is to live as a woman in Colombia. If we look at the statistics:

According to DANE (National Department of Statistics of Colombia), between 2001 and 2004, 56% of women and 44% of men entered secondary education. There is an increase in women's preference for professions that were considered masculine like engineering, law or international relations. In 2007 even though women represent 50% of the labor force among professionals and technicians, only 38% occupy high directing posts.¹⁹³

The invisibility of women in the labor force is paralleled by their visibility as sexual objects in the streets. Being invisible is as traumatic as a repetitive knot that never seems to unwind. The same happens with being too visible in the streets. It is as if one thing erases the other. Traumatic wounds are invisible to the naked eye. The difficulty of representing them seems to parallel the fact that a significant number of women who choose art as a career later choose to remain at home, invisible to the national art scene. In another parallel women philosophers who need to remain at home in their universities, teaching, are never taken seriously as

¹⁹³ Silva Caputto and Luz Amparo, "La Mujer en Colombia: educación para la democracia y democracia en la educación" [Woman in Colombia: Education for democracy and democracy in education], *Revista Educación y Desarrollo Social* [Education and social development magazine], January-June 2008, 115-6; my translation.

colleagues. Invisibility distracts from the real reasons they do not pursue their art making further: they live in a patriarchal culture that does not nurture the process needed for a woman to dedicate her life to art or philosophy. As they marry and contract imminent responsibilities that a “grown woman” must uphold, they decide to let the career slide. Sliding in everyday chores that swallow women in a patriarchal culture is recurrent. Margarita Vasquez is intentionally avoiding the same fate many of her classmates at the Universidad de los Andes have had with their artistic careers. She states that even though seventy per cent of her classmates were women, she sees only men still active in the field.¹⁹⁴ Her own practice stems from a painful decision not to remain invisible and not to remain at home. She has played with the materials granted by art as a way to confront that cultural reality, and she has suffered through her own discoveries, working with simple everydayness creating a very diverse medium to face personal, intimate, almost unimportant trauma.

¹⁹⁴ Based on conversation during fieldwork in April, 2012, in Bogotá.



Figure 65. Untitled painting by Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas provided by the artist.

Talking about her life-art processes, Vasquez relates how for a while after graduating from the university, she was lost. It felt as if she was flying above her own self, suffering what she termed “post-partum mood states.” In this early painting that the author has called *The Floating Girl* (figure 65), one gets the sense that the artist needed to look again and again in order to see where she is at. This is a painting of a woman in need of materially re-making her own image, going back after realizing there is no mirror, no shadow, no definitive face to own. A girl drowned in blue almost blends with the sky or maybe the sea, natural elements that give a sense of not belonging to earth, un-grounded-ness. It is one of those bodies that are left behind during traumatic experiences. The blue girl has no face, no identity. It is not Margarita, it is any girl in her country, or maybe the world. On October 11, 2014, the editorial page of *El Herald* is entitled, “How Difficult It Is To

Be a Girl.” On this date the United Nations commemorates International Girl Day. The editorial purports to be a “vehement call to respect the rights of girls,” as it states that in the whole world 500 million girls have no developing opportunities, while in Colombia too many are victims of all types of violence.¹⁹⁵ Victims of violence often report a sense of detachment from their own bodies while in the traumatic event. They also report a sense of floating or being able to watch the scene from another point of view, away from their own bodies. This is a flight mechanism that is useful at the moment, but that has subsequent effects on people who have gone through a traumatic experience.

Dissociative defenses, which allow individuals to compartmentalize perceptions and memories, seem to perform a dual function. They help victims separate from the full impact of the physical trauma while it is occurring, and, by the same token, they may delay the necessary working through and putting in to perspective of these traumatic experiences after they have occurred.¹⁹⁶

Therapies that have been developed in order to access that body that initially had left the scene of the event, in order to heal the person who needs to fully function in everyday life. Once, while in that state of “floating,” Margarita was roaming the streets of Bogotá and stumbled upon the rejects of a popular photography shop where people go to have their pictures taken for official documents or credentials.

¹⁹⁵ “Lo Difícil Que Es Ser Niña” [The difficulty of being a girl], *El Heraldo*, October 11, 2014, <http://www.elheraldo.co/editorial/lo-difcil-que-es-ser-nina-169550>.

¹⁹⁶ David Spiegel, “Dissociation and Trauma,” in *American Psychiatric Press Review of Psychiatry*, Vol. 10, ed. Allan Tasman and Stephen Goldfinger, 261.

Taking a second look, she grabbed these anonymous tiny squares of printed paper without faces from the garbage and took them home in order to investigate why those photographic cuts intrigued her. What the camera took was now lost to Margarita's eyes. The features that had made these anonymous people identifiable were gone. She could only see the traces. She could not know their faces, just as she could not find a definite face for her own previous paintings. But she could propose to execute an act of divination stemming from that obscurity as the bits of clothing on the borders allowed her imagination to compose a figure with a gender, an age, a social status, maybe even a character.

In the series called *Cara a Cara* (Face to face) (figure 66), she found a mirroring for something untraceable or inscrutable in her own family picture. The family had been fractured due to a grave violent incident when she was a little girl. Looking at these faceless cutouts reminded her of the unsettling sensation a fractured familial identity had given her. It also mirrored the facelessness of so many disappeared, gone, lost in her Colombia. Missing faces also lead us to wonder about what is left behind, possibly in many garbage dumps, in rivers, under damp woods, jungles, deserts of mass graves. Identity papers full of pasted cutouts give us access to places as the rest of our bodies become void of meaning. In these pictures arranged as void portraits that trace real lives, a lone figure is lurking in the background, pleading for some eyesight to come and re-do it because Vasquez has chosen to keep them as portraits of misplaced identities or at least abstract ones.

Instead of remaking the faces, she purposely leaves them blank. The story needs to be told by the rest of us, the observers.

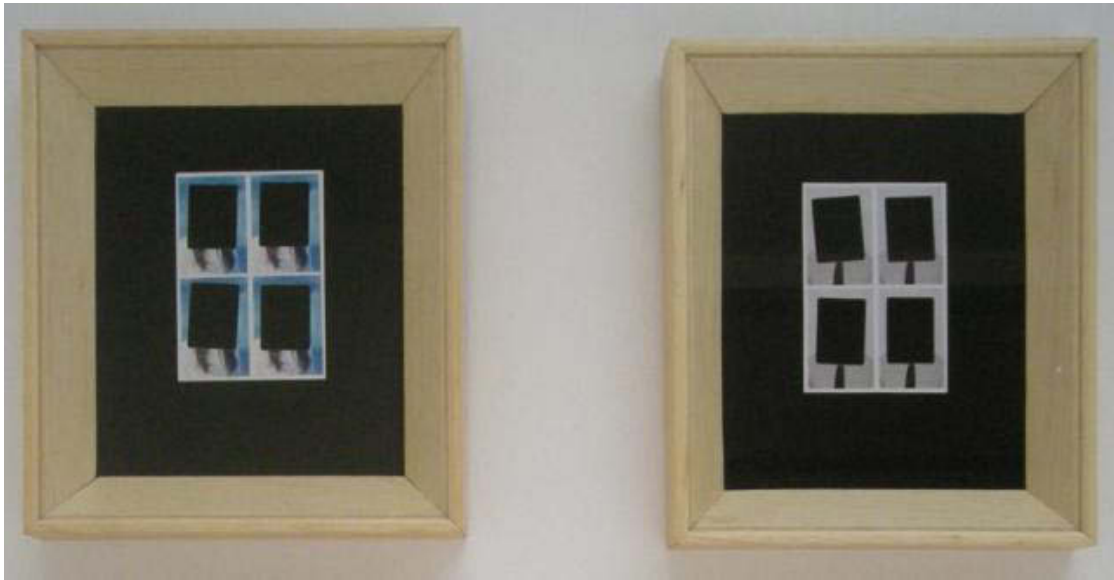


Figure 66. Photograph of one of the pieces of the series *Cara a Cara*. Provided by Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas.

These can also be simple everyday instances of forgetfulness, of necessary gestures of protection from quotidian reality. Everyday life for many, as for the artist, is about coping with traumas, little and big, familial and national, private and public. Thus, an identity that flows with the actual coping, which is a never-ending process, is something that can be achieved by image building in such a way that there is not an intention to fix one. As Irigaray has desired, women artists like Vasquez are finding a language that has the power to access their imaginations, an unconscious that does not have only a phallic reference: “always...in movement, at home everywhere, finding their security in their mobility, their *jouissance* in

movement, nomads knowing only the frontiers of their living bodies.”¹⁹⁷

Ontologies that permit identities beyond those created by phallogocentrism¹⁹⁸ must arise from processes like the artistic, executed by women who question ways of thinking about themselves and the world that have been handed down to them, inscribed in their bodies, even before they had been born. Margarita Vasquez knows the faces of girls are born erased, non-identifiable; they have no essence in the immanent world of the present, as de Beauvoir has shown. Then, Margarita finds faces that were cut out; especially those removed from identity papers, and uses them as a metaphor for a normalized and naturalized non-identity that permeates our society as we enter its symbolic order—a phallic order, a violent order.

When Margarita Vasquez was five years old, in an effort to flee familial trauma, her family had moved to Florida, in the U.S. They returned to Colombia after she finished high school. After finishing her degree in Art at Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, she returned to the USA in 2006 as a Fulbright scholar to pursue a Master of Fine Arts at Ohio University. Otherness and the instability of identity again became a palpable experience, not just a concept or a feeling. She decided to work with images taken from photographs of the city of Bogotá and drawings sketched on the airplane on her way to her future home. It is a work done between landscape

¹⁹⁷ Luce Irigaray, “The Poverty of Psychoanalysis,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991), 91.

¹⁹⁸ Term coined by Jacques Derrida in order to refer to the masculine as the construction of meaning. It begs us to recognize the centrality of logos, a discourse of linearity and order.

and sky: the forms she saw through the airplane window gave her the impulse to take aerial photographs of the United States of America from different books and combine them with drawings she had made think of her familiar Colombian landscapes. Memory and new possibilities were turned into mixed images as if her own body was trying to land while in the middle of an ascension that heralded new subjectivities to be performed. The name for this series is *In Between* and it points towards a possible question: could there be a place to return to, a place where one could stand while looking at shadows, reflections, land, water, a place immersed in the obscurity of the un-known?¹⁹⁹

Her next piece, *Telling Whispers* (Figure 67), is more than a visual search for clues in faceless paper cuts, as in *Cara a Cara (Face to Face)*; here, the anonymous portraits are amplified on paper prepared with graphite. Vasquez fills with words and stains the supposed blank spaces of other people's lives. These are void spaces simply because she does not know them. An empty second look instills the materiality of imagination into them. Large-scale drawings are now filled with narratives based on other remnants, other memories that are from her own personal life and the lives of others she is imagining through the usage of the traces they have left unwillingly. The utilization, yet again, of pieces of evidence of other people's lives in order to create her own versions of narratives that will fill her own voids, look like possibilities for a forensic report.

¹⁹⁹ To view this segment of her work, see the artist's website, http://www.margaritavc.com/Site/In_Between/In_Between.html.



Figure 67. Screen shot of one of the pieces of the series *Telling Whispers* by Margarita Vasquez C'ardenas, retrieved from the artist's website: http://www.margaritavc.com/Site/Telling_Whispers.html.

In Margarita's painting *Bereavement* (Figure 68), one can see traces of this search within dead or discarded things, or selves. The girl, now a grown woman, is fragmented; only parts of her inactive body can be seen. Is she dead or is she grieving? If she is in between realms, she could take action. Pain can place a person and a whole country in a liminal, in-between border-like place. One endures, and time takes care of the pain in multiple ways. Or one can take advantage of the gap in time as an opportunity to look into the event again. Grief can be an impulse. Death is possibly another way of finding out how to come back from fragmentation. Coming back to the present is an action that should happen in everydayness if survival is to become possible. Bereavement involves a submersion into darkness, one that requires an effort through minute everyday actions in order to ascend to a state of

empowerment; this state can be reached by using everyday materials shaped creatively in order to build a bridge, a rope, something the artist can hold on to; something to make with your body, your hands, something where feet can stand and thus inert floating can be detained. Art is the material that results from imaginative flight.



Figure 68. Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas. Photograph of the painting *Bereavement* provided by the artist.

Relentless and repetitive investigative looks are one of the reasons why Margarita Vasquez is intrigued by what happens and what does not happen in quotidian life. It is in everydayness where she mostly finds situations that point toward possibilities of healing. Observation took her next to thinking about how people change their hairstyles when they go through a life crisis or change. She started collecting the leftover hair on the floors of various hair salons. Then the question found the material she needed to work through it. This material became her next art piece composed of balls she shaped from discarded human hair. The

spheres she made kept growing while holding the memories of so many people whose identities she did not even know. In this piece, entitled *At a distance* (figures 69 and 70), the bodies of the people whose hair she used were meshed together in an organic way, in a sense becoming a visible net of possible life stories that could inter-connect and thus dispense a sense of belonging.

At the same time, by molding other peoples' hair into balls, the artist kept a distance between herself and others. While connecting intimately with their bodies and the possible stories that emerged from this touch, she was exerting the distance that allows respite and awareness. She decided not to use gloves but her bare hands in order to perceive the different textures, colors and the multiplicity of hair implied in the randomness of the chosen material she was working with. Hair became a material-emotional net between her and the Other, providing a closeness that nonetheless allowed her to keep the separation. In fact, overcoming the revulsion that accompanied the process of making these spheres became an integral part of the piece; it gave her a performative, intimate edge. And it is precisely this edge where liminality stands and the gift of transformation is possible.

Previously part of their bodies, now discarded, these strands of biological material are attached together un-naturally by an artist's hands. Abjection thus becomes transformed into a visible form by rendering life stories part of a woven fabric that happens outside of the hair owner's awareness. This weaving on the edge of revulsion and the subsequent exhibition of an organic material that renders the

mask of death visible, reminds the viewer as well as the weaver of what Ettinger maintains about the practice of artworking:

Artworking is sensing a potential co-emergence and co-fading and bringing into being objects or events, processes or encounters that sustain these metramorphoses and further transmit their effect. Art evokes further instances of trans-subjectivity that embrace and produce new partial subjects, and makes almost-impossible new borderlinking available, out of elements and links already partially available in bits.²⁰⁰

The emotion that has accompanied the making is as invisible as the faces that, again, we do not see in Margarita Vasquez's work. The hair, unattached from a faceless individual, has been rendered as meaningful as an observer's projection can make it. But the maze of interwoven hair does not allow any image of a single set of features that can be attributed to one individual. We cannot make a story out of the faces in the cut outs (*Face to Face*) or give the floating blue girl an imaginary thread of sense. It is a ball of reject, a maze of otherness that becomes even more repulsive as we approach the material that conforms these spheres. Intra-trans subjectivity comes into play because, as Bracha Ettinger repeatedly has said, art belongs to a realm she has named a matrixial borderspace—a mental encounter as well as an event that transgresses individual boundaries, one that has a co-poietic potential for aesthetic and ethical paths.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Ettinger, Bracha. "Art, Memory, Resistance." *Ephemera* 5, no. X (2005): 693.

²⁰¹ Ettinger, Bracha. "Copoiesis." *Ephemera* 5, no. X (2005): 703.



Figure 69. Photograph of the exhibition of *A una distancia* [At a Distance] Centro Colombo Americano in Pereira, Colombia in July, 2010. Provided by Vasquez Cárdenas during fieldwork in Bogotá, 2012.



Figure 70. Photograph of the exhibition of *A una distancia* [At a Distance] Centro Colombo Americano in Pereira, Colombia in July, 2010. Provided by Vasquez Cárdenas during fieldwork in Bogotá, 2012.

In a further doubling of the poietic action, this work is exhibited in a way that allows the viewer a close but distant look and a hint to the performative meaning of the act. One can see a video of just the artist's hands, making the motion of shaping a ball of hair. A wall is filled with individual spheres of hair as if they were precious objects in elegant stands that proudly display them. Abject material and unknown memories become possible to envisioned if distance permits it. New images are allowed to emerge as one senses the artist's intention to redo lost identities, her aspiration to touch on the possibility of finding knowledge or some light through the gap in liminal stances, which prompts her to insist on taking double looks at everything around her. These spheres composed of human hair seem like an escalator of some sort, a collection of abject stepping-stones to self-knowledge.

One of those stepping-stones is another piece that Vasquez Cárdenas has entitled *Ever Lingering*, in a performative-reiterative gesture. It seems by now evident that the artist needs to understand her life and the world around her through first looking at others. Otherness became the point from which she feels identities could be thought. If she is in a no-land, a land of darkness and otherness, then that is exactly where she might find a reflection upon which to reflect. Faceless, the faces of others that she can intuit as they are also missing, help her think of her own otherness. It is an ever-lingering affect that needs to be dealt with, if not foreclosed. For *Ever Lingering*, Margarita began recording friends and acquaintances answering a simple question she posed: "Of all your sentimental possessions, which

one would you miss the most if it were lost and why?”²⁰² After telling her what they imagined would happen to them if they lost these objects, the individuals were asked to hold a gesture that could capture this non-present. Afterwards the artist used the photographs of these friends’ torsos to pose and photograph herself in an imitative posture. She copied their stories and placed them under the pictures. She also wrote her own personal stories, developed and influenced by what these people told her and what the pose elicited in her. She exhibited these as parallel pictures and texts in a single frame (Figure 71). Once the artist had someone else’s story, she could begin re-constructing her own story that needed healing. It is nonetheless, a never-ending story, one that lingers, as a ghost, now in some sort of control.



Figure 71. Photograph of one of Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas’ pieces in the series *Ever Lingering* retrieved on July 2012 from the artist’s website: http://www.margaritavc.com/Site/Recognition/Pages/Ever_lingering.html#13.

²⁰² Margarita Vasquez, *Ever Lingering*, 2011, http://www.margaritavc.com/Site/Recognition/Pages/Ever_lingering.html#5.

As one can see, the person in the picture is again faceless. One of them is the artist. She doubles the gesture of the inter-viewed friend and thus proposes a new story that is at the same time open to interpretation by the other viewer, the one attending the exhibition, or by us, who look at the pictures on a website that presents the pictures at the exhibition. The doubling of the gestures and the texts, the redoubling of the material produced, give way to a multiplicity of other stories, allowing liminality to continue even if fixed in framed pictures and texts. Imitation thus became also a tool for multiple representations that suggest non-stability of images or narratives. The artist, through the looking glass of others, thus continues to navigate in the distance, her parallel phantasms. It is as if looking at these reflections seen on other people's stories, through everyday objects that suddenly become meaningful, that the artist can attach meaning to lost painful memories. Representation thus mediates without interfering, presents and exposes that thing that can now be seen, breaking the spell. Jean Luc Nancy artfully describes this process:

Representation is a presence that is presented, exposed, or exhibited. It is not, therefore, presence pure and simple: it is precisely *not* the immediacy of the being-posed-there but is rather that which draws presence out of this immediacy insofar as it puts a value on presence *as* some presence or another. Representation, in other words, does not present something without

exposing its value or sense—at least, the minimal value or sense of being there before a subject.²⁰³

Us, the subjects that see what another subject has created for us to see. Us, the subjects as faceless as the subjects whose gestures Margarita has photographed while telling their stories, can now put ourselves in another frame that represents the void being filled by our own stories. They are all stories of loss, stories of everydayness.

Everyday things, objects and occurrences lead Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas to other spaces where she may imagine ways to perform her own familial story differently while performing traumatic events at a safe but intimate distance. It is as if some magic power in her art making could change the world or make a new one, one she can envision better. One such piece is devised when she finds sheets of paper left behind in a library's photocopying machine. Someone had forgotten to retrieve the CV that was being copied. Curious, she reads it and starts to notice particular interesting things this person has consigned there: personal data like dates of birth of his offspring, religious affiliation, etc. She makes her own copy of the left-behind CV in order to see where this newly found object might lead her. Sometime later, during a visit to the Smithsonian in Washington, she learns about a practice realized by a specific people of Mexican origin who lived in pre-colonial times in what today is southern California. The women of the Luiseño people use Indian Hemp (*Apocynum Cannabium* L) to create an artifact out of hemp braids:

²⁰³ Jean Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, ed. John D. Caputo, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 36.

Of all the important uses for Indian hemp, the *itatamat*, or "counting the days" ball, was perhaps the most significant for the people themselves. From the time of her marriage, a woman would record a calendar of her life's events by tying knots on a length of hemp as important events occurred. She marked births, deaths, and other extraordinary days with beads, shells or other talismans. When the ball got too large to handle easily, she started a new ball.²⁰⁴

In the same way that Margarita Vasquez used the document photographs found in the streets of Bogotá in order to arrive at a new art piece, she created an *itatamat* for this man whose CV she found in a library in USA. This man was also faceless, but he was not anonymous. What intrigued her was the web of meanings this faceless man had left in the unusual form he had prepared his curriculum vitae. Playing with his sense of identity as placed on a piece of paper, for each event and accomplishment on his CV presentation, the artist wove an object into the braid. Her hands were again weaving but now the material was not discarded hair, it was inorganic material bought at a hardware store. She recorded this practice resulting in a seven-hour video of long middle shots of her making the braid on her bed, talking to herself or making different sounds while braiding. As she recorded herself making the *itatamat* of an-other, for an-other, she started to conjure and braid similarities between such different lives as hers and the CV's writer. She finds herself, again, living the narrative of an-other in order to understand her own life

²⁰⁴ "Indian Hemp," Plant Guide, United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Services, http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_apca.pdf.

story: “To me, this long object became something like Wonder Woman’s invisible lasso of truth, because it became a cathartic process for me where hidden truths and memories arose.”²⁰⁵

In the video, the artist again places two parallel activities on a single frame, permitting a doubling of the viewer’s look. On the left we see her weaving in actual time and on the right there is a shorter video on a loop that shows the details of the braid with commentaries in text. At one point she stops on a specific date, her time of birth, and says: “From now on, our lives are intertwined.” After exhibiting this work and even winning a prize,²⁰⁶ a few years later the artist looked for the man, went to his home, met his family and explained the project that she had developed. She gave them the *itatamat* and the video as a present. Their lives then became personally intertwined as an invisible lasso of emotions united them. As the lasso formed of golden colors that sparkled on the darkness, the invisibility of this older man has come to light through a transformative experience for her own eyes, and to many possible others that can see the exhibition of the piece.

The cord in figure 72 is not organic; it is plastic and as such, it does not pretend to unite two human beings in a symbiotic womb-like relationship. Its material emphasizes the distance between the subject of Margarita’s non-gaze and her imagined subject to be, the man she imagines is in the curriculum vitae. She later meets him in an action that transgresses the boundaries given by everyday life in a society that is built on individuality and separateness, an action that also dilutes the

²⁰⁵ Personal interview, April 2, 2012.

²⁰⁶ Best in Video in the competition *Image Ohio 9* in the Roy G. Biv Gallery, Columbus, Ohio, 2009.

boundaries art presupposes. She gives him back a piece of the artwork, thus bringing his face to the foreground, but only in her memory. Facing the other, the unknown, what is still unconscious, bringing to materiality what needs to be seen-- this is an encounter that transgresses and heals at the same time.



Figure 72. Screen shot from Vasquez Cárdenas' piece called *Counting the Days* as displayed in the video of the same title, posted by the artist on February 21, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/20227370>.

Healing comes from exceeding the symbiotic and welcoming the semiotic. Since Vasquez Cardenas' work recurs continually to themes of identity and otherness, it seems appropriate that we return to the artist-theorist cited earlier, Bracha Ettinger:

'I' meets a 'non-I,' 'I' meets another 'non-I.' This 'non-I' meets another 'I.' Each encounter creates its own psychic resonance field, and each resonance field is with and in other fields of resonance. Thus, each matrixial cluster is a web

of meeting of one with-in the other, where each one – and each other – belongs to several such clusters. The matrixial web is thus the body-psyche-time-space of the intimate even though it is a web of several, and it is from the onset transgressive. Transgressive and intimate – even when the encounter is between, with, and in two subjects, the encounter is not symbiotic.²⁰⁷

Looking at the type of work Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas has been doing, one could think of her whole oeuvre so far as a big *itatamat*: a weave of stories and moments that can take her anywhere she chooses, leading us also on journey into other-ness where we can enter a multiplicity of possibilities. Like many women before her, Margarita Vasquez sits on a bed and forms connections that inform her surroundings by the apparently simple act of weaving. Story telling, story weaving are acts applied amply in the therapeutic world. They are acts that transgress, that travel beyond isolated selves and connect to others who have been living similar experiences. They are symbolic encounters, distanced encounters, not symbiotic ones. They produce the possibility of a new vision. Weaving her net of words and pictures and sounds and gestures, Margarita can find the necessary stillness to contemfigure a way out of darkness. This way is a path anyone can follow while in the materiality of art making.

²⁰⁷ Ettinger, "Copoiesis," 704.



Figure 73. Screen shot from Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas video in *Counting the Days*, posted by the artist February 21, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/20227370>.

Like a contemporary Eurydice, the artist knows how to find paths to self-understanding and has developed ways to show others the minute paths, the windows, doors, places above or below the fissures. Like a contemporary Ariadne, she weaves threads that serve as guides to understanding mourned identities. Her dwelling is a dark room that can reveal. In darkness she knits the connections. In Figure 73 the artist is illuminated through the window while she weaves the net of understandings needed to reshape her always shifting identities. It is Eurydice finding the light for herself. It is also Ariadne contemplating the labyrinth within. In the piece called *Rendezvous* (2008-2010, the artist literally allowed her bedroom to become a *camera obscura*. Her bed and her own body sustained light for hours on an open shutter left wide open via scotch tape on a Pentax camera.

In a personal long durational performance, an intimate picture develops. It is the very long and sustained shot of what a romantic break-up left behind. It is a painful timeless performance of bereavement for that self that goes away with the once-loved one that has parted. Stretching the moment of trauma that lingers in the memory of the body in real-time, for a whole month Vasquez lived in darkness. By never turning the lights on in that room, the scene of heartbreak becomes longer and also easier to erase. The scenario was the bed, where the trees outside projected their shadows through the room window. While lying on that bed, her naked body became a screen for the shadows.

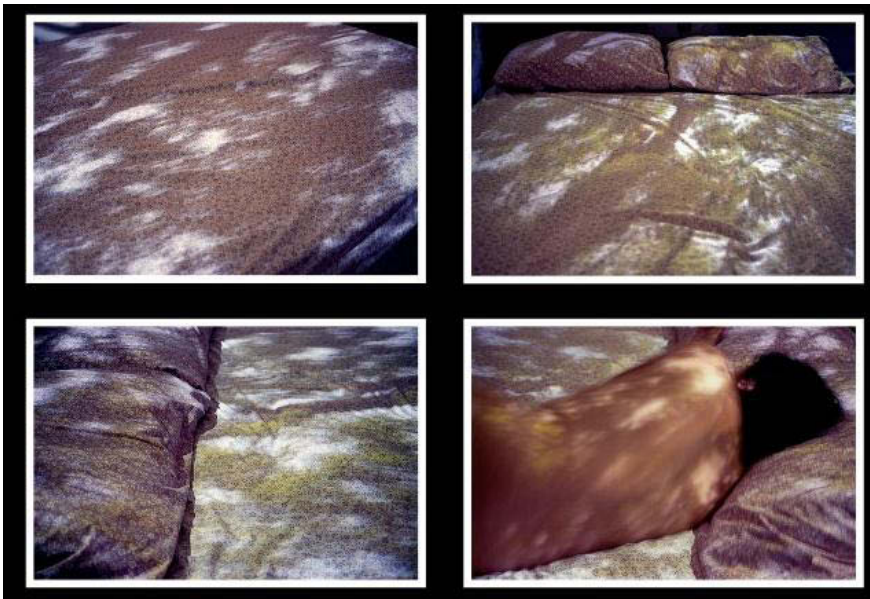


Figure 74. Photograph of the piece *Rendezvous* by Vasquez Cárdenas provided by the artist.

Performing this work entitled *Rendezvous* (figure 74), Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas learned to accept that love is an illusion, yet also a powerful vision that

can empower if taken as an event. An open obturator²⁰⁸ (shutter) that does not block the light's entrance to index the film is a metaphor for the long process of feeling the pain until it becomes bearable and until one can understand its meaning. Then maybe the necessary encounter, the rendezvous, the presentation of the subject, is with your own self, a self that is and is not your own, or maybe many of your possible ones. It is a healing process to perform this type of artwork. Showing such an intimate work, framing it for the world "out there," the world of the others, is letting us know how it works when you do not die of pain but live with and through it. One can learn about separation and difference. One can live in separation and difference. The plastic umbilical cord yields a body that needs to deal with loss in order to survive. In the same way, Badiou reminds us in his book about love as an encounter: "Starting out from something that is simply an encounter, a trifle, you learn that you can experience the world on the basis of difference and not only in the terms of identity."²⁰⁹ Identification with an-other is not the point of love, of the encounter. It is not even the point of the encounter with a work of art. Awareness of our own other-ness, recognition of the other's difference as essential to the encounter, as essential to love and thus to a life full of others, is also what art like Margarita's does; it allows us to remember.

There is an encounter the artist performs while allowing light and time to paint her body, devoid from the world outside of the private space. Vasquez lets the

²⁰⁸ Obturador is the name in Spanish for this fixture in a camera—the shutter. In English, obturator is the word for a surgical figure utilized to close a fissure. Both meanings are interesting to keep in mind.

²⁰⁹ Alain Badiou, *Praise of Love*, trans. Peter Bush (London: The New Press, 2012), 16.

marks of light on her bed, on her body, become the unforeseen shadows of possibilities in a difference that will never ease. There are ways of becoming while being undone. In this way, *Rendezvous* is an unfinished work. Naked, the artist's body is motionless for unendurable stretches of time as if saying: show me in new, subtle light; how can there be even more encounters? In this particular case, the light comes from a window in the middle of the spring – a world that is not stable and that is fleeting. This reveals to the artist that projections are all that is left of the encounter. Our encounter with her world might say the same to us. We can follow the light that becomes a difficult promise to fulfill, just as Orpheus did, and then turn and see Eurydice on the verge of panic, knowing she is now, again, invisible.

Margarita finished the piece by adding typewritten text on paper mounted on the wall next to the photographs produced by the over-exposure. The text that accompanies the photographs in *Rendezvous* attests the need to understand absence while performing in-between-ness. Taking the time, allowing time, engenders new spaces. Action surges from immobility. Illusion is permissible as a way to attract imagination that can hold together some vision, a possible visibility:

I remember waiting for you in a place of shadows and lights
 There I heard how the branches from the spring tree swayed
 I felt how the darkness intertwined with mid morning
 And in that absence I imagined illusion as permissible.²¹⁰

²¹⁰ Untitled, retrieved from the artist's website on July 14, 2013, <http://www.margaritavc.com/Site/Rendezvous.html>.

There seems to be in Vasquez Cárdenas a “real urgency to elaborate alternative accounts, to learn to think differently about the subject, to invent new frameworks, new images, new modes of thought.”²¹¹ Vasquez Cárdenas reflects upon the shadows projected over diverse everyday surfaces, objects, bodies and faceless people. All of her pieces are spiritual exercises, ethical conundrums that bind her own everydayness to others. As Margarita states, artwork is creating further understanding of her life and what surrounds her. Weaving understanding is a healing process:

I would say that in the majority of my work I believe there is an introspection about the models of femininity, of what that early education or everything around us imposes as the role of women...I think my work has to do with the idea of constant evaluation of my own being and to understand, as a woman, what I need to inquire or do...especially about stereotypes to overcome or transform...²¹²

Conclusion

There are many types of violence within a home and there are also many types of violence within a territory like Colombia. Trauma comes with life; they are born at the same moment. Strategically, one can see artists like Margarita Vasquez taking double looks in order to displace—or dispel—not just family tragedies but also other life stories that lead to the loss of wished-for-identities and thus to bereavement and floating in a space of darkness. Displacements can thus be seen in

²¹¹ Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 1.

²¹² Personal interview; Bogotá, April, 2012.

different colors and angles, doubling possibilities for new fluid nomadic identities. Finding beauty in new material objects gives light to the diversity of roads in front of the eyes. Identity is forged through other people's non-faces, in case one is not able to see one's own. The effort is to approach the fact of inessentiality as an investigation on time and space, where life happens. The effort points towards awareness of inescapable otherness.

Vasquez embodies a new kind of mestiza, one who has learnt to travel between worlds while staying within the borders. She looks into ordinary lives of other people, some anonymous, some acquaintances. Artifacts like an *itatamat*, an ancestral practice of others she does not even know, that do not even belong to her particular cultural heritage, allow her to inter-weave memories. She belongs to a net of woven individual identities that still maintain communal ancient practices. Appropriating them is honoring lineage and looking back. She manages to look into her own life and her family's in double takes that undo and redo narratives, which are fluid and creative. As she explores absolute otherness, she goes deeper into her own inessentiality. More than undoing, she materially re-does, drawing invisible connections between ordinary lives and art. Healing, which may or may not happen, is simply part of the process.

Maria Mercedes Carranza could not endure the limits of poetry and perished in anguish. The words that had allowed her to connect to others' pain did not heal her own pain. In Margarita's case, the creation of objects resonates with Foucault's words when he is struck by the fact that "in our society, art has become something

which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life.... couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?"²¹³ Margarita Vasquez's work is congruent with "a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence."²¹⁴ Therefore, it is apparent that Vasquez has been able to find in art a way to cope with traumatic experiences that constantly place her subjectivity in turmoil. María Mercedes, on the other hand, possibly saw too much through her poetic practice: she looked at her world in such a state of fragmentation that she found no redeeming feature to value.

Writing did not save Virginia Woolf, Silvia Plath, Alexandra Pizarnik or Anne Sexton, among others, as it did not save Maria Mercedes Carranza. Still, one can agree with Jean Luc Nancy's statement about Hans Sahl, another poet in the note at the beginning of his essay, *Forbidden Representation*: "We actually believe that poems have only now become possible again, insofar as only the poem can say what otherwise mocks every description."²¹⁵ Poems and images are memories in others, memories in objects, thoughts as stepping-stones, postmarks for lost identities that come and go, even when one becomes a woman who is named and situated—thrown into the world, as Heidegger would say.²¹⁶ How to cope with common trauma of being thrown into a world one has not chosen, a foreign place after the womb, a place of continuous violence?

²¹³ Hubert Dreyfus, *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 236.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

²¹⁵ Nancy, *Ground of the Image*, 144.

²¹⁶ See notions of *Befindlichkeit* and *Geworfenheit* in Chapter V of: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 123-64.

Artists know that the in-between-ness needs to be maintained, needs to be accessed and maintained in order to cope. Liminality is possible as a non-space for empowerment in instability. As Ettinger says, “In esthetical working-through the artist transforms the time and space of an encounter-event into matrixial screen and gaze, and offers the other via com-passionate hospitality an occasion for fascinace.”²¹⁷ Art practices embrace such a “floating state” as a possible place for self-knowledge. Art making embraces gaps in narratives and lost places from which to gaze. Margarita Vasquez Cárdenas is not re-affirming an identity through entering patriarchal modes of inscribing meaning in society. By her actions in everyday life and through her art, she is doing something that Rosi Braidoti deems a necessity: “... to recode or rename the female feminist subject not as yet another sovereign, hierarchical, and exclusionary subject but rather as a multiple, open-ended, interconnected entity.”²¹⁸

Interstice 4: Eurydice's Desire

The past is

foreign land

never able to live in one place

one to call my own

my body spoiled

tongue cut

²¹⁷ Ettinger, “Copoiesis,” 703.

²¹⁸ Braidoti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 158.

breasts eyes
veiled
needing a resting place
where feet could stand
strong legs
armed wings
waiting for the horizon
to tell me where this land
that does not split
actually is.²¹⁹

²¹⁹ Poem by Monica Gontovnik.

INTERLUDE 4: OLGA

I studied ballet as I was growing up but went to the university to study publicity. As soon as I finished I entered the ASAB,²²⁰ where I did another full term career in dance. While studying dance I got together with some friends and we created a collective called Blanco Oscuro. We did a couple of performances for university festivals. Later on I started to dance with a few different companies in Bogotá.

Then I decided to go to San Francisco to explore all types of movement tendencies. Later I went to New York, where I studied and danced with different companies. There I discovered soloist work, and I loved that process and the idea of being on my own. It became a very productive way of working because I could move from place to place easier. Solo work is a marvelous space to be in. I go in and out of this space because, since I started to live in Canada, I started working in different collectives, either writing, choreographing, directing or dancing.

Different processes seem to feed each other. With a group of women we were, for example, working on the theme of what being born a woman means. This project that was never finished was called Enigma F. We are still thinking about it. But the research we did on different costumes, like for example in China, that make people kill their newborn girls, fed a solo piece that I later did using salsa. This is a solo piece called Petunia (figure 75), where I furiously dance as an investigation of what it means to be a woman-object.

²²⁰ Art Department offering diversity of programs at *the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas* in Bogotá, Colombia.

It also has to do with Diaspora, because I was living in Canada, away from the music I love to dance. I wanted to find there the *jouissance* that salsa gives me while thinking about the pain of coming from a country where one is viewed as an object of desire in such a way that it is even difficult to just walk alone on any street.

The petunia is a common South American flower, like me. In a contemporary world, where we have overcome so many things as women, I cannot believe the things that are still going on all over. So joy and pain are part of my dancing in this piece. Sometimes I feel I was like an innocent flower, who cannot believe the news she hears or reads everyday.



Figure 75. Photograph of Olga Barrios performing *Petunia* in Bellas Artes, Barranquilla, in November 2013. Ceded by the photographer, Roberto Camargo, from his Facebook page.

I am trying to understand as a woman the contemporary world, the relationship of my body with technology, finding answers in the midst of so much information. I want to interact with the world in a different way, not just by words, using my body. Recently I am moving between Santa Marta in the Caribbean region of Colombia and Toronto, Canada. Even though I am from the Andean region, from the mountains of Colombia, I wanted to investigate the new sensations that my body was encountering: breeze, sea, the sounds and the smells.

But on the way to creating the piece, a new piece, “El Llamado de los Caracoles” (The Call of the seashells) (figure 76), I discovered its final purpose while walking on the beach once, after a storm. The sea I had fallen in love with had spat out all of these crazy things: shoes, sofas and tires. The beach was like a cemetery. This was a perfect image for my new dance. The beautiful and romanticized sea was filling up with what people do to it and it had had a chance for vengeance. I love to use contradictions and juxtapositions either in me, my body and the spaces I am in. It is my way to have an opinion.



Figure 76. Promotional photograph of the performance piece *El Llamado de los Caracoles* in Santa Marta, Colombia in March 2014. Taken from Barrios' Facebook page with the permission of the photographer, Juan Carlos Marquez.

In the solo I did years ago called *Recordando Los Adioses* (Remembering the goodbyes) (figure 77), I created many scenes of different goodbyes. I dramatize distance, memory, the story of a woman that was twenty-five years old and was for the first time able to see herself as if there was a split between her and the world. There were so many emotional aspects that I was learning to understand while in that split.

For me, creating started more like a need to express something that was not very clear. On the way, while creating, I start by realizing that there is something about being a woman on the stage, in society, that is shaping what I create and what I explore and what I find. What I find then begs for a second look and maybe a disarticulation, plus a further re-arrangement in a different order.



Figure 77. Olga Barrios performing *Recordando los adioses* provided by the artist.

To be on a stage is an opportunity to be something different from what I am, or what I am supposed to be routinely. It allows for a transformation into an-other. I can generate other things. In the studio, creating is another transformation. Every time something is performed and again performed, it changes, it transforms itself within the little spaces one finds that permit it.

As a human being it is a constant growing, a growing that becomes a memory that is also me. All that I have become on stage is also a part of Olga. I am not sure that I am looking for answers. It is more like trying to understand somehow what being a woman in the world is all about.

It is obvious that I look back at my society and the way that I was raised and my experiences as growing up, as a woman in a specific culture. But as time passes,

my confrontation as a woman is with the world; it is more like an abstract gesture fed by other gestures and cultures.

As a performer, I find that something appears in a gesture and a landscape of emotions, and it is there where my questions arise as an individual about society and the position of women in many societies. For example, I have never been abducted, but in my work *A Ventana Cerrada* (Within closed windows) (figure 78), as I was in the process of creating, what I encountered were my own fears as a woman in that body of this kidnap victim.

I worked with my own fears about being an abducted person, but what immediately became possible to me was to be raped while I was trapped in that situation. Being a woman, I realized that this fear is what came up first, and I worked with it for the piece that was intended to look into the experience of kidnapping, which is such daily occurrence and plays an enormous role in Colombian culture.

Trying to understand this common world that I have not experienced personally, trying to fill in the shoes of that victim I never have been, all of my own personal fears as a Colombian woman came afloat. Why would it be that to be violated was my first fear to arise? And also, will I be able to show this on a stage and not have everyone think that I have suffered a rape, personally? As one lends ones body to the stage, there is something I like to call a form of surrender.



Figure 78. Photograph by Carlos Luna of Barrios performing *A ventana cerrada* [Within closed windows]. Provided by the artist from her portfolio during fieldwork.

Many performers and interpreters do not reach that point. To surrender yourself means to live something you are not, but it is not about losing yourself, because in that act you are able to achieve a paradoxical state from which you can look at your performance. There is this distance that is created, a space from where you can look and see again, particularly because you have not lived through the situation in your personal life experience.

You are vulnerable while in the process of creating this space, also while performing you are very vulnerable, but later you can see from a distance. You have created a split from which to stand and understand. Now you are not that vulnerable, you have separated after the whole body was involved. It is as if these two selves are still you, still connected in your own body, but it is like a thread, like a

muscle one trains to have. One lends the body, enters the state of otherness and then leaves. There is a transformation in the surrender. And then one comes back.

As a child one enters and leaves worlds through fantasy, and now I am conscious of doing the same, but with my work as an artist, through my own body. The body and the mind maintain the memory of the experience during the creative process and the performance, but life goes on as usual, without the traumas of actually having lived it. As a dancer and performer I am used to seeing my self from the outside; the mirror is the object used in training.

This distancing effect clearly comes from this. I have also used cameras to see what was happening as I was creating choreography. It helped me not only see the movements and be able to remember them, but the emotions going through my body and how I felt then. It also gives me another perspective after exploration and improvisation. Then I write: I saw, I felt...this is what the camera does not see, but it is what I transmit in my art that is a live art form. I also live this distancing effect as a person who is away from her own country of origin and culture.

Living in Diaspora, in exile, even a self-imposed one, in a chosen form, is a way to look from a vantage point, a distancing place. And what happens to audiences is so different! How they react to my performances differs, depending on the place I show my work. This is also a learning experience. My interpretation is linked to Colombian drama, but people in Colombia tend to distance themselves from that emotion. In Canada, audiences are trying to reach an understanding of this

otherness that is being performed, and thus they come near this exotic body that splits.

Note for Interlude 4



Figure 79. Screen shot of the artist Olga Barrios from videotaped ethnographic material during fieldwork in Barranquilla in September 2012.

The previous narrative is a construction from video taped conversations with Olga Barrios (Bogotá, 1974) during fieldwork in Barranquilla in 2012. Olga is a dancer and choreographer who creates her own pieces, mainly solos. She is a performer of her questions, an investigator always aware that she is far from answering any of them definitely. Her body is the material that gives meaning to her identity as a Colombian contemporary female artist.

Many of her questions come from what she is able to see in the mirror as a traditional dancer's tool. It is a mirror that encloses her in a studio when she needs

to be dancing with the sand near the waves, something she does in her latest experimentations on the beaches near the city where she resides on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia.

After saying goodbye to Bogotá, leaving the many cultural memories and familial ties through her dance pieces, she has continued creating new ways of being that respond to new circumstances. It is a question of survival for her. She believes emotional strength and drama in her dance pieces are the factors that allow her to communicate the non-representable. As Phelan notes: "If women are not reproduced within metaphor or culture, how do they survive?"²²¹ Her voice is that of a woman who reflects intensely on the whole process of making dance as a transformative act.

²²¹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge: New York, 1993), 151.

CHAPTER 5: COLORING

Beauty and race in Colombia are performed insidiously and constantly in such ways that most people are not conscious of racism playing a role in quotidian life. Familial practices regulate national practices while creating modes of identity. Disrupting the immanent realm of family is what the artists reviewed in this chapter do to try to shake up naturalized ways of functioning that evidence gestures of conformity. When Colombian women gained a symbolic status of “transcendence” as subjects of civil rights, they were able to advance in the sense of examining their own belief systems in order to discover possible causes for inequality that still exert a rampant influence in every day life. They have been able to take responsible actions through concrete material acts. Making art, performing an identity that is not fixed, using their own bodies and diverse media at their disposal in order to continue creating and recreating what they see as a better world, begins with the closeness of the known and the intimate.

According to Santiago Castro Gomez,²²² the hegemonic subjectivizing discourse of “blood cleansing” was built through cultural practices during the colonial period in Nueva Granada.²²³ The imaginary whiteness was part of a practice inscribed within the coloniality of power/knowledge as diverse groups fought for social privileges. As Castro describes, during the 17th and 18th centuries creoles

²²² Santiago Castro-Gómez, *La Hybris del Punto Cero: Ciencia, Raza e Ilustración en la Nueva Granada (1750-1816)* [The Hybris of point zero: Science, race and illustration in New Granada (1750-1816)] (Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2005).

²²³ Former denomination of the current Republic of Colombia.

started to accumulate economic power and then defended it by various strategies that included the ideology of whiteness as a higher-ranking lineage. His work builds on an exploration into the way the ideas of the Enlightenment were read in the newly formed colonial Nueva Granada. He investigates the way these ideas were implemented and how they acquired a new sense in this region of the world, as well as how they shaped an ideal of “blood cleanliness” through *habitus*,²²⁴ that is, the idea that the creoles were ethnically superior to all other types of populations within the nation. Whiteness became the most important cultural capital, since it granted access to education and thus knowledge and power. This ideology permitted the concentration of wealth within a group by distancing all of the other indigenous and black minorities under a cover of scientific neutrality.

The practices of the three female Colombian artists reviewed in this chapter attest to a way of living that has changed for women in Colombia since 1954, the date that marks the watershed moment when women obtained the right to vote as a possibility of exerting full citizenship. They are using their art making as a way to question not only their own identity but also that of their families and ultimately the country. Obeida Benavides, Tania Maza and Margarita Ariza are three artists who approach issues of color, race and family as a tactic to understand ways of being other than those assumed through their culture when growing up. The first two, Benavides and Maza, do not address color directly. They look into the family, into memory, and they look at others. They are both Afro Colombian women who do not

²²⁴ Castro uses Pierre Bordieu’s term and thesis as an anchor for his exposition.

see themselves as part of a differentiated ethnic population. Ariza, the third artist, looks deeply into her familial practices to denounce the ideology of whiteness, even though in the eyes of others, the eyes of Colombian cultures, she is white.

Mestizaje and Blackness in Colombia

Colombia has the third largest black population in America, after Brazil and the USA (I am referring here to the whole continent), but this is hardly acknowledged, since during the colonization the nation was constructed under an image of “colombianity,” a word intended to erase racial differences under the spell of *mestizaje*. This term has been promoted by the Colombian state since 1851, aimed at the whitening of the black population with the intention to erase signs of difference. Colombian culture is idealized as a mixed culture, but the privilege of access to culture, education, and jobs exists mainly for the whiter population. A national identity was formed based on the pride of a tri-ethnic heritage—white, black and “indian”—a mythological narrative that avoids the reality of everyday life. Peter Wade states,

Blacks and especially indians were romanticized as part of a more or less glorious past, but the future held for them paternalistic guidance towards integration, which also ideally meant more race mixture and perhaps the erasure of blackness and indianness from the nation. The mestizo was

idealized as of bi-ethnic or tri-ethnic origin, but the image held up was always at the lighter end of the mestizo spectrum.²²⁵

Despite the idea of a nation built on *mestizaje* with no separate ethnic populations or races, Colombian black and indigenous populations tend to be located in specific areas, separated from other segments of the population. This makes them very vulnerable to becoming the targets of continued displacement from their lands as the result of successive appropriation by powerful groups for coffee, banana, sugar cane, oil palm and cocaine plantations. Traditionally the “indians” or indigenous population has been identified as the people in need of protection, as a minority that has always been in danger since the conquest. They have land protection (on paper, because in reality they are continually displaced as their lands are needed for exploitation), and they have gained some rights, especially since the last constitutional reform of 1991.

The black population of Colombia has not been viewed in the same way as indigenous peoples; blacks were brought over to the Americas from different places in Africa by the conquistadores for the exploitation of their labor. Therefore, for the State, they really don't have an ancestral right to the land: they are immigrants. Ancestral rights are reserved for the very diverse indigenous population. In the last two decades blacks have begun to use the term Afro Colombians. They have formed political clusters, gaining recognition as an ethnic group that has lived in specific areas for generations and thus deserve to be treated according to their ancestral

²²⁵ Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 11.

rights to the same. In order to do this, they have had to copy the political strategies of the indigenous minorities and sometimes even have gained representation through them, developing a new discourse that points to an “ethnicity.” This discourse of Afro-Colombianity has led to increased visibility.²²⁶

Even though the 1991 Constitution recognizes the black population as a major component of Colombian society, the majority of this population lives in poverty, is discriminated against and suffers forced displacement. Only about ten percent of Colombians see themselves as Afro Colombian, although about thirty percent of the Colombian population has an African heritage. The legacy colonialism left is an almost unacknowledged discrimination against people of color: Indians and blacks and all the mixtures in between. This is most apparent in beautification practices, mainly for the female population. Hair straightening, hair coloring and facial whitening are evident signs that in present times being white is perceived as better for social positioning. One of the main national stages that evidences the underlying racism in the country is one of the most watched events in Colombia: The National Beauty Contest. For women who enter this contest, it is a highly sought road to social mobility:

Established in 1934, the contest is celebrated every 11th of November, the date that marks the revolt in Cartagena against the Spanish colonizers in 1811. The country is practically paralyzed, watching every move the candidates for each

²²⁶ Nina Friedemann, *La Saga del Negro: Presencia Africana en Colombia* [The saga of the Negro: African presence in Colombia] (Santa Fé de Bogotá: Universidad Javeriana, 1993).

department²²⁷ take while competing for the crown. Pride bursts when a girl who is elected is from a specific region, and the reception in her hometown that follows also becomes a holiday. In November 2001, ten years after the blacks in Colombia were awarded representational rights in the Constitution as an ethnic minority, for the first time in the contest's history, a black woman from the Chocó region was elected the National Beauty Queen of Colombia. None has earned the crown since.²²⁸ It is ironic that Cartagena, the city on the Atlantic Coast where the contest is housed, also has one of the largest concentrations of black populations in the country. Only one national queen from Cartagena has been crowned, and she was not black. The two departments with more queens elected have been Valle and Atlántico, each with ten elected national beauty queens. None of them were black, even though these are two of the departments in Colombia that house many afro-descendants, the term in use to "properly name" blacks in Colombia today.

Cecilia's Performance

Cartagena is the most important center of tourism in Colombia. It was one of the most important ports of the Caribbean colonial power, one of the two ports where slaves were imported from Africa. As such, it also became the place where *cimarronismo* was established: fugitive communities of slaves that freed themselves

²²⁷ The Republic of Colombia is divided into 32 departments that in turn are divided into municipalities.

²²⁸ One can see the faces of the 70 beauty queens here: Concurso Nacional de la Belleza [National beauty competition], 2008, Terra, http://canales.terra.com.co/mujer/infografias/reinados/historia_reinados.html.

and settled around the city limits.²²⁹ Colonial Cartagena, site of the first revolt against Spanish power as well as the National Beauty Pageant, is a walled city where the price of a home is only attainable for the richest of the rich, surrounded by extreme poverty and racial discrimination. This was the home of Cecilia Porras (Cartagena 1920-1971), a rebel and a trailblazer who did not have much time to show the fruits of her art working. As a member of the upper classes, she was educated and is now remembered as one of the first women painters of the Colombian Caribbean region. She was a modernist, experimenting in the 1950s with a style that made many of her contemporary male colleagues famous.²³⁰ Her father was a prominent member of Cartagena's creole society who wrote about diverse matters in the first half of the twentieth century. One can learn about his open racism through his writings. A respected patriarchal figure of Cartagena's bourgeoisie, he was confronted by the choices his daughter Cecilia made, especially since as director of a magazine like *América Española (Spanish America)*, he was opposed to modern art in the local scene. However, that is where his daughter inserted her life and work.

²²⁹ Alfonso Múnera, *El Fracaso de la Nación: Región, clase y raza en el caribe colombiano (1717 – 1810)* [Failure of the nation: Region, class and race in the Colombian Caribbean] (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Banco de la República, El Áncora Editores, 1998).

²³⁰ Isabel Cristina Ramírez Botero, "Cecilia Porras: Un Hito de Ruptura en las Artes Plásticas en Cartagena a Medios del Siglo XX" [Cecilia Porras: A milestone in the plastic arts in Cartagena in the mid-20th century], *Memoria y Sociedad* 16, no. 33 (2012): 100-119.



Figure 80. Photo of Cecilia Porras' *Ange Volando*. Retrieved from Nestor Martinez, "Cecilia Porras," July 19, 2013, <http://www.slideshare.net/nestormartinez/cecilia-porras>.

In figure 80, one can see that Cecilia Porras was a woman of the future. This painting of an angel attests to her education in art history and her exchange with groups of artists like Alejandro Obregón and Enrique Grau, who were experimenting with non-naturalistic representations of either mythical themes or everyday Colombian subjects. Gustavo Tatis Guerra, a noted Cartagena journalist, recently wrote about her resurgence in the national art scene due to homages paid to her in Bogotá thirty years after her death. He refers to her as the "forgotten one."²³¹ Researchers have now reclaimed her as a very early performance artist. Alexa Cuesta, a feminist art critic from Cartagena, hailed her ways of appearing at parties

²³¹ Gustavo Tatis Guerra, "Cecilia Porras: Una maravilla desconocida" [Cecilia Porras: An unknown marvel], *El Universal*, November 7, 2010, <http://www.eluniversal.com.co/suplementos/dominical/cecilia-porras-una-maravilla-desconocida-0>.

and other artistic gatherings as early performance pieces.²³² Her love for costumes bordered on an everyday performance vocation, even before this term became trendy in the arts in Colombia.

Cecilia was part of the famous bohemian group *La Cueva* in Barranquilla. This group of intellectuals used to meet for conversation in a bar, and their antics were as famous as their works of art have become. The work of Gabriel García Márquez sprang from this group, and it was nurtured by the exchange with all his colleagues. Even though Cecilia was a shy woman, she managed to become part of a group of men who would change the course of the Colombian art world. She worked on their film projects, illustrated their books, and posed dramatically for their paintings, while creating her own modernist paintings.²³³

²³² Alexa Cuesta, from an interview with Porras in May, 2014 about her research, forthcoming in "Visionarias." For more information about Cuesta's work see "Cecilia Porras," *La Redhada: Red de Mujeres del Caribe*, <http://laredhada.wordpress.com/artistas-caribes/>.

²³³ Sara Araujo Castro, "Regresa la Luz de Cecilia Porras" [The light of Cecilia Porras returns], *El Espectador*, Bogotá, October 26, 2009, <http://www.elespectador.com/impreso/articuloimpreso168806-regresa-luz-de-cecilia-porras>.

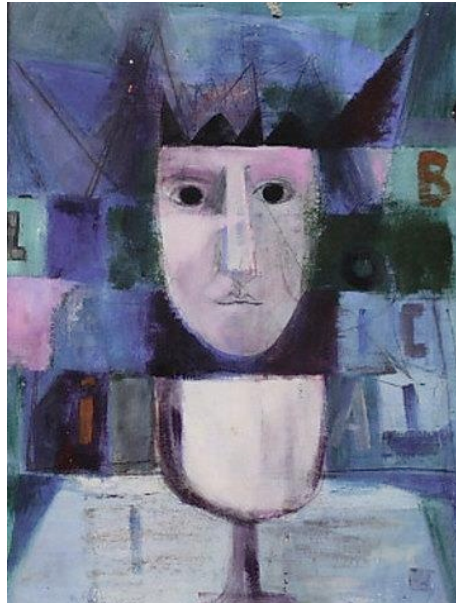


Figure 81. Cecilia Porras, *Arlequín*, 1956, retrieved on June 2013 from “Disfruta lo mejor de Colombia” [Enjoy Colombia’s best], Colarte, Web Page: <http://www.colarte.com/colarte/foto.asp?idfoto=281923>.

After an exhibition in 1956 Marta Traba, an eminent art critic of the time, praised Porras’ new more abstract treatment of the female figure due to its creativity beyond interpretation and the artist’s appropriation of natural elements that are then transformed by her coloring, which seems to signify an entrance into the sparkling new art scene in Colombia.²³⁴ Figure 80 is a photograph of one of the harlequins mentioned by Traba in her critique. On the web page that references her, she is named Cecilia Porras de Child, giving preponderance to her husband’s last name. She belongs to the realm of male privilege.

²³⁴ Marta Traba, “Cecilia Porras: el triunfo de Arlequín,” *Intermedio*, November 9, 1956, <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/1098290/language/en-US/Default.aspx>.

Therefore, it is quite interesting for a feminist reading to see how her work was profiled at the time she was trying to emerge in that new national art scene with a distinct voice. The following paragraph is undoubtedly a testimony to what Cecilia Porras faced:

When the first half of the century came to an end, there were two good-looking students in Bogotá from the School of Fine Arts who were well known in the artistic and cultural medium. They were Lilia Peñuela and Cecilia Porras. It seems they fascinated their young male colleagues, and thus their portraits were painted often. Thanks to these artists, Ramirez Villamizar, Hernando Tejada and Jaime Lopez Correa, who painted their portraits repeatedly, they were well regarded...so nobody had seen a painting where they had not been the models, but [in the case of Cecilia] the authors'... curiosity became surprise because many had suspected that the daughter of an aristocratic family from Cartagena had decided to spend some time studying art in Bogotá in order to have a good time in good company. This exhibition transformed all of these suspicions, as the talent of the artist is evident.²³⁵

Despite all of this, Cecilia Porras managed to leave a mark for younger generations of women artists in Colombia. Her work is seen as that of a pioneer who belonged to a group of bohemian artists, which is considered quite a feat in itself for a woman at that time. In 2009, *Semana Magazine* published an article about her that

²³⁵ Walter Engel, *Pintoras Colombianas Contemporáneas* [Contemporary Colombian Painters] (Bogotá: Cuadernos de Arte Colombiano, 1959); my translation.

starts like this: “The most remembered image of Cecilia Porras is probably that of her waist.”²³⁶ Just as in the paragraph cited above, she is usually mentioned in relation to this group of male colleagues. For example, she is mentioned in the article entitled “Una Mujer en la Cueva” (A woman in the cave) as the one who designed the first edition of *La Hojarasca* by Gabriel García Márquez. There it is also stated that she was the only woman in the now iconic film *La Langosta Azul* by Alvaro Cepeda Samudio. In this iconic Colombian film, her character is *La Hembra* (The Female), a name used mainly to denote the female gender of an animal, a name in common usage for a woman who is desirable. Yet, it is evident that Cecilia was looking for a way to become a recognized artist on her own merit. She was one of the individuals who got together at La Cueva (The Cave) in Barranquilla. As recently as 2009, in several articles talking about a retrospective exhibition of her work, she is mentioned as one of the few women of her time who broke the mold, reminding us especially that she was a friend of those other brilliant male artists who revolutionized Colombia’s literature and arts. In figure 82, taken from one those articles, Cecilia is in full bloom. Although she was a mestiza, a creole woman, race identity questions were not to be seen in her art.

Cecilia lived in a conservative society where she performed a different identity than the one expected of her. She could not escape the vision of others, the others who could not see beyond their time. Yet she colored her own world by

²³⁶ “Una mujer en la cueva” [A woman in the cave], *Semana*, November 14, 2009, <http://www.semana.com/cultura/articulo/una-mujer-la-cueva/109828-3>; my translation.

performing a new way of being: that of a woman that was also an artist in the middle of twentieth century Colombia.



Figure 82. Photograph of Cecilia Porrás in *Semana*, November 14, 2009. Retrieved in August 2013 from: <http://www.semana.com/cultura/articulo/una-mujer-la-cueva/109828-3>

One can see a predicting gaze in the painting in figure 83, entitled *White Cartagena*, painted shortly before she died. The white colonial buildings against a background of sea and skies feature one small spot, a roof that reminds the viewer of the passion enclosed by centuries in this walled beautiful city. As time has passed it has become more evident that Cartagena is a city for white privilege, where the majority of the black population perform dance feats and colorful, fruit-vending

parades for national and international tourists. In order to survive, this city now lives on the commercialization of its own colored people as exotic.²³⁷



Figure 83. Photograph of the painting *White Cartagena* by Cecilia Porras. Retrieved in April 2014 from: “Cecilia Porras, pintora” [Cecilia Porras, painter], Colarte. <http://www.colarte.com/colarte/conspintores.asp?idartista=517>.

Obeida’s Drama

Obeida Benavides is a dramaturge and performer born in Cartagena in 1963. Even though she is Afro-Colombian, a popular term since 1991, she states that she is not interested in racial issues as an artist.²³⁸ Obeida is part of a mixed family where

²³⁷ Daniel Greenbaum, “Cartagena Tourism Video,” October 18, 2007, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv7qsNzIRZQ>.

²³⁸ Personal interview, December, 2011.

all skin colors are present. They could be seen to represent the emblematic Colombian creole family, an important intrinsic part of the middle class mestizo mythic population. But Obeida as an artist is much more interested in myth in general: mythic women in classical literature and mythic family ancestors. She develops dramatic pieces from the untold stories of her ancestors and finds a new understanding of them by studying classical myth.

In one particular instance, she looked at the survival strategies of a population of Colombian women whose lives seemed to depend on having a man, a concept Benavides aligned with the figure of Clytemnestra. This is the mythic woman who dares to kill her husband, Agamemnon, as soon as he comes back from war. Her driving question was: why kill the husband? This fact reminded her of her grandmother, whose story she started to remember more clearly. She then situated her investigation on the women of Montes de María, a region in the north coast of Colombia in a mountain range, where she was conducting theatre-related social work. She found out that for these women, a useless man, a dead man, an absent man, any man would suffice. Even the memory of a man was needed for survival in a culture where a woman's subjectivity is linked to her being attached to a male partner.

Benavides became interested in the stories that most of these women told her about having been abandoned by their men, needing to fend for themselves and their children. She was struck by their need to keep the memory of a good husband alive for the supposed sake of the children. What attracted her attention was the fact

that even if the women were strong and were the providers, they still needed to be attached, in some fantastical way, to a man, in order to feel some sense of self-worth. In this very practical situation, one can see that the idea of a woman who has no identity without a man is still prevalent across race, social class and age in Colombia. It is the concept of the inessentiality of women in practice, in everydayness. And when Obeida finally set out to write her dramatic text and then stage it and perform it, she was purposely looking back not only at her past, because these women resembled so many in her family, but also at herself, at that moment coming out of a painful and traumatic separation and having to provide for her own two children.

Through her project *Nana para una memoria terca* (Lullaby for a stubborn memory), Benavides's intention was to be able to remember a grandmother in a way that was more direct than family stories or long lost childhood memories. She started to become the woman her grandmother was. She learned the folk melodies of the Montes de María and began singing lullabies to the children to come, nursing the future Obeidas who seemed like all the women she met there. The artist was carrying a heavy history - maybe one she would start to shed, like she hoped these women could also understand and learn to do. From this region, comprised of many little towns, she brought an embodied memory: the songs and dances belonging to all of the women she worked with, probably similar to her long lost grandmother: that black woman she thought was not present in her contemporary urban life.

As she sang the songs and moved the moves of these women at Montes de María, the stories of all the women before her were like the mirrors she had forgotten to look at. She embodied them and her grandmother at a precise moment in her personal life when healing needed to occur. Then and only then, the artist had access to a transforming experience, one that she could hold on to, in ways the past—her lineage—had failed to support her. Or so she thought, because in actuality the opposite had happened. While connecting with these women she embodied their melodies and movements and thus was able to reach a part of herself that she had forgotten. Her forgotten story and the stories of these women needed to be told. Obeida is part of a mestizo culture, born in a milieu that tended to forget her darkest skinned side. Her sisters are considered white, while she is phenotypically black. Her gaining consciousness of the forgotten legacy of her dark grandmother was a spiritual revelation through dramaturgy and performance. She deems that her healing began when she understood that creating the theatre piece had become a spiritual journey. Anzaldua has stated:

The work takes place underground-subconsciously-. It is a work the soul performs. The focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor it is a balancing of opposite powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is greater than the sum of its severed parts. The third element is a new

consciousness—a *mestiza* consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspects of each new paradigm.²³⁹

The performance piece starts when a woman, any woman, gives birth to any child. The performer resorts to Medea, the mythic child killer, and to the Caribbean myth of “La Llorona” (The weeping woman), a ghost who cries for her dead babies. She has them meet in the performer’s body, and they become the central point of departure for the piece. Clytemnestra –the initial guide–is gone. Husbands are not the central point of the resulting piece. Children, maternity and mating are places for mythic womanhood that Benavides has found in order to understand the ways of others and eventually her own other-ness. Benavides embodied all of these women who, like her grandmother, had in a sense killed their abandoning husbands, while keeping what was useful in a mythic memory order that left their cultural milieu intact. As such, she began to disappear. As new embodiments took place, these various forms of otherness she had become transformed her again. The artist relates how she had an injured back at the time that seemed to magically heal while creating and performing this piece.²⁴⁰ Healing, in her case, seems to arise from becoming an-other, one who is at the same time keeping more possibilities of being, alive. What the women in her lineage and the women at Montes de María had thought essential to womanhood thus dissolves into inessentiality. She did not have to be this woman–she could be that woman, another woman, whichever she chose.

²³⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 101.

²⁴⁰ Personal interview, December, 2011.

By performing her own piece in her own words, in her own body, in spaces she can choose, an artist may realize that diverse positions are not only possible, but effective in daily life. Art is not only what happens at a liminal moment and then disappears. Art is a happening that remains as a mark, once performed.

As the space is opened in performing other ways of being, Benavides makes an appeal to mythic women in order to ask why they need to kill loved ones. She wants to know why the legacy of sacrifice as a duty is so prevalent in women. Or is it that sacrifice is the other side of destroying what does not allow you to be? She asks the question to herself, to women in the audience and women in the past, real or mythical. Now she is some kind of Medusa who is not afraid of the mirror that can reflect her monster-ness. Becoming a monster, a woman who performs, Obeida Benavides gives instructions on how to hug a Medusa: "But I feel like Medusa, naïve, desiring that someone will hold me. But the problem is, nobody knows how to embrace a Medusa, a nomadic, prickling, translucent animal..."²⁴¹ She identifies with Medusa, that ancient memory of a woman whose embrace can kill. Medusa's call is important when she re-performs the relationship with her husband, the man who could not embrace her or embrace her desires for a life of her own.

²⁴¹ Notes for Obeida's piece obtained during fieldwork; my translation.



Figure 84. Photograph Obeida Benavides performing *Nana* at Villa de Leyva in 2009. Provided by the artist from her personal archives.

Men like these were kept alive for too long by Obeida's forbearers. Thus in the piece *Nana*, she digs a hole of water (figure 84) where she sings and moves to other words, those of many lost women who mourn the man that is supposed to bear their look, their meaning, their sign. Her contemporary man became the same man of all of these previous women, their songs turned into killing lullabies: "I went to look for myself. My grandmother is an excuse, a point of departure-what I want to understand is why am I like a grandmother I did not even get to know until now. I also want to know why what was normal for her is unacceptable for me"²⁴² But the

²⁴² Personal interview, December, 2011.

question remains: why is the myth of woman so compelling to investigate for a woman who is a lawyer and works in theater and writes her own pieces in Colombia, in the twenty-first century? Where can she find models of female-ness if mothers and grandmothers provide difficult answers that are not applicable anymore? When Obeida works her questions through dramaturgy and performance, she is enacting other ways of being. She says that race issues are not a concern, but being black and having just turned fifty-one years old, she is currently finding paying jobs in telenovelas and television series where she is to play either maids or older funny folkloric women. Either she plays these roles or she starves. Her plight transcends the auditions and roles she obtains.

As an educated, middle class woman, Obeida Benavides has had chances to avoid the encounters that can mark one with a darker skin as in Colombia. But the burden is still there, every day, even when she walks with her children and people assume that she is the nanny. The women she studied in rural areas of the country for the *Nana* project belong to a population much more vulnerable than hers, but they have given her the strength to understand her own situation. Despite the adoption of the idea of a nation built on *mestizaje* with no separate ethnic populations or races, the black and indigenous populations tend to be located in specific areas and separated from other segments of the population. This makes them very vulnerable to becoming targets of continued displacement from their lands as successive appropriation by powerful groups for coffee, banana, sugar cane, palm oil and cocaine plantations occur. Sometimes she becomes these women when

she is cast in popular television shows, but the work that matters to her is when she is able to enact her own questions through performing her own pieces. In her productions she is a protagonist, usually a solo one. She confesses that when she thinks of herself or her pieces, she never thinks to consciously address color or social condition or any gender issues. She believes that her work speaks about subjects relevant to anyone. In Obeida's latest piece, *Marca de Agua* (Watermark) (figure 85), the protagonist is a woman who believes she is a magician and who is so distracted that she is never talking about just one subject even in a single sentence.



Figure 85. Benavides performing during the premiere of *Marca de Agua*. Bogotá, September, 2013. Photograph by Giulia Ducci provided by the artista.

Alicia, the protagonist, sees life mediated by fantasy. She is moved by happenings, by the intention of others. She moves when the moment needs her to

move, as if exploiting the fact that she is inessential to the fullest: “For me this woman is Colombia. She needs to be jumping from one party to the next and is not capable of looking at her self. She cannot recognize anything that does not involve celebration.”²⁴³ *Marca de agua* (*Watermark*) is a name that references those traces of humidity we find on the walls and places where there has been flooding. Obeida’s words flow like barbaric bursts of inexactitude in the dramaturgy. This is the way she presents the characters in the piece: ²⁴⁴

Alicia

Lleva en su cuello las palabras que escurren de su cabeza. Ella misma no se acuerda de sí misma. Sísifo contemporánea que hace el trabajo inútil de ordenar las palabras.

(Words are on her neck and they drip from her head. She does not remember her self. Contemporary Sisyphus whose useless job is to order words.)

Aníbal el Pulcro

Representante natural de la urbanidad de Carreño, gasta su vida limpiando la evidencia de su evidencia.

(Natural representative of the Carreño etiquette book. Spends his life cleaning the evidence of the evidence.)

²⁴³ Personal interview, April 18, 2014.

²⁴⁴ Text ceded by the author. Unpublished.

La Maga

Patidifusa, alharaquera, el alma de la fiesta. Reina de un universo mediático que se derrumba despacito ante la amenaza de la marca del agua.

(<two colombianisms without translation>---The soul of the party, queen of a mediated universe that slowly crumbles over the menace of the watermark.)²⁴⁵

This presentation of the text presupposes an open dramaturgy very much susceptible to interpretation when it comes to montage. In the first and only presentation so far of the piece, Obeida was the director, producer, stage manager and an actor. This took place in Bogotá in 2004, financed with a grant from the Ministry of Culture. The total control she has over the production of her pieces exists in sharp contrast with the total subservient role that she has as an Afro-Colombian actor in television productions. These productions geared towards a consumer-audience of popular television are her everydayness as a breadwinner. Her own fantasyland, where Alicia and the Sorceress navigate, is the reality that becomes ever so material as Obeida is able to perform and shape her own characters. Benavides' theatrical work allows her to achieve everything she has trouble attaining in everyday life: she creates her own circumstances and atmospheres as well as the characters she wants; she writes about her fears, her fantasies, she imagines ways out of the maze; she produces and controls all aspects of the performances to suit her strong character. An Afro-Colombian woman who

²⁴⁵ My translation, from the original manuscript ceded by the artist during fieldwork in Bogotá, 2013.

lives through many small quotidian racial gestures, Obeida grows more and more confident in her own powers and gives back her own reflections useful to others as well. Instead of worrying about color or race, she chooses colorful women to embody as examples of difference, of other ways of being. She continually uses masks and clothes that she tries on and plays with in order to understand the questions that pierce her.

Interstice 5: "Socorro"²⁴⁶

Cosas que no se dicen: Socorro era negra, gorda, pobre y mi mejor amiga. Los domingos, antes de ir a la misa de diez, se empolvaba el cuello con polvos blancos que con el sudor le dejaban una línea de bolitas grises. -Socorro, no uses esos polvos-, le decía yo, que la quería como se quiere una gota de agua en el desierto, pero ella insistía en seguir usándolos. Antes de que se le terminaran corría hasta la tienda - un polvo Arrurrú - pedía con la voz de un enfermo que suplica el perdón de sus pecados y, como el sacerdote que concede paz, el cachaco de la tienda le vendía el polvo que ella pagaba con el dinero ahorrado durante un mes sin tomar merienda en el colegio. La volví a ver muchos años después, cuando las historias sobre los árboles de ciruelas y los helados en la fuente de soda se transformaron en cosas importantes como la marca del reloj, la hipoteca de la casa y el apellido de los

²⁴⁶ Socorro is a popular Spanish name for women. It means "Help." This is a short story by Viridiana Molinares (Santo Tomás, Atlántico, 1973). She is also a performer and a Professor of Constitutional Law at Universidad del Norte. This short story is part of her forthcoming book, entitled *Tedium and Other Stories*. This short story was ceded by the author to be used as an interstice in the present dissertation.

maridos. Seguía siendo mi mejor amiga, seguía con las bolitas grises en el cuello, seguía soñando que en su vida podía tener algo blanco.

Socorro

Things one doesn't say: Socorro was black, fat, poor and my best friend. On Sundays, before going to ten o'clock mass, she dusted her neck with white powders that left a line of little gray balls with her sweat. –Socorro, don't use those powders I said to her, loving her the way one desires a drop of water in the desert, but she insisted on continuing to use them. Before she ran out, she rushed to the store. An Arrurru powder, she asked, with the voice of someone ill asking forgiveness for her sins and, like the priest granting peace, the store owner sold her the powder that she paid for with the money saved up from a month without snacks at school. I went back to see her many years later, when the stories about plum trees and ice creams at the soda fountain were transformed into important things like the brand of a watch, the mortgage on the house and the last names of her husbands. She kept on being my best friend, she still had the little gray balls on her neck, she kept dreaming that she could have something white in her life.²⁴⁷

Tania's Hell

Tania Maza (1974) was born and lives in Cartagena. She is a theatre artist and a poet. A black woman, she is not interested in being identified as an Afro-Colombian.²⁴⁸ She talks of being obviously black, but having an indigenous mother

²⁴⁷ My translation.

²⁴⁸ Personal interview, January, 2013.

and Spanish grandparents. She says she cannot identify herself as a member of a race and that even her daughter, resulting from a union she had with a black man, is not black. "I have no idea where her softly colored skin comes from," she says laughing. As contradictory as skin coloring can be in Colombia, it is a country where social status is quite a visible marker and underlying racism is rampant but not addressed. Despite twenty years of a constitutional reform that declared its multiethnic population to be the basis for the country's identity, people do not see themselves as black, white or indigenous, in general. There is a wider gap among regions, accents and culinary customs, but they are seen as part of an enjoyable way to interact. Like Tania, all of the artists interviewed for this dissertation see themselves as Colombian women. Some of them do pay more attention to what being female means for their everydayness, the country and the art they care to make.

Becoming others on a stage is about becoming an-other who suffers from cultural projections that must be dismantled. There seems to be an ethical mandate that comes with the fact that women, as Beauvoir showed, are the Absolute Other in most cultures. This position of otherness is a location from which to address issues that pertain to a multiplicity of others. As Malabou states, "Woman is the place without a place of materiality which is not passive materiality, which can always take form, auto-engender, and develop itself."²⁴⁹ She says that nonetheless, there appears to be a sense of using different forms of materials to conform artistic

²⁴⁹ Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), 130.

practices that keep de-stabilizing cultural mandates, that keep opening possibilities of other ways of being. Artists like Benavides and Maza are women who “elude form.”²⁵⁰ They are constantly creating new forms, successfully or not, and always trying to engender in ways other than what has been naturalized as a female essence or racial determination. Not identifying with Afro Colombian-ness as a specific site of reference for their pieces is about not accepting essences in general, of any kind.

Like many women who write, dance, paint and perform, Tania knows there are multiple themes and a multiplicity of colors and creeds. She believes that her creativity finds common ground when thinking about issues that affect the female population. For a decade she has been telling stories about women’s lives. For example, one performance is about the everydayness of a woman with Alzheimer’s disease. Some of her work is presented in places where human rights activists are invited. She creates workshops for a diverse population of women, children and mostly displaced people through government and private organization projects.

One of Tania’s latest projects is the creation of a non-profit foundation called *Olympia* to protect and aid victims of intra-familial abuse. I argue that many contemporary female artists in Colombia are in search of an identity that is not attached to differentiation or particularity. Their identity seems to be a construction, a re-constitution, through the deconstruction of mythological and stereotypical images in a patriarchal society still on the brink of modernism. This

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

identity is based on understanding what it can mean to be a subject with rights in a culture attached to essentialist views on women. “Women’s issues” are seen by these artists as an ethical mandate on the way to becoming a full subject aware of differences, aware of dangerous essentialisms, but still looking for a more responsible way of being to continue becoming full citizens. This means not only having the right to vote but also the right to voice and be heard about what matters to them.

Tania has a law degree but was keener on creating what she calls a “gender-theatre” project. She founded a theatre group with quite an existentialist name: *De La Nada Teatro* (Nothingness Theatre), in 2008. There she created a solo performance called *Descuartizadas* (Drawn and quartered)²⁵¹ (see figure 86). In this piece she holds a black baby doll as a symbol of fragility. She uses the idealized figure of maternity as a way to pull in women spectators in order to speak against abuse and violence. In the performance piece she never mentions the fact of her blackness or the race of the doll. She is talking about all women, mentioning well-known concrete names of different cases of violence against Colombian women that she has documented. These named subjects of abuse and death cross social classes, racial backgrounds, regions of the country and ages. Tania works on this performance in all sorts of venues: halls, salons, and homes. Wherever she is invited she places her body and the doll in a very simple manner and starts a harrowing description of dismemberment. In Colombia, even though she is referring

²⁵¹ This word can be roughly translated as the women carved-up-into-pieces.

particularly to crimes against women, dismemberment easily conjures images of too many deaths by political violence, performed on men, women, children and the elderly alike. Anyone observing her performance can identify an example that they too suffered, someone they knew or something they know about. Tania Maza's body and the doll's can be seen as pertaining to the black race, but her intention is not to make issues about racism visible. She gives voice to a diversity of women who suffer from cultural practices that affect daily life.



Performance Des-cu-ar-ti-za-das-Tania
Maza Chamorro

Figure 86. Promotional photograph of the performance piece *Descuartizadas* provided by Tania Maza during fieldwork in Barranquilla, January 2013.

Tania is a published poet. In the following poem one can hear her voice attempting to identify with a mythical woman who has been deemed by the canon of classical literature represent the qualities imperative for the ideal woman: Dante's Beatrice.

My Divine Comedy

After descending
 a few frying pans from hell
 I remain with more fevers
 like wanting
 against my mother's advice
 to enjoy sleeping naked
 reading until dawn
 not wearing a watch
 wearing boots, always
 not having a boyfriend.

After descending
 a few frying pans from hell
 I am little Beatriz
 who since the third circle smiles
 holding on to Dante.²⁵²

When Tania becomes Beatrice, not performing on a stage but through the performative action of poetry, words give Tania the chance to mirror what is expected of her by a western education in a Caribbean setting. It is a way to perform

²⁵² Rubén Darío Otalvaro, *Ellas escriben en el Caribe* [Women who write in the Caribbean] (Montería: Fondo Editorial Universidad de Córdoba, 2012), 149. My translation.

the whiteness, the norm, the status state of being, the ideal of an Italian mythical woman that she needs to enact in order understand and assimilate all the notions of a femininity that does not happen under her control. Thus the question comes back, as with Obeida: why is the myth of woman so compelling for a Colombian woman who is a lawyer but works in theatre and writes poetry? Tania and Obeida both studied law, but allowed their passion for theater and writing to guide their lives. It seems more compelling to them to pursue a more difficult career, one filled with economic uncertainties, than to practice law, quite a lucrative profession in Colombia. Why is it that despite the non-possibility of equality due to racial prejudices, they prefer to go back to a past that is and is not theirs? What are they searching for in their questions about what it means to be Medusa, Beatrice, and Clytemnestra? I argue that the impossibility of identifying with supposed feminine essences that women like Tania and Obeida found in the world they were born in has given them questions about gender identity that are prior to racial identity. Being black is not like being a woman. Being a woman is a mystery to be dealt with if you are told stories about mythic femaleness from the beginning. Being categorized as black is an additional, not-mysterious characteristic that in the Colombian case is about class, social status and disempowerment. The first source of power then, is to take on inessentiality as a place from which to begin to look at the reasons for disenfranchisement. Being a woman is being inessential—a great place to become an-other.



Figure 87. Photograph of Maza during a performance of *Descuartizadas* in Cartagena in 2011; provided by the artist.

Margarita's Mirror

Margarita Ariza (Cali, Colombia, 1970) uses family images and stories to mount an assault on stereotypical ideas of beauty about women in Colombia. The project, called *Blanco Porcelana* (*Porcelain White*), won a government grant to be produced in Barranquilla during the year 2011. *Blanco Porcelana* is an aesthetic intervention of images, objects, stories and documents that are part of familial practices passed down for generations. The artist mixes genres using design, pastiche, video, text, sound, public interventions and performance, making the piece an installation and also an ongoing project that finds no end. Like chemical reactions, her creative actions become something else in the hands of the others who respond. To achieve this effect, Ariza created an interactive web page where

people could enter and see the diverse responses to their own and others' postings. Inspired by the works of other artists who deconstruct negritude²⁵³ like Mickalene Thomas, Ellen Gallagher, Lorna Simpson and Liliana Angulo, Ariza comments on daily invisible practices that regulate ideas of beauty and distinction within her personal intra-familial culture. Most of the beautification practices in Colombia disguise blackness. She states,

This work seeks to reflect on a model of beauty that classifies individuals in scales of grey, from white to black, and is mainly about the inherited underlying racism that finds different expressions in public and private realms.²⁵⁴

In Colombia Margarita Ariza can be considered a beautiful white woman. She recalls all of the discussions in family gatherings about who had more or less perfect skin tone, hair and other facial features in accordance with a system based on comparisons with what her aunts labeled the perfect color: the porcelain white of grandmother Teresa. She decided to intervene her family history in a series of actions that together make up the complete project, one that now cannot be completed since it developed a life of its own after members of the family attacked

²⁵³ Negritude is a word used daily in Colombia in order to refer to wider, non-localized, afro-descended communities. It was coined by Aimé Césaire as a response to the *Who am I* of Descartes and the European philosophical tradition. It is a *Who are we* that counteracts the universal position of the white male.

Ricardo A. Ferrada, "Aíme Césaire: Acción poética y negritud" [Aíme Césaire: Poetic action and negritude], *Literatura y lingüística* no. 13 (2001): 89-104.

²⁵⁴ Notes on her project created during fieldwork.

her. First she intervened the new modern public transportation system of the city of Barranquilla.

With the cooperation of management, she placed everyday phrases people use popularly without much awareness of their racist meaning on the public announcement system of three of the stations of the *Transmetro*.²⁵⁵ Some of these sentences were also pasted on walls in the stations. In the main station she placed an installation consisting of the white furniture of a baby's room. At the bottom of the crib, a video could be seen of Margarita going about in her home performing everyday acts of whitening and beautification (figure 88). She staged this intervention for October 12, 2011, on a date when Colombia celebrates the "race day." This day in the calendar actually celebrates the moment when the Spanish fleet could finally see land before arriving in the "Indias" in 1492. It was declared an official national holiday in 1939. Margarita Ariza's intention was to help the people coming in and out of the metro station to reflect on what this day really means in a country that keeps celebrating colonization through everyday practices. She performed for seven consecutive days through the simple act of brushing her hair for hours. She continues to restage the installation in several places. In figure 89 she can be seen brushing her curly hair to straightness at La Alianza Francesa Gallery in Cali in April, 2014.

²⁵⁵ In 2010, Barranquilla implemented its first public modern transportation system, called Transmetro: Massive Integrated Transportation System.



Figure 88. Photograph of the crib Installation during the piece Blanco Porcelana near a Transmetro Station. Provided by Margarita Ariza during fieldwork in Barranquilla, January 2012.



Figure 89. Photograph of Margarita Ariza performing for Blanco Porcelana posted by the artist on Google Plus on June 2014.

On the walls of the crowded Transmetro station, the public could find eleven different mirrors with paper doll type wigs painted on them. When you looked at yourself, some other type of hair appeared (figure 90). The hair drawings pasted on the mirrors were based on photographs of family members. Here her personal experience is definitely intended as a political action. Trespassing within the strict private-public boundaries of middle class Colombian society brought on dire consequences: a legal battle with a fraction of her family who felt unjustly accused of racism. They sued the artist for using the photograph of their common beloved grandmother. On January 22, 2013, Margarita Ariza sent emails to her friends and colleagues asking them to send letters to the Constitutional Court to revise the order given by a judge to stop all of her exhibitions and close *Blanco Porcelana's* web page. When trying to access the web page she created in order to interact with others, one encounters an announcement warning that due to a legal action the page is being restructured (figure 91).



Figure 90. Photograph from Ariza's archive, taken during the installation of *Blanco Porcelana* at a Transmetro station in Barranquilla, 2011.

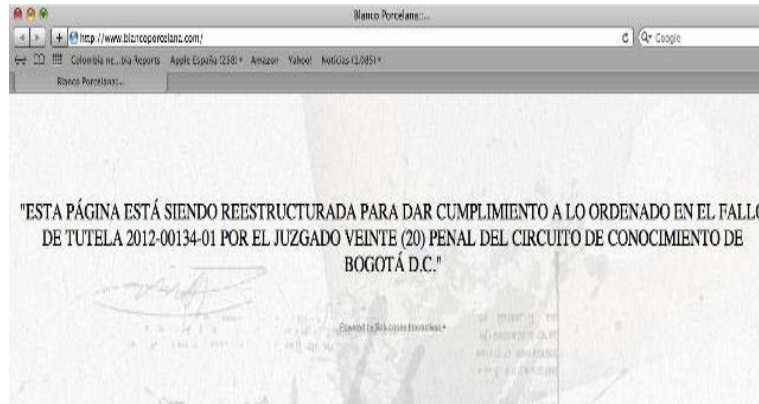


Figure 91. Screen shot from the image retrieved July, 2013 at Blanco Porcelana, last modified 2012, <http://www.blancoporcelana.com>.

How is it possible that all of the actions Ariza took using her personal situation, were seen as a threat by her own family? Unveiling hidden oppressive practices within such personal material has the power to shake beliefs in a manner that can turn violent. As the artist opened her personal memories and subjected them to scrutiny about a colonial ideology present in contemporary everydayness, her family saw this as a stain on the immaculate picture of grandmother Teresa. What a huge irony, since the only completely new material object that Margarita created for her piece is a face powder compact (figure 92).



Figure 92. Photograph of the powder boxes from the artist's archives. Provided by Ariza during fieldwork in Barranquilla on January 2012.

This compact contains grandmother Teresa's picture where the mirror should be. The user can apply white face powder with sand paper concealed in the puff. Thus faces seem in need of sanding to erase blackness and aspire to some shade of whiteness. While using a direct familial reference, the powder compact implies that Colombia's gaze is racist. The fact that the family in reference interpreted it as an affront and a huge dark shadow upon the image they had of their beautiful grandmother evidences the piece's a powerful performative gesture. The only way they found to deal with this power was to sue legally. This fact alone gave an unexpected continuity to *Blanco Porcelana*, thus stressing its performative aspect and giving the artist more chances to demonstrate her point. Ariza was surprised at the course her loving gesture took, and to learn that such a gesture could cause a rupture perceived as violent by those she intended to address. Her family includes not only the close relatives belonging to Teresa's lineage. She sees the whole nation as her family. In her work one remembers a very important question feminists have

been trying to pose and answer now for decades: who is a woman to speak for all women? And in this case, who is this Margarita who dares to speak for her whole family; who does she think she is to confront the country in this subtle way? About what the project has yielded, the artist states:

It is interesting to think that all of this has been incorporated into the piece and that an initial execution has been strongly impacted by the diversity of readings of the material and now by a censorship that has produced a new piece. This is artistically interesting because now the public that would intervene as I had thought is the judge and my aunts, making new versions of the project intended to show veiled aspects of our reality.²⁵⁶

Margarita Ariza's project *Blanco Porcelana* includes a booklet she produced, intended as a bedside tale for children. The coming birth of her son, now an adolescent, precipitated many family discussions about what his appearance would be like: would his mouth be big, his skin clear, his hair the "good type"? In short, would he retain the traces of blackness in our extended family, or would he be another instance of erasure? She turned this personal experience into a "fairy tale," which she wrote about her own story of birth. Her parents were expecting the grandmother to make an appearance, but she died a few days before traveling. She exhibits this bedside book together with photographs and other textual exercises and videos developed during what she calls her "investigation on racism" in

²⁵⁶ Andres Romero Voltadano, interview by Andres Romero Voltadano, *La Moviola Cine Club* (blog), May, 2012, <http://lamoviolacineclub.blogspot.com/2012/05/blanco-porcelana-de-margarita-ariza-o.html>. My translation.

subsequent venues. Half of the booklet has been censored by her aunts' legal actions. It could be seen in its two versions on a web page one of her cousins has created in order to circumvent censorship.²⁵⁷

In Figure 93 one can see the exhibition of the familial archives encased in a transparent exhibition box, as a sign with which any Colombian family may identify. All of the actions, photographs, texts, images and objects that arose from this vital investigation are deconstructions of every day words and signs that mainly fall to the hands of mothers to pass along the future generations as regulatory practices that ensure that "mestizos" stay on the bright side of the spectrum, that is, consolidating pertinence to the affluent middle class. It is worth noting that even though the artist speaks in general about individuals subjected to racism, she is intervening on her own body, and the main image is that of the matriarch of her family. The female body as the receptor of projection has enormous power. Disrupting familial images has the power to dismantle emotions that, if not looked at deeply, can have the effect of breaking relationships apart.

²⁵⁷ This page is no longer accessible.



Figure 93. Photograph of the case in the installation of Margarita Ariza's Blanco Porcela. Posted by the artist on Google Plus in June, 2014, <https://plus.google.com/107469887998122704187/posts/aKqjcAh8W7u?pid=6019828017979210050&oid=107469887998122704187&authkey=CO7uvKP71JKqEw>.

Another way Margarita performed these disruptive actions was to present her piece in an actual beauty salon that operates inside a store. Clients and employees alike were presented with these ideas. Most of the shock and disgust towards what was being presented by the artist this time came from salon workers trained to straighten and color hair. They complained to the management for presenting that in their location. The location was perfect, since it is known place for beautification practices. Besides being a nationally known chain where one can find all types of beauty products, this particular location has a spa and a salon. The salon workers perceived *Blanco Porcelana* placed there as an affront because it literally does break the image in the mirrors, where clients are involved in all types of beautifying routines. We can easily relate this to Malabou's statement referring to

Irigaray's mimetic strategies: "Woman is no longer the victim of mime; she becomes its subversive instance."²⁵⁸

Like many women artists before her, Ariza has used not only her own body but also her private life in order to defy stereotypes that keep the status quo intact. Later on, as part of the ongoing piece, Ariza intervened the mirror of a vintage dressing table where she placed her grandmother's expanded translucent picture, covering the whole surface. In front of this surface she executed again the performance of brushing her hair in order to straighten it. Superimposed on the surface of grandmother Teresa is granddaughter Margarita, repeating the familial command to be whiter. In the doubling of these two related bodies there is a gentle question posed to hereditary practices, not just a repetition, which is what tradition means. Her body lovingly disrupts the image in the mirror that is not a mirror anymore. Even though her family is upset and went as far as to sue her legally in order to stop these performances and installations, what they attempt to do is what she is actually doing: stopping a repetition. Using the same weapons she has used to make her artistic practice, they metaphorically enable the further repetition of the piece as it gains even more attention, and this repetition has become part of the piece. In figure 94 one can see a more recent addition to the project: Ariza has integrated a notice on a wall of the subsequent exhibitions where the sentence *Family Penalty* has been embroidered. A black thread seems to be waiting for the next re-action. This last aspect of *Blanco Porcelana* shows how backlash can be

²⁵⁸ Malabou, *Changing Difference*, 123.

turned into a positive situation. Actions the artist is designing in order to counteract the actions against her artistic action are posing ethical questions in a country definitely marred by enormous issues and conflicts that seem more important.



Figure 94. Photograph of the sentence “Family Penalty” a new addition to the ongoing *Blanco Porcelana*. Posted by the artist on Google Plus in June, 2014. <https://plus.google.com/107469887998122704187/posts/aKqjcAh8W7u?pid=6019828017846673346&oid=107469887998122704187&authkey=CO7uvKP71JKqEw>.

A seemingly naïve art piece like *Blanco Porcelana*, obviously manufactured like an everyday unaesthetic product that brands almost a childlike innocence, has sparked a feud that has little chance of becoming a national issue. Happenings like this one seem almost irrelevant in Colombia, especially if it is an art work that a woman has prepared and that seems to have been metamorphosed into an inner circle, intimate dispute, or we could say, a home argument. Immanence is still the

name of the game for a woman artist; Beauvoir resonates again. As she has said, the realm of immanence is where a woman is situated. Ariza is executing art works that have the intention to expose, go beyond and transcend the personal, even though they spring from the personal realm. Yet the feud is within her family, within that smaller realm. Some media have paid attention; Margarita has had interviews about the struggle, and she is battling on legally with the aid of lawyers. Nothing has been enough to create a crisis of national consciousness. Somehow, months later, it all seems to have stayed in the private realm. Out of sight familial practices are micro-political actions that keep us all disciplined. Margarita Ariza was able to work through practices that seemed as normal as everydayness in her family and see them as what they were, ways of disciplining identity in order to achieve and sustain social status. The anger she provoked in her aunts, an outrage that was taken to the legal system, shows how difficult is to admit that these practices are ingrained to the point of making racism invisible. Revising personal history can teach us about collectivity. Ariza looked into her own family system and talked to the collective body of Colombia.

Sometimes collective outrage comes from unexpected places, and it has the power to erupt on the national scene with the force that an artistic exhibition cannot. Coincidentally, in those same months when Margarita was working on the performances and presentations of *Blanco Porcelana*, Colombia went into shock when a family in Cali (coincidentally the city Margarita was born in) opened their doors to *Hola Magazine* from Spain to take pictures of their home. Everyone,

including the women of the family, the camera crew, the magazine editors, and their Afro Colombian maids, were clueless about what they were about to show the nation. The article that was published about the beautiful house of the upper class women featured photographs of four white women sitting on a plush sofa looking at the camera and behind them, two black maids in uniforms, like statues looking at each other while holding silver platters (figure 95). The photograph was so realistic that no artist could have devised a better scenario in order to wake up the country about its naturalized racism.



Figure 95. “La foto de la discordia” [The photograph of discord], *Semana*, December 10, 2011, <http://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/la-foto-discordia/250614-3>.

Figure 96 is the promotional poster for Ariza’s *Blanco Porcelana*. There, we see Margarita’s smiling face when she was a child, with hair that is wavy and full of mythical figures. Wavy, unruly hair has to be straightened daily in Colombia. It is a private practice not dictated by any government or institution. It’s a micro practice that keeps things in their place. Social status is maintained or achieved via many of these small private acts. It is a hair that does not belong to the blackness of the

people who purport to be mixed, mestizos. Margarita's public practice of critiquing the status quo does not go into the void of indifference. Just as small everyday acts maintain the order of things, apparently small artistic acts disrupt from the inside, from the place where these racist practices begin, at home. Margarita has paid the price by enraging her family. But she is part of a new breed of women who have been voting and acting on laws and becoming educated, who that little by little will tell the country what they see and think. Margarita is white, she has unruly hair and she acknowledges where it comes from, maybe because she is safe. Her appearance is not a threat. Her social class is not in danger. But, she is not sitting on the plush sofa, facing the camera with the black maids behind her.



Figure 96. Photograph of the flyer for a 2014 exhibition of *White Porcelain in Cali*, provided by Ariza.

Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, a new generation of artists can translate events from the private realm to the public one, displacing the attention given to elements in their lives that seem normal, and thus denaturalizing events that need to be looked at more than twice. This brings forth a reflection on systems of little acts of violence that affect a large part of the population through everyday practices coming from inside households and relationships. Cleaning the house and tending relationships, interestingly enough, are the culturally sanctioned jobs of women in most of the world. No wonder many women like Ariza, Maza and Benavides also look here into these situations of domesticity as a place for violence, a behind-the-doors type of violence that is about emotional control, racial erasure and also the normalization of behavior patterns that keep silence as an undeclared rule.

Beauty and race in Colombia are performed insidiously and constantly in such ways that most people are not conscious of racism playing a role in quotidian life. Familial practices regulate national practices while creating modes of identity. The artists reviewed in this chapter disrupt the immanent realm of family to try to shake up naturalized ways of functioning that evidence gestures of conformity. They have been able to take responsible actions through concrete material acts. Making art, performing an identity that is not fixed, using their own bodies and diverse media at their disposal in order to continue creating and recreating what they see as a better world, begins with the closeness of the known and the intimate. The practices of three female Colombian artists reviewed in this chapter attest to a way

of living that has changed for women in Colombia since 1954, when the right to vote and the possibility of exerting full citizenship marked a watershed moment. They are using their art making as a way to question not only their own identity, but also those of their family and ultimately, the country. They are coloring their world with their own resources, hoping to make a difference.

This is why they like to interrogate familial practices, to look into their forbears' ways of being in order to find other ways. It is a recurrent theme to look at how their mothers, grandmothers and other women move, act, dress and behave in order to give these practices a second look, one that destabilizes the norm that became natural and difficult to shed. The void of inessentiality is conjured by a mirror, a mirror held by the artists. Through this mirror's opaque reflection, they can learn and show others what they taught themselves by doing art. Little by little, the reflecting mirror becomes transparent as the private practices become publicly exhibited mediated by art practices that perform new ways of seeing. These artists bring second, third, multiple looks to naturalized social phenomena that speak covertly of emotional violence and racial erasure. The immanent imposed femininity is exposed as a social construct that does not need to be sustained in order to grow as individuals in a nation that believes in its mixed ethnicity as a source of strength while it hides the killing look of a Medusa that paralyzes. To be a subject of rights is to keep disquieting the political construct, to keep finding fluidity within the fixed identities given by society, is to answer private questions about being, that ultimately transcend as they belong to many others as well. Coloring is not about

what color your skin, hair, or eyes are. Coloring is about facing your life with all its seemingly small private deeds by re-acting, performing new ways of being, and holding it with care until it becomes the color you imagine.

INTERLUDE 5: JULIETA

I do not enjoy being exposed. I was very introverted while growing up, so I decided to study mathematics and systems engineering. For four years I worked in this profession of data processing. But at the same time there was this need to express myself in a more artistic way. So I started to study Caribbean Literature but did not finish.

I decided to immigrate to Canada because they were giving access to people like me, young Colombians and with my education, quite easily. There I entered York University, where I studied visual arts as an undergraduate again and continued to do the Masters.

I created an organization for artistic projects with my partner. We organize events and find funding with which we produce projects. At the same time I had to earn a living by doing the work of simultaneous translating during immigration court hearings.

This act of translation helped in many ways: aside from supporting myself, it was a job where my curiosity for the other had a great outlet. As I spoke in first person, translating, these words were passing through my body, and I was learning about feelings of others, but at the same time I was not emotionally invested.

This work also fueled an artistic investigation on my immigrant family because part of my family came to Colombia from Palestine after the First World War, looking for a place to economically prosper.

As a person who is very timid I have had a hard time connecting with others and also I have often wondered about my place in life, in the world, about my identity. This is probably the reason I chose to perform for the camera. I place my body in front of a camera for my videos, but I never place my living body on a stage or in a performance situation where I am present. I have chosen the technology of digital video to develop my questions.

Once living in Toronto and experimenting while learning about art, I was able to meet a lot of people like me, with similar questions, and video became a tool for expressing or researching these things that haunt me and that I was not free enough or simply unable to investigate while living in Barranquilla.

In a sense, distancing myself from the known territory allowed me to grow towards a direction I always desired. I was not my father's project or my mother's projection anymore. I knew somehow that I could not be the woman they wanted me to be. So to be who I wanted to be, I needed to find another place. I had to go away and start thinking on my own. I did this thinking through doing, through making, experiencing.

A clear parallel I can relate is through an art class. As I was taking art lessons in Barranquilla, everyone was making still life paintings, under the instructions of the teacher. I painted some sort of strange blue fish that nobody liked or understood. I compare that experience with the freedom to create I had at York, where classes concentrated on theory, and nobody told you what they expected you to produce.

So my projects started to appear as questions about who this stranger was--me, in front of the video camera. Thus I explored my fears, particularly the fear of movement, fear of traveling, fear of change, of death. One of my first works then is me on a raft, moving on water.

One of my projects sprang from an old photograph taken in 1915 that my mother had. There was the face of this woman, one of my great aunts, who looked just like me. Who was this woman echoed the question of who am I as a woman? Was she what I could have been or was she what I am not? That familiar look that is completely unknown was a mirror reflecting a world apart, a world I would never be able to connect to. I dressed like her, with my own clothes, posing for the camera, styling my hair like hers, but in the video there are very minute movements (figure 97).



Figure 97. Photograph Julieta Maria posing as her aunt besides an old picture of her aunt. Provided by the artist during fieldwork in Barranquilla, November 2012.

It is as if I am a photograph. You only realize it is a video when very small movements appear to change the image. The piece is an installation where the video is projected on a loop, and there is a sort of metal sculpture you need to get close to in order to understand as a participant observer. It is a metal box covered with adobe that has six tunnels inside.

Inside each tunnel, at the bottom, there are six copies of this picture where the family is posing, the photograph where my great aunt looks like me. It is a picture taken in Bethlehem, and my grandmother, my great grandmother, grandfather and great grandfather surround her. These are six mobile tombs illuminated from the bottom that can only be seen as one looks into the sculpture. In my video performance, I take on the identity of my great aunt, while playing in the background of the room is an object that resembles another tomb, framed, like a picture of dead people I did not know and yet who are so close to me.

To put one self in the place of the other is an impossible act if done intellectually or consciously only. How do I describe the pain of the other if I do not feel it? Where does pain reside? Does it rest in the body of the witness?

In Canada I am this other body that interprets others while being at the same time part of a system and an-other. I investigate these questions raised by my practice as a translator for a court in a work entitled Ejercicios de Fe (Faith exercises). In these exercises I am able to make videos that maintain a distance and expose my body at the same time. There is a barrier between myself and the other

that watches, and the other whose pain I am exercising, but it is a way to exercise my own faith in possible contact.



Figure 98. Julieta María. Screen shot of the video *Bird* from the series *Exercises in Faith*, July 13, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cRrAp5btow>.

I wanted to create a formal contrast between the stillness of the camera, the aseptic composition of the shot and the intensity implied in the action on the video. In these videos I practice being a victim and a perpetrator at the same time. I believe this is the paradox of our everyday lives.

Images come to me intuitively and I explore them. In the series *Faith Exercises*, for example, I was reading Wittgenstein on something like whether it is ever possible to feel what another person feels. I was also reading about conflicts and land and wars and how women have always been identified with land, with earth and with the violence inflicted on them during conflicts. I was also thinking

about the famous Colombian painting by Obregón called *Violence*, depicting a ravaged pregnant woman's body, which equates our land with a woman."²⁵⁹



Figure 99. Screen shot from the art video *Soil* by Julieta María. July 14, 2010, retrieved on July 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LsHnURoGnIA>.

I wanted to comment on the female body because of all of this and also after reading about a practice somewhere in which a woman is taken to another land when she marries, and she must eat some soil upon arrival in order to incorporate it. My meditation about all of this is this video, where my naked body is lying facing up, vulnerable, my mouth open, ready to receive all this earth that is poured over me. Before I choke, it ends. I am possibly a victim, yet I am opening my mouth and I receive, passively. This video is entitled *Earth* (Figure 99).

On this border, this limited and controlled performance for a camera, I stretch the possibilities of having the spectator connect viscerally with my own questions. In another video in this series, *Air* (figure 98), you can see my hand

²⁵⁹ The image mentioned appears with discussion in Chapter 3, figure 45: Alejandro Obregon, *Violencia*, 1962.

holding a bird struggling to get free. My hand is not harming him, it is at the border, at the point of crushing him, something I have the power to do but never do.

In the one called *Water* I embrace a live fish over my naked chest. I hold him lovingly until he dies. This is a fish I got from the market; it was going to be cooked by someone that day anyway. It is my reflection on responsibility and love for what we kill in order to subsist (figure 100).



Figure 100. Screen shot from the video *Soil* of the series *Exercises in Faith* by Julieta María: *Embrace 2011*, Retrieved on March 22, 2011 from: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l_6g9hU-08M.

Out of context, these videos can be disturbing, something quite interesting to produce for someone like me who is always feeling separated and distanced from those around me. In the act of doing these actions for a camera, in the distancing, there is a displacement, an entering into a strange zone I am not able to enter in everyday life. I do not expose myself directly; my body is not there to be perceived,

touched, heard. I am safe as I explore. In the video entitled *Fire*, you can see my feet treading along a dirt road where I am tossing papers afire and then stomping on the fire in order to detain its movement. I do not hurt myself doing this, but I like to play with fire and all its implications.

Interlude 5 Note



Figure 101. Screen shot of Julieta María from ethnographic video material; Barranquilla, November 2012.

The previous narrative is a construction from videotaped interviews completed in Barranquilla in November 2012. Julieta María (Barranquilla, 1971) is an artist who uses technology to place a distance between herself and the others who will gaze at her. She uses her own body, but always to perform for a video camera. She owns the camera, and it is her own performance. It is another way to revert the male gaze that creates the woman that is to be looked at. Maria's work is

an example of reversal of what Laura Mulvey²⁶⁰ describes as a freeing of “the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment.” What Julieta Maria does is to take the active role of gazer as well as the active role of performer, doubling herself in the looking and the looked at. She gives us her body, but we are twice removed from her. Also a mestiza, born in Colombia from a Palestinian paternal family and a Colombian maternal one, she is like Anzaldua’s border-crossing woman: a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one Group to another.

Her meticulous video performances come from a mestiza who faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: “Being tri-cultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition... which collectivity does the daughter of a dark-skinned mother listen to?”²⁶¹ Looking at her own mixed borderless body, she tries to identify her family history of migrations in order to redefine her self, away from her father’s demanding patriarchal gaze. Now residing in Canada, the artist materializes research on themes like her great aunt who might look like her, so she can understand her own body’s appearance. Julieta has found a place of her own, one far away from cultural pressures that dictate womanhood: work in a job, get married, have children. From Canada she is strategically performing new identities she can project from a safe distance towards home. Distance has built her fluid boundaries, allowing the space to perform herself

²⁶⁰ Mulvey, Laura, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 27.

²⁶¹ Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 100.

anew—innumerable times. When posting her videos on the Internet or making her installations, she seems to be saying what Bracha Ettinger stated: “Please look at me once. You are my dead aunt or you are my living aunt or you are someone I don’t know. Lost, you do not stop raising questions in me. In painting, face to face, face to non-face, a moment before leaving again. Mother – I, my aunt could have been my daughter.”²⁶²

²⁶² Bracha Ettinger, qtd. in Griselda Pollock, “Thinking the Feminine: Aesthetic Practice as Introduction to Bracha Ettinger and the Concepts of Matrix and Metramorphosis.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 no. 1 (2004): 27.

CONCLUSION

Researching the lives and practices of twenty contemporary female Colombian artists has shown that they see their work as being focused, attentive to what surrounds them as well as to what goes on in their own lives. Within this attention is their intention to modify, to transform their immediate world and the larger world around them. They advocate, by living it, what Foucault pledged in his *Hermeneutics of the Subject*²⁶³--that is, an understanding of life as a work of art. Like Foucault, the women interviewed see subjectivity not as a given but as a process, an ethical process, something one never ceases to obtain anew because one is in a constant state of subjectivization. Being a subject is about transforming oneself by constantly disquieting the self. This dis-quieting is not a metaphysical attitude; it involves the materiality of the body that thinks and the materiality of the world in which one lives, which is transformed by what we do as we live in it.

I believe that the artists I worked with during this process are executing an act of self-knowledge. Knowing oneself includes taking care of one self. It is about how one behaves and about how one relates. It involves intention, attitude and action. Generally these artists have stated in our dialogues that they are not only doing something that is about freeing themselves from culturally preconceived notions, but that they heal in the process and they intend to heal the world around

²⁶³ Foucault, Michel. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981--1982*. Vol. 6, ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Graham Burchell, General Eds. Francois Ewald and Alessandro Fontana, English series ed. Arnold I. Davidson, New York: Macmillan, 2005.

while in the process. It is a truth they believe in and that is repeated regularly during the interviews.

Parrhesia is the act of the telling of truth, practiced by ancient philosophers. Foucault uses this term in order to support his belief that life is an esthetic durable act and also to explore how the relationship between a subject and truth is about living as one says it²⁶⁴. Austin emphasizes the way words do or perform something beyond their mere utterance²⁶⁵. What is more, the utterer, the one that says his-her truth, must have the courage to be part of this truth as an ethical being who does not necessarily follow a norm, but that understands that he who utters a truth must live it. I found that the artists that collaborated with this dissertation were mostly exercising a critique of their lives and what surrounds them. In a sense, *parrhesia* serves as a critique of life through objective actions, actions that form a subject as they are executed. In order for a critique to serve as an ethical act, its performativity implies a creative act. That is, an act that is able to transform into something else, to change, to produce. This comes along with acts of self-knowledge as performed by the artists I talked to. They clearly envisioned their work as questions and as research on myriad different subjects that touch them.

Ethos and discourse correspond to each other. The Greek oracle demands something before the moments the utterances of the prophecy are heard. One could say that in order to be able to know thyself, one should not pledge anything that one

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Maria Sbisà, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975.

cannot do and one must do the little one can do in order not to exceed expectations. Seeing life or existence as a work of art allowed Foucault to transition from seeing the subject as subjected by external forces, to seeing subjectivity as a place for contestation of power, for resistance, for emancipation. This is what I observed as the female artists I interviewed worked on their art. There has to be some kind of freedom that rests within the interstices of being, something that allows you to hope to become “something else.” Art making as a life practice is a way to liberate these artists from whatever attachments are deemed detrimental to an individual and its society.

Most of the women artists I observed and talked to do not stay within a single field and say they belong to one way of doing or seeing life and work. They meander and experiment everywhere as if looking for a thread that is never going to be found, a thread similar to the one that made Ariadne powerful as she gave it to Theseus. On the way, through his deeds, she also saved his life, the life of an-other. The women studied in this dissertation see their artwork as a thread that binds them and frees them at the same time that they desire to affect others’ lives. The life of this text that is a dissertation was also kept by a thread that held my interest ever more active as I met more of these women I had the pleasure to work with. This kept me aware that what was happening in the text belonged to the same area of creativity, to that area of truth that comes from an ethical point of action, something that practicing art as a way of life points to.

Not only did these artists intentionally address issues such as the traffic of women, domestic violence, individual and collective trauma, displacement of people, or racial discrimination with their work, they were also consciously building another way to approach the formation of a discourse that could have an effect on these issues and more, via art. Doing research through an embodied practice is similar to what an artist does, always present in her body while working. Research that prioritizes doing and allows imperfect solutions that are still in the making can change the way that performance can enter the well-guarded field of scientific knowledge, the way that can be handed down as certainties can be provided through citable theories. Even though we are far from changing the paradigms of academia, at least doors are being opened, where *interstices* can allow the slippages we need in order to perform.

All of the interviews for this dissertation were conducted in Spanish. Once I translated the participants' ideas into academic language, also a second language for me, trying to confine plural meanings into the limits marked by scholarship, the new shape their words and my interpretations took on seemed awkward. Doubting my skill to really say what I found was in a sense mirroring the doubts so many of my interviewees were having about their own art making. These doubts make us perform in ways that attract the right kind of gaze, the gaze of approval. This is why I believe it is paradoxical that I found masquerading as a theme that emerged while studying the artists and their work. That is, many of these artists used masquerading as a way of telling their truth while acting morally.

Joan Riviere's seminal article "Womanliness as Masquerade"²⁶⁶ is the exposition of her intuitions regarding the performance of femininity, written after she analyzed the way a successful woman conducted herself around men. Her observations of the woman's vocal inflections, the way she moved, dressed and played down her assertiveness, while always trying to play some type of neediness, showed Riviere not only that women were playing at being feminine, but also that they were getting something out of it. Her short psychological article has been very fruitful for the analysis of cinema about the construction of femininity, which in itself is a construction that mirrors western's society production of gender.

In the cited essay Riviere goes only as far as showing that femininity is a masquerade, that is, in her view, a faking. I stress here the use of the word *faking* in the gerund. I want to accent the non - definitiveness implied in the act. If a woman is inscribed in a cultural structure where she is the lack, then she lacks something. The woman learns to play the lack even if she doesn't seem to be lacking anything, implies Riviere. However, she feels insecure in any case, while acting upon the labels, the essences and the places culturally assigned to her. But acting through an artistic practice empowers. Haunted by lack and loss dictated by phallogocentric psychoanalytic theories, many of the female artists told me about striving to belong to the system, yet they use this supposed void and exclusion as the very much needed fuel for exerting their creative powers. While the masculine gaze remains

²⁶⁶ Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as Masquerade." In *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan, 35-44, (New York: Routledge, 1989).

intact all around them, they are putting together the desired look, exposing the vacuity of femininity and giving others the gift of awareness.

Masquerading implies distancing in another way. If there is a masquerade, somehow there is an understanding of a difference: a distancing between oneself and the mask being worn. If one is able to wear a mask, one can take it off. Here is where the empowerment of women can come forth. As these artists begin to poke, open and pull apart the workings of their culture and the images society gives them even before they are born, they can also work with those images in order to question the place assigned to them in the system. By beginning to deconstruct, they investigate desire, social issues, personal and political matters. These issues become visible as the artists attempt to become visible within a male dominated art world. Colombia is still very much a patriarchy and as shown in this dissertation, this resonates throughout all of the nation's everydayness.

In a world where man is the producer of meaning, woman is the produced sign. I have seen, by studying contemporary female Colombian artists, that the power is located in this sign, and from this location it is dislocated and subverted. The women reviewed in this dissertation do not merely become aware of the difficult position entailed in being the produced sign. They take the power of the sign and re-produce another view that subverts the power, taking it into their own hands. They are re-thinking phallogocentric (borrowing Derrida's term)

colonization of their imaginations²⁶⁷ and have begun to disrupt the structures of patriarchy through small acts of re-in scripture. To do this, they use techniques and technologies only now available to artists in a country that has seen, since the middle of the 20th Century, an increase in education equality, gender-wise. I found that some female artists multiply stereotyped images of femaleness in order to serve as fragmented mirrors that disclose and dislocate the culturally acquired notion of femininity. Others mark femininity by exaggerating its stereotyped influx in their society as a way to call attention to the futility of essentializing.

Stereotypical gestures assigned to femininity are used as triggers for strategies of creative disruption, opening the possibility for alarm, awareness and action in others.

Culturally assigned places for women like home, church and supermarket are denounced by these artists as sites where violence exists in every other minute way. At the same time, women are building their places in order to construct a better habitat for their life work. They seem to be able to find the strength and the resources that are necessary to do so. Strength is a key word here. I believe that these artists have found that their strength comes from using exactly what has been seen as female essential and naturalized features: fragility, beauty, passivity, the private sphere, otherness, sites of projections and immanence. They take control of their own images, thus giving back the projection, disrupting cultural images and

²⁶⁷ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, "The Newly Born Woman," trans. Betsy Wang, in *Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 24 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 65.

exposing the failure of the notion of an essential femininity. In order to make new images, they first undo, not intending erasure, but exposing the brutality and ridiculousness of culturally naturalized images of women.

Simone de Beauvoir declared in her work *The Second Sex*²⁶⁸ that woman is inessential. In this way, she placed on the theoretical table the fact that women are perceived by most cultures as empty vessels where the society imprints the projections. In this way they are the Absolute Other. I believe that this realization by half of the human population can become a source of strength. As representatives of the “second sex,” the women seen in this study have used that awareness of their position as supposed inessential beings in order to cross borders, assume many faces, displace signs and understand the plight of all Others in their society. These women have taken assumptions about the fact of having been born in a certain body that marks them as the Other and interrogated it, using diverse strategies of deconstruction. I believe that much of the strength that comes forth in their doings is about looking outward from this position of inessentiality.

One of these strategies is to take control of images of womanhood in order to revisit and relocate myths related to the cultural conscience of the mestiza, that woman who belongs to the borders, as Anzaldúa has stated.²⁶⁹ Many of the artists interviewed acknowledged the need to give second looks to the distant past, to stories about the past and to images ingrained in their imaginations via religion. They use a border-less imagination to re-create myth, not to repeat it but rather to

²⁶⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

²⁶⁹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*.

study it profoundly in order to deconstruct it. Thus they construct new approaches to myth, standing in the present; they perform new figures like a present-day Eurydice, whose fate is now in her own hands because she looks into that light beyond the threshold. No longer captive, they remind us of what Wittgenstein stated: "A figure held us captive. And we could not leave because it resides in our language and it seems to repeat it inexorably."²⁷⁰

Femininity for the artists seen here has become a space to be explored, reviewed and redefined, but also definitely left open to other meanings while creating a matrixial gaze, as Ettinger proposed²⁷¹ It is about building new spaces from which to act, even if in this action the idea of the sacredness of the body of woman returns to myth and appears anchored to a past. Anchoring is an important point from which to start building new ways of being. The relief of trauma, that inescapable fact of life is augmented in places like Colombia where there has been an undeclared civil war since the late 1940s. Once a space (material or metaphorical) has been found, built and secured, most artists have used that space to take second looks in order to dispel national and familial life stories that could have maintained them in a place of darkness and bereavement. Like a contemporary Ariadne who holds the secret of the thread, through recounting they begin to count and form new stories that matter. Like a contemporary Eurydice, their bereavement impels them towards action; once they realize inessentiality is their strength they

²⁷⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. *Aphorism 115* (London: Blackwell, 1958), 48e.

²⁷¹ Ettinger, "Metramorphic Borderlinks."

can become anything, they can go almost anywhere. Displacement, violation, even death can be viewed through through new colors and angles, thus doubling the possibilities for nomadic subjectivities, as Braidotti has called for.²⁷²

As new *mestizas*, contemporary Colombian female artists approach the fact of an inessentiality decreed by culture in order to instigate an investigation in space and time and to travel between worlds while managing to stay anchored in fluid borders and being able to create narratives about their own lives and the lives of so many other others. Art is a way to cope with the traumatic injuries that happen as you are thrown into the world, as Heidegger would say. Art making is a way to travel beyond those injuries. The anchored border is that space where liminality can be sustained and supported, a space available through a life of art practice, like the one the women interviewed here have been living. Liminality, as Victor Turner showed, is that period where the characteristics of the ritual subject are ambiguous, where he is neither the one he was nor the other yet to come.²⁷³ I purport that the artists reviewed here do practice, almost everyday, this constant maintenance in a liminal space that will allow, as Derrida suggested in his work about Plato's *Timaeus*, a place to remain between Entity and Being, between Being and Nothingness, between Logos and Mythos.²⁷⁴

New generations of Colombian female artists are translating events from the private to the public sphere with ease, bringing attention to normalized and

²⁷² Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 158.

²⁷³ Victor Turner. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94.

²⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida. *Khora*, trans. Ian McLeod, in *The Derrida Reader*, ed. Julian Wolfreys, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 242.

naturalized events and situations. Thus they bring second looks at small, often overlooked, acts of violence in everyday practices that affect the majority of the population in Colombia. These acts of violence are about emotional control and racial erasure. This behind-the-door type of violence needs to be made visible via other venues besides political discourse. Art can perform this deed and also constitute political action. Becoming conscious of racism inside your own family and nation is not an easy task. Some of these women artists are denouncing racial practices inside their own private spheres, projecting it into the public sphere. They disrupt the immanent reality of silent, imposed femininity that applies rules of beautification and conduct in order to move upward socially upward, exposing those rules among other, larger national beliefs involving the proper places for races and classes.

The artists seen here have been able to actualize the recently found subjectivity that suffrage has helped support, in order to take responsible actions through concrete material creative gestures. They perform identities that are not fixed, that want to stay fluid, using their own bodies and all forms of media available for the expression of gestures of non-conformity. Through responsible actions they are able to envision a possible utopia, a change, however far away it may be. The void of inessentiality is summoned through the art mirror as they question, investigate, talk, paint, dance, write, and perform. In this way, the mirror becomes transparent, and they can see and we can all see with them. Thus they each become

a Medusa who awakens, not one that freezes the gaze: “Woman is no longer the victim of mime: she becomes its subversive instance.”²⁷⁵

The explosion of women artists now making relevant work in Colombia has come not only through educational opportunities but also due to the simple fact that the mid-20th Century also brought the legalization of their status as citizens and valid suffragists. This act empowered women from then on, and its consequences are seen every day when new laws are decreed due to advances in perception of the diverse situations that affect equality in Colombia. As I found one artist to talk to, two more emerged as possibilities. I had to stop due to logistics, but this interesting topic of research can yield material for a lifetime of work devoted to studying these artists’ practices. I am talking not only about visual artists but writers, dancers, choreographers, actors, directors, and musicians.

I have grown while talking to these artists, while looking at what they do and while coming to understand and interpreting their artistic gestures. I have found that the ethnographer is also performing, and the body and senses of the ethnographer are as implicated as his/her intellectual activity. In this way the field is opened up to slippages, just as Derrida showed should happen in writing. Thus, performance can inform ethnography with the possibility of *differance*,²⁷⁶ of going to places it does not know, opening spaces that were not intended in the abstractions of proposed research projects. I found that going inside the field of performance in

²⁷⁵ Malabou, *Changer de difference*, 123.

²⁷⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 3-27.

order to study it, disengages the ethnographer from the aestheticizing-anthropologizing look. Yet, that gaze has to be maintained in order to share this knowledge with the academic world. Therefore, the balancing act has to be maintained until the end, like this conclusion. In the same way, the artists I talked to maintained their search for a form with which to express what they were seeking, one that would become present just then, in conclusion.

The problem to be grappled with during the writing phase is inherent to fieldwork. There is great difficulty in entering as a stranger into a place where once one resided. I was not a working artist while entering these artists' creative spaces; I was a scholar researching the way they work. Using ethnography as performance allowed me to participate, to adopt an identity between artist and scholar. Dwight Conquergood saw his work as an ethnographer, as a moral act: that of erasing the ideological barriers between object and subject of study.²⁷⁷

This is mirrored in the artists' moral act: one that makes a call to the nature of the practice of performance, a moral calling shared by all of the artists I interviewed during fieldwork. They were always thinking of the community being addressed while they performed other ways of knowing. In the case of the present dissertation, if I came to knowing something, it was in the same way a performer can, by doing it. Thus, my words during this long text attest to the fact that performing *new ways of being*, as the title suggests, is about simply practicing and

²⁷⁷ Dwight Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance," *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (1985): 1-13.

sticking with a practice, wherever that might lead you, exactly as the women seen here have done within the multiplicity of their practices.

My own practice, linked by this dissertation to the artists' practices, has been validated as it stems from a place of academic discourse. It has been legitimized by the artists' own work, now available for future generations that will need to research these and many more contemporary Colombian artists, as well as emergent ones. The performative acts of these artists continue on via this academic work, yet another performative practice. This dissertation also performs in ways that will affect other works, both academic and artistic. I believe this is one of the first comprehensive studies of a significant group of living Colombian artists during their actual doing. I was able to observe some of their processes and question them in all matters of their lives both as artists and in other aspects of their lives. They are not canonized, which is an important component this dissertation. These women do not even know if their work will ever be valued as significant by the art world. The significance is in their constant present manipulation of materials in order to shape their world.

Finally, I want to acknowledge that this dissertation has opened many more questions for me to work on as a scholar who also intends to continue practicing art as a way of life. A question Malabou²⁷⁸ asks will be a feasible point of departure. I quote her here as an epilogue and as a postmark for the future:

²⁷⁸ Malabou, *Changer de Difference*, 110.

Emancipatory transcendence (to use Simone de Beauvoir's powerful expression) certainly did not die with either deconstruction or gender studies. The "woman" subject, in her ontological escheat, nevertheless still wants to free herself. Must she, despite everything, always remain running behind, resigning herself, pretending, inhibiting her energy, installing herself in mimicry, forever enveloping herself in tallits that are not made for her?

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