

Rape of the Earth: Ana Mendieta's Defense of a Metaphor

Feminists usually disapprove of rape metaphors—using the language or imagery of rape to describe something that is not rape. Most often, rape metaphors are deployed by those who have not experienced or are less likely to experience sexual violence, and the effect is to trivialize the experiences of survivors: this would include the example of the fraternity brother who complains, “that test raped me.” Less often, a rape metaphor might be used to highlight, rather than trivialize, violence, as when the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, described India as a woman and British colonialism as possessing her: “but it was a possession of violence. They did not know her, or try to know her. They never looked into her eyes” (quoted in Fraser 2018, 730). Here, the effect is still to hide, rather than make visible, what rape is. Rachel Fraser, who discusses this specific example and others in an important recent article on “The Ethics of Metaphor” (2018), argues that the problem with such a metaphor, even if it does not trivialize rape, is that it nonetheless “restructures” the concept of rape, out of step with the “interests of a hermeneutically marginalized class—that is, victims of sexual violence” (738). Projecting “rape” into non-rape domains retroactively changes what rape means, whereas stabilizing the meaning of rape is important for those who have survived it and those who seek to end it.

Politically in sync with Fraser, I nonetheless come to the defense of one rape metaphor in this essay: the “rape of the earth” to describe the destruction, manipulation, and degradation of natural environments, resources, and habitats. Or rather, I argue that the famous earthworks of Ana Mendieta come to such a defense. In her *Siluetas* series from 1973 to 1980, Mendieta dug, burned, or buried the silhouette of her body into mud, grass, and air at a number of sites, beginning in Oaxaca, Mexico, and spreading to other locations she visited or in which she lived, especially around Iowa City, where she went to college and graduate school. Mendieta is often accused of visually performing a slip that Nehru performs rhetorically, conflating some essential femininity (“the female body”) with something else: the Indian state, for Nehru; nature or Mother Earth, for Mendieta. Rather than read the earthworks as conflating two essentialist subjects—woman and nature—I read them as aligning two structures of violence: sexual and environmental. To

see these as aligned is indeed, as Fraser warns against, to restructure the concept of rape but only to better understand it: to see a larger context and set of conditions that come to bear upon the scene of sexual violence.

In the following section, I show how Mendieta's *Siluetas* earthworks first emerged as extensions of performances explicitly engaged with rape in the early 1970s. Disturbed by violence against women at the University of Iowa, where she was a student, Mendieta restaged rape scenes or, rather, installed scenes that documented the effects of rape: for instance, her naked body strewn across a table in her apartment, blood on the walls, overturned furniture. These scenes had what semioticians, after Charles Sanders Peirce, would call an "indexical" relation to rape: they are the imprint evidencing that rape happened rather than, say, a representation of rape in a movie scene. The *Siluetas*, too, are indices, and what they index is not only Mendieta's body but a structure of violence that has produced the body in a particular way, just as, in one of Peirce's first examples of an index, a murder produces a corpse ([1867] 1992, 5). While often thought of as two different stages in her career, the earthworks and the rape works temporally and conceptually overlap in Mendieta's oeuvre, and her first *Siluetas* directly borrow iconography and materials from concurrent blood-based performances. I argue that Mendieta turned from the scene of her apartment to the scene of "nature" to deepen her understanding of rape and to develop an indexical practice that could trace the intersections, rather than separability, of multiple structures of violence.

To argue this not only shifts critiques of Mendieta as an essentialist; it also revises the important discourse on indexicality in visual art, beginning with Rosalind Krauss in her early essays on "Seventies Art" (1977a, 1977b), which do not include Mendieta, although she is arguably one of the most important artists of that decade, and expanded more recently in the work of visual culture scholars such as Mieke Bal (1990), Tina Campt (2012), and Mary Anne Doane (2007)—which is to say that indexicality has a feminist genealogy in art criticism and theory, one that I seek to extend. Furthermore, it reassess the sometimes fraught coalition between feminist and environmentalist movements.

Ecofeminists are, like Mendieta, frequently accused of essentialism if they claim that women have an intrinsic connection to nature that fosters an ethic of stewardship. Among others, Greta Gaard (2011) has—I believe persuasively—rebutted this accusation by instead showing how foundational works like Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, because they were invested in unveiling the modern discursive formation that feminized nature in order to authorize its exploitation, were nearly poststructuralist in their arguments (see also Estévez-Saá and Lorenzo-Modia 2018). For Merchant (1990), the point is not that women and nature are essentially linked but that the rise

of mathematical and scientific formalism beginning in the seventeenth century understood the “constraint” of nature through sexual metaphors: “the penetration of hidden secrets—language still used today in praising scientist’s ‘hard facts,’ ‘penetrating mind,’ or the ‘thrust of his argument’” (171). Because of metaphor’s authorization of violence, Merchant, while appreciative of the ways in which environmentalism throughout the world was led principally by women in the late twentieth century, cautions against too easy of a metaphoric transfer between women and the object of their activism. She does not wish to “reinststate nature as the mother of humankind nor to advocate that women reassume the role of nurturer dictated by that historical identity” (xxiv).

Whereas, for Merchant, environmental violence is the target rather than source of the metaphor (so that sexual violence is mapped onto and legitimizes environmental violence), in many strands of critical theory, both Marxist and ecofeminist, “the domination of nature serve[s] as the ideological template for political domination generally” (Mathews 2017, 55). That is, the human-versus-nature binary encodes a further series of binaries that counterpose social classes. For Val Plumwood, in her foundational text on *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), the fundamental binary of domination is more particularly that of reason over nature, such that nature is not only subordinate to but in the service of reason. Over the course of capitalist and imperialist development, reason became a master identity, but “the master identity is sensitive to context” (Mathews 2017, 59), because which social groups get placed closest to nature, in order to be instrumentalized for the groups placed closest to reason, will change according to social and historical conditions. Thus, in the early American context, as Annette Kolodny had already demonstrated in *The Lay of the Land* (1984), this domination of nature took on the added dimension of authorizing the colonial project and eventually the manifest destiny of settling the “wilderness” of the western part of the continent (7).

In line with this reappraisal of early ecofeminist writers, Mendieta’s *Siluetas* do not celebrate a connection between women and nature but critique the alignment of environmental and sexualized forms of domination. But the *Siluetas* are also more exacting than general theories of domination by insisting that environmental violence be understood not simply as domination generally but as rape specifically. At stake here are not the claims that nature is gendered or that violence is sexualized—claims that should, I think, be relatively uncontroversial. Instead, Mendieta’s earthworks conceptualize the form of environmental and sexual violence itself: a form that, I argue in the following sections, iteratively uses forceful resource extraction for the production of symbols memorializing vulnerability.

Rape works and earthworks

To date, the authoritative account of Mendieta's early career remains Julia Herzberg's (1998) indispensable and insightful, but unpublished, PhD dissertation. Herzberg was one of the first to allow us to approach Mendieta's *Siluetas* in the context of her travels to Mexico and her subsequent engagement with Indigenous iconography and cultures, especially as that iconography would develop more recently in Afro-Caribbean rituals and religious practices, including Santería. In turn, these practices figure into Mendieta's own reclamation of a culture she felt separated from when, at age twelve, she and her sister were sent from Cuba to be raised in Iowa as part of Operation Peter Pan, the 1960–62 mass evacuation of Cuban minors sent by parents alarmed by Fidel Castro's parental policies.¹ Her first trip to Mexico was as part of college field research with the archaeologist Thomas Charlton in the summer of 1971. Charlton brought Mendieta and other University of Iowa students to ruins of the ancient Mesoamerican city of Teotihuacán, and her encounter with pre-Columbian artifacts influenced the iconography of her artwork in the following years. Her 1972 *Feathers on Woman*, in which she glued chicken feathers to a model starting with her head and moving downward, may reference the plumed serpent known in numerous Mesoamerican religions by the name of Quetzalcoatl; several sculptures of the deity populate the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the third largest pyramid at Teotihuacán and the earliest known evidence of its worship. Mendieta experimented with similar modifications of the body that year in her MFA thesis, which featured her "hair transplant" documentations in which she took the beard and mustache of a male colleague and attached them to her face. But whereas she framed that work in dialogue with Marcel Duchamp's similar gender reassignment of Mona Lisa in his 1917 *L. H. O. O. Q.*, an Indigenous source for transformation across not only gender but species allowed Mendieta to widen the thematic content of her work in *Feathers on Woman*.

¹ In this section, I seek to bypass a tendency in Mendieta criticism to read her artwork merely through this biographical lens, but an artistic biography helps bring out latent connections between her works. In attending to the formalism of Mendieta's projects, I understand I risk erasing the kinds of particularity she might—as a woman immigrant from Cuba, for instance—have also been attempting to express through them. But I have been more concerned by the tendency in cultural studies to legitimize ethnic and women's art and literature as expression rather than aesthetic production, producing what Kandice Chuh calls "an overemphasis on minoritized writings as political or anthropological documents rather than artistic creations" (2019, 16). In this "segregation of aesthetics and politics," in which artists of privilege receive formalist analysis and minoritized artists are mined for what they represent or tell us about their class status, "the aesthetics of minoritized literatures . . . have remained covered over" (17).

I will return to the decolonial implications of this iconography in the following section. For now, I want to highlight Mendieta's simultaneous engagement with, or intersecting of, gendered and racialized symbols. Mendieta's work comes at the beginning of a ten-year period in which Black feminists in particular unpacked the racialized imaginary of rape in the United States, inherited from a period of slavery in which the guilt of white rapists was projected onto Black men, creating the stereotype of the beast, and the legal impossibility of raping enslaved women created the stereotype of Black female promiscuity. In and around books such as Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) and Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1981) and *Violence against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism* (1985), scholars and activists showed how the racialized distribution of rapability and culpability was also instrumental in securing the autonomy and humanity of an emerging white middle class. At the conclusion of her groundbreaking work on the *Color of Rape* (2001), Sujata Moorti turns to art films as a way of disrupting this legacy. Her case studies "do . . . not show rape" (209) but "destabilize . . . the axis of rape narratives and present a defamiliarized rape representation that requires the viewer to rethink women outside of their object-victim status" (210). As I will return to later, Mendieta's work, which she documented in film, forms a prehistory for the feminist tradition Moorti explores, and her interest in the intersection of gender and race was already evident in these student works that deployed Indigenous references.

A more explicit engagement with pre-Columbian Mesoamerica began in 1973, when Mendieta's mentor (and lover) in the newly formed MFA in Intermedia, Hans Breder, brought a class to the Yagul archaeological site in Oaxaca. She would return with the class the following summer as well. Critics often call the image Mendieta produced in her first summer, *Untitled (Image from Yagul)*, the first *Siluetta*, with Mendieta in a rocky terrain with flowers seeming to bloom from her body, visualizing a kind of interspecies exchange of agency. But such an image, by including Mendieta's body in the image itself, is not, strictly speaking, a silhouette. For her part, Mendieta has referred to her "first" silhouette as being produced the following summer, when she outlined her body with blood in the Palace of the Six Patios, a labyrinthine complex that was being actively excavated at Yagul in 1974 (quoted in Herzberg 1998, 223). For that image, Breder first traced her body in the dirt, then Mendieta dug a shallow recession in the dirt along the outline and poured in chicken blood. She called it *Laberinth Blood Imprint*, referencing the maze of ruins surrounding her installation.

The move from her body in the 1973 *Untitled (Yagul)* to her silhouette in the 1974 *Laberinth Blood Imprint* was part of a series of developments

she made in her artistic practice in the intervening school year, when most of her creative energy was focused on, even obsessed with, the visual iconography of sexualized violence. On March 13, 1973, University of Iowa student Sara Ann Ottens was found naked, bloodied, and strangled to death in her dormitory. It would later be discovered that her accused murderer, a part-time student James Wendall Hall, had not raped her before killing her, but coverage of the incident at the time assumed sexual victimization. Shortly after the incident, Mendieta invited students in her art class to her apartment, where they discovered her naked, bent over a table, and covered in (chicken) blood, reproducing the scene of Ottens's death as it had been described in the local newspapers. This *Untitled (Rape Scene)* is the performance art piece related to sexual violence for which Mendieta would become most well known in the following years.

But this initial engagement with rape, by reproducing a scene of violence with her body as the victim, was only the first of a rapidly mutating series of works that Mendieta developed immediately before, and then in symbiotic relation with, her *Siluetas* series. At her final exhibition at Iowa during coursework that school year, she presented *Dead on Street*, in which the flashes of a camera alerted audience members leaving the show to her bloodied body in the street. This introduced the theme of documentation, which became central in subsequent works (she filmed many of her *Siluetas* on Super 8 film, a popular medium for home video production), but it most importantly moved the scene of violence from the domestic space of the apartment to the public sphere. Mendieta began to stage other violent scenes in public spaces, including the alleyway next to her apartment, where she left blood and tattered jeans; and the sidewalk in front of the Moffit Building in downtown Iowa City, where she left splashes of blood and then photographically documented the reactions, frequently indifferent, of those who walked by. In removing her body from the scenes and leaving only the props that had been imprinted by a supposed violent event, Mendieta shifted the subject of the artwork from the body of the victim to the spectators and bystanders implicated in the scene of violence. This is to say, the focus of her art became not the effects violence has on a private body but the effects—and, very often and tragically, the lack of effects—it has on a public.

In removing the body from the visual economy of the rape image, Mendieta was, in other words, doing something different than what Mieke Bal (1990) has called the “rhetorical” displacement of rape. For Bal, “rape itself cannot be visualized,” which she takes as an ontological fact more than a social prohibition, because rape “takes place inside”—as an act of penetration of mind and body—and because “rape makes the victim invisible” by physically covering her body and shattering her sense of self (141). If rape

cannot be seen, what becomes interesting is what can be. Bal looks at a pair of paintings by Rembrandt that pick up on the story of Sextus Tarquin's rape of Lucretia by depicting not the rape itself but Lucretia's act of suicide in response to it. How to read the relation between suicide and rape? Bal provides three options. First, it could be a metaphor, which by saying "one thing to mean another" substitutes suicide for rape, with the effect of conveying "the idea that the victim is responsible for her own destruction: she kills herself. The element *self* thus displaced the attention from rapist to the victim" (142). Second, it could be a metonymy, which means the relation between rape and suicide is one of association rather than replacement; here, rape causes suicide, thus, suicide refers back to the rapist rather than displacing his responsibility onto Lucretia as metaphor does. Third, we could interpret the suicide as synecdoche, in which part stands in for whole, and therefore "self-murder becomes the detail that represents the entire process" (143). Here, "Lucretia's act does not detract from the significance of the rape but is part of her position as victim, thus emphasizing the perpetrator's responsibility" (143). As I will argue in the following section, Mendieta is invested in metaphor, although her making "one thing to mean another" is about mirroring structures of violence rather than looking away from them. But Mendieta is not trying to look away but to look toward, here toward the public, who oversee violence. In turn, she moves beyond Bal's victim/perpetrator dyad and focuses on a third figure, the bystander or witness.

After her return from Oaxaca that summer, Mendieta continued to expand the scope of her documentation of violence by considering not only the urban environment of streets, alleyways, and sidewalks but also the seemingly natural environment of the surrounding area. In fall 1973, she recreated the bloodied body of her earlier *Untitled (Rape Scene)* in a wooded area. This new *Rape Piece* included the documentation not only of her body but of the foliage around it, which, too, had been stained by the blood she used on her body. In October of that year, she also created a scene of bloodied *Mattresses* in an empty farmhouse. When Charles Ray, who was also studying at the University of Iowa, discovered the scene, he reported to his classmates that he thought he had stumbled onto a real scene of violence.

Throughout her documentations of violence, whether with her body or without it, blood was Mendieta's constant medium. But she began to be especially interested in the significance of blood when the body was not present. In an earlier work from 1972, *Chicken Piece*, she had held a just-decapitated chicken in front of her nude body, which in turn collected the splatters of blood as if it were a canvas for the Jackson Pollocks of the previous generation. But with a work like *Mattresses*, what became important was how blood referenced a body's destruction precisely through its absence. To

make blood visible requires opening up a body. But the mutilated body haunts rather than grounds a work like *Mattresses*, introducing a new theme of spectrality.

In the spring of 1974, immediately before the second trip to Oaxaca and the production of what she would call her first *Siluetas*, the *Laberinth Blood Imprint*, Mendieta made *Blood Sign #1* and *Blood Sign #2*. In these works, she traced the outlines of her body onto a studio wall using buckets of animal blood as her paint and her hands as brushes. In marking the shape of her body with blood, she turned the absence of her body into a form of abstraction, expanding on the spectrality of the *Mattresses* by making absence into a kind of presence: the presence of a sign. What the *Laberinth Blood Imprint* does is take a work like the *Blood Signs* and move it outdoors, just as Mendieta moved from the private space of her apartment to the public spaces of the street and eventually the environmental spaces of the surrounding woods. In turn, the *Laberinth Blood Imprint* represents a combination of her gradual move from interior to exterior and her gradual removal of the body to make it an abstract sign. I return to the *Laberinth Blood Imprint* as Mendieta documented it on film in the following section, but I first take the invitation of her naming the intermediate pieces “signs” to reflect on the kind of abstraction and signifying at stake in the *Siluetas*.

Indexing the rape of the earth

In an influential two-part essay on “Seventies Art in America” published in 1977, Rosalind Krauss considers a wide range of contemporary artworks in sculpture and installation as meditating on the concept of the “index.” She glosses the term—developed most extensively by the pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce first in an 1867 essay and then more extensively in a series of lectures and letters in the early 1900s—as “marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify” (Krauss 1977a, 70). One of the examples she looks at, for instance, is the cast shadow, which does not represent its object but refers to and is caused by it, much like how a footprint is the trace of a foot but does not itself represent a foot or smoke is the mark of fire but does not itself look like fire. One of Peirce’s early examples of an index, which may seem counterintuitive but is now taken by many, including Krauss, as paradigmatic, is a photograph. As Peirce explains in perhaps his most frequently cited passage, which Krauss also quotes: “Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically

forced to correspond point by point to nature” ([1894] 1998, 6; quoted in Krauss 1977b, 63). Photographs are an index because they are the chemical imprint of what they refer to, and this is what makes them different from, say, a painting, which may similarly *look* like what it depicts but was not physically *caused* by it.

Krauss thought that many other media in the 1970s were beginning to model themselves after photography in terms of aiming for an indexical relation to objects. The appeal, she writes, was that this indexical relation was “uncoded” and a photograph was “sub- or pre-symbolic, ceding the language of art back to the imposition of things”; other art forms similarly attempted to “substitute the registration of sheer physical presence for the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions (and the kind of history they encode)” (Krauss 1977a, 75, 81). An index does not come weighted with the history of form or the arbitrariness of language. It functions not as symbol but as selection, not representing the world but—like how a photograph frames or crops part of the visible—merely pointing to some aspect of it.

In an important essay on Peirce and visual analysis, Michael Leja (2000) pushes back against this insistence on the brute physicality of the index, an insistence he believes is naive in underestimating the persistence of the symbolic and the impossibility of the “uncoded” relation, the inescapability of those “aesthetic conventions.” Jackson Pollock’s paint spatters, Leja’s concluding example, may seem mere imprints of his gestures, the simple effects of his arm swinging paint against a canvas. But the point, Leja says, is that they’re on a canvas, and this invokes aesthetic convention at the same time as it claims to eschew it. In a thought experiment invoking a setting germane to Mendieta’s works in dirt, Leja proposes: “Imagine Jackson Pollock lying on the beach and leaving traces in the sand by virtue of moving his arms and hands as he reclines. Now compare these traces of arm movements on the beach with the painted records of his arm movements in his paintings. The identical physical movement will produce two different forms of index with two different significances. Whereas the mark in the sand may stand simply as evidence of a movement, the painted line made within a frame by the identical movement will be simultaneously and necessarily a symbolic gesture” (119).

Peirce, for his part, acknowledges that “it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of indexical quality” (1932, 306). In the 1867 essay from which the majority of art critics and media theorists have developed accounts of the index, Peirce offers three types of signs. In addition to an index, which has a “real” connection to its object, usually by way of causation, a sign could be an icon, which looks like the object, or a symbol, which refers to its object by way of convention. In his more mature reflections on the sign in the early 1900s,

Peirce moves away from a tripartite taxonomy of three different types of signs and toward three different functions of a sign. The basic division remains the same—icon, index, symbol—but the point is that a single sign can be functionally both iconic and indexical, for instance, as is a photograph: sure, it's indexical in that it was chemically caused by its object, but the photograph also looks like its object, iconically. This crisscrossing of relations between object, sign, and interpretation is staged dramatically in Ana Mendieta's work, which, in turn, complicates Krauss's account of indexical art; although of the same period that Krauss surveys—"Seventies Art"—Mendieta offers not a pure index but a mixing and cross-hatching of semi-otic functions. Take the original *Rape Scene* staged in her apartment in 1972. Blood is an index of violence, as violence has produced its appearance in the opening up of the body. But the blood on Mendieta's body is not itself an index, as it was not violence against her, or against a human body, that produced it. Rather, it is chicken blood she bought at a local butcher. So she is actually representing a rape scene iconically but representing the scene as an index of rape. She is not representing the rape itself but the effects rape has on bodies, bloodied—and rooms, disarrayed.

In contrast, the *Labyrinth Blood Imprint* is in many ways an index, and made in dirt, it is even of the paradigmatic kind of index that Peirce gives us in the footprint in the sand or that Leja offers in the thought experiment of Jackson Pollock thrashing about on the beach. But the outline of Mendieta's body is not present because she lay there and imprinted the sand with her shape but because she dug into the dirt to make the sign. Upon first looking at the outline, we are likely to take it as a representation of a body rather than an index of it. Or, if we take the form not as a representation of Mendieta but as a more abstract representation of, say, the feminine, then we take it as a symbol, in the same way we would take ♀ as a symbol. What becomes interesting is how Mendieta has produced this symbol through an indexical relation to the earth. Scholars have tended to stress the imprinting of the feminine form in the earth as bringing the feminine and the earth into symbiosis or even equivalence.² But the point is that the feminine form is actually produced through a violence on the earth, through a cutting into the earth. The feminine is not a reflection of the earth but a product of the earth's manipulation, even mutilation.

² This is the so-called essentialist reading of Mendieta's work. For a summary of these debates, see the introduction to Viso (2004). For influential challenges to the essentialist reading, see especially Kwon (1994) and Best (2007). For the poststructuralist defense of Mendieta—that her work stages not a static essence but a performative contingency of identity categories—see especially Blocker (1999).

What this brings out is that the same thing can be a sign of many different things. You could take these printed words as signs (symbols) of my thinking, but you could also take them as signs (indices) of a printing process. This was one of the reasons Peirce became obsessed in the latter part of his life with analyzing the many different possibilities of what he called “interpretants” ([1906] 1998, 477). Krauss, in calling something an index, is talking about its relation to the object to which it refers. Leja, in talking about how we approach a canvas differently than we do a stretch of beach, is talking about how we take up and interpret it; we summon a set of conventions for canvases that we don’t bother to summon for beaches. Krauss and Leja don’t necessarily disagree; they’re just talking about different things. To take the example of a footprint in the sand: what matters to Krauss is that it was produced by an actual foot stepping there, a foot to which the footprint existentially points, whereas for Leja, what matters is how the footprint is understood by someone walking by; for instance, whether its shape is valued in and of itself, or whether the person walking by begins to wonder about the foot that made it, or whether, perhaps, as a detective, to wonder whether the footprint leads to a murder suspect. For approaching a sign as an index is a different matter than whether the sign was existentially produced as an index. If we take the footprint as an index, it points us to the existence of the foot that made it, but it does not point us to many of the qualities of that foot, like whether it was hairy or had been recently bathed with scented soap, or even the person to whom it belongs, like their age or what shirt they were wearing that day. So, too, if we think of the footprint as an index, a lot of its qualities will not matter to us—for instance the color of the sand in which it is imprinted. That tells us about the sand; it doesn’t tell us about the foot.

What matters to Peirce in the “interpretant” is how the sign focuses our understanding. The point of thinking about three different functions of a sign in his later writings is to provide a pragmatic foundation for the division of signs, the different uses to which they can be put, or the different effects they will, in time, have on interpretants. Thus, he talks of indices as “more or less detailed directions for what the hearer is to do in order to place himself in direct experiential or other connection with the thing meant” or a “kind of sign which shall act dynamically upon the hearer’s attention and direct it to a special object or occasion” (Peirce 1932, 336; quoted in Freadman 2004, 120). All indices point to something; they therefore say to someone, “Hey, look here!” As Anne Freadman (2004) glosses the transition in her indispensable book on Peirce’s semiotics, “The focus is now on semiosis as process, rather than on the sign as entity” (171). The effect was to think of signs as overseeing a primarily temporal and diachronic procedure rather than a

synchronic spatiality in which, say, signified = signifier. Semiotics in turn became an investigation—and this sense of investigation will be important for the detective aesthetic of Mendieta’s cinematic documentations of her *Siluetas*, discussed below—and the particular investigation provoked by the index is one that can open up what Peirce calls “the common environment of the interlocutors” ([1903] 1998b, 281). In giving directions, the index also gives a common object for all to look at. In his 1903 lectures at Harvard on the “Algebra of Logic,” Peirce discussed as one index a landmark such as the Bunker Hill Monument, whose designer, according to Peirce, said he meant for “it to say simply, ‘Here!’ It just stands on that ground and plainly is not movable. So if we are looking for the battle-field, it will tell us whither to direct our steps” (Peirce [1903] 1998a, 163; quoted in Freadman 2004, 125).

Mendieta’s *Siluetas* appear as monuments in this sense; they seem to designate a space and, in their indexicality, seem to say “Look here!” And yet, it may seem unclear at first what instructions Mendieta’s *Siluetas* afford; it may seem that they present the impossibility of a common environment rather than its facilitation. It is not just that Mendieta stages a problem of communication across cultural difference in, for instance, her use—some have said appropriation (Hyacinthe 2019)—of Afro-Caribbean religious images with which many spectators would be unfamiliar, and with which she herself was unfamiliar before she began to employ them; or across historical difference, in her use of Indigenous images and contexts filmed on a then fairly new technology, the Super 8 home movie camera. It is also that we do not know at first what Freadman would call its “genre” (2004, 125); we know the *Siluetas*, as indices, point to something, but point to what? In the midst of what Lauren Berlant (2018) might call the index’s “genre flail,” the index also becomes what Mary Ann Doane (2007), in her contribution to a special issue on indexicality that she coedited for *differences*, calls “eminently exploitable” (148). Faced with an indeterminate index, not definitely pointing to X or even a category of X, we are led to imagine its referential object, to construct its genre. Such an insight partially underwrites the uptake of indexicality in critical race theory, because whereas (for instance) a photograph of people of color might seem to index race, it in fact produces race (Mirzoeff 2003). The body cannot be an index of race, since race has no biological substrate; rather, race is produced through our engagement with the photograph, and we retroactively implant it as a cause rather than effect. As Tina Campt (2012) puts it, “photography serves a critical function in materializing race as a visible attribute of human difference by simultaneously producing and propagating it as a meaningful category of humanity” (49). Campt’s term for this phenomenon, the “performative index,” also applies

to the way in which photographs may aspirationally produce forms of relationality that they officially claim only to document; a photograph might “enact . . . and thereby produce . . . the very forms of subjectivity and linkage it appear[s] to record” (162).

This performative indexicality, as well as its ramifications for the production of social difference, both gendered and racialized, is dramatically staged in Mendieta’s Super 8 documentation of what she called her first in the series, the *Laberinth Blood Imprint*, in the summer of 1974.³ The *Silueta* is in the central room of a labyrinth, the rocky walls of the maze still upright and affording only certain paths of movement. The video begins at a distance from the *Silueta* itself, elsewhere in the ruins and along a path that may eventually lead to the central room but that has no immediate view of it. The camera looks down at the dirt pathway, at an angle that emphasizes the path itself rather than where it leads, like looking down at one’s feet for something dropped there. But the handheld camera is especially shaky, making it hard to focus on or find whatever object has been misplaced, and so we are encouraged to read the ground itself, to see it not as some surface on which an interesting object could be placed but as the object itself, warranting close reading. One of the only cuts in the sequence happens early, when a sudden shot of one of the walls flanking the path is replaced by the shot of the path itself. The camera zooms in to such a degree, it takes a few seconds of movement to reveal that the surface, with all its detail, is the rocky wall itself, and we seem invited to read its every crook and shadow. Eventually, the camera pans back to the pathway, this time at a higher angle, looking more straight ahead as the camera, too, moves forward as we walk down the path. But the camera gets distracted from its movement and again looks down and to the sides of the walls. The shaky camera, the slow and hesitant nature of the walking, and the too-close reading invited by the attention to surface all work together to create a sort of detective aura and almost a sense of suspense: an anxiety that everything could matter (because everything could be a clue) at the same time that something surprising (a bad surprise) may lurk around the corner.

The second and final cut in the sequence is from another close-up shot of the wall to the interior of the labyrinth. We are at first peering around a corner and now glimpse the *Silueta* on the ground. Is this what we were looking for? It explains our attention to the ground and the walls, as if we were searching for this outline and knew it could be somewhere, or anywhere, that

³ I join a recent trend in Mendieta scholarship to center her cinematic practice of documenting her works. See Joseph et al. (2015).

it was not going to be an object hung on the wall like a painting. As we walk into the center of the labyrinth, the camera first looks to the sides of the room, away from the *Silucta*, as if still scanning the space for other clues, other aspects to focus on. But finding nothing—or, perhaps, finding there is no danger, that no one else is here—we pan back to the *Silucta* and, in getting closer and slowly circling around it, make out some of its features: the circle and horizontal lines that iconize a head and outstretched arms; a bulbous midsection atop two ovals that suggest legs. The body is oriented away from us—the head closest to the camera, the feet furthest away—and its outline is filled with blood.

At one point, the camera again looks up, at a separate entrance into (or exit from) the room, perhaps confirming again that no danger lurks. The camera, too, remains hesitant in its approach to the *Silucta*, at one point backing away before finally building the courage—if not quite the nerve to stabilize the frame itself, which continues to shake—to approach the bloody imprint and circle completely around to the other side to look at it in what we might call its proper orientation, standing up. Here the imprint recalls the *Blood Signs* in which Mendieta used blood on her hands to make shapes on the wall, her body and her canvas aligned and oriented in the same direction. Such an orientation is aspirational in this video rather than provided; it is the work of overcoming hesitation, uncertainty, and fear to finally position yourself in such a way that the imprint could be your shadow, could be mirroring *you*.

The camera's hesitant approach to the object, its scouting for clues, positions us at first as a detective coming upon a crime scene, like the original rape scene Mendieta had staged in her apartment. Coming upon the object, the blood indexes a violent crime that has happened. But here there is an added difference: for unlike the apartment that Mendieta rented and therefore had a right to disorganize, and unlike the studios in which she was authorized to perform her *Blood Signs* works, this archaeological site does not invite her artistic manipulation. In turn, the outline that seems to index a crime of violence also *is* a crime of desecration. This literally is a crime scene, in other words, and not only the index of some other crime of violence.

In emphasizing a supposed essentialist connection between women and nature, or in emphasizing Mendieta's use of Indigenous spaces as a mode of connecting to a cultural heritage from which historical colonialism and contemporary anti-Cuban sentiment had severed her, critics have tended to overlook the violence that Mendieta not only represents but herself performs: against the Indigenous space she desecrates and against the nature she manipulates, not only in the digging up of land but also in the decapitation of the chicken whose blood is poured into the land. The violence on

the land takes on allegorical meaning in the crisscrossing of iconic, indexical, and symbolic interpretants. The blood looks like human blood, marking an iconic connection; it is the effect of and points backward to the violence that produced it, indexing the violence against nature and nonhuman animals and forming a human shape, but an abstract one that cannot quite be referred to any one individual; the blood symbolizes a collective human subject, something like mankind. And yet the form also indexes Mendieta's body, since it is carved into the ground as her silhouette, and so the symbol is not quite universal, not quite Mankind in the universal, but therefore masculine, understanding. Although we are led by the camera's detective gaze to read the form like a crime subject outline, it is instead a symbol of the victimization of some portion of humanity.

Together, these elements point to a kind of violence whose purpose is the production of symbols: a violence against nature that also looks like a violence against humans to symbolically create victimization. Both the violence against nature and against humans are brought together in the coformation of the symbol, which in turn suggests their similarities. Both convert raw material into symbolic value; or really, the violence is this conversion itself, the opening up of land and body for symbolic use. That is to say, the silhouette does not make an essentialist conflation of woman and nature but instead aligns two structures of violence. For both, there is a double theater of violence: first the violence against nature or bodies, but then second the symbol of victimization that the silhouette memorializes. The symbol says not only that *this* earth and *this* human figure have been raped but also that the earth in general, and humans generally, are eminently rapable. If it is a monument, in the indexical sense explored by Peirce and Freedman, it is one that points to, or threatens, victimization, like a head on a pike warns the visitor to beware it could be their head, too.

Mary Mellor (2017) has written about "the common experience of exploitation, damage, and marginalization that women and the natural world share" (89). Modern economies rely on "externalization," which Mellor defines as the "failure of formal economic accounting to 'cost in' the work of nature or women's work" (90). Writing in another context, Rachel Fraser (2020) has also turned to an economic conceptualization of rape by way of critiquing the dominance of trauma narratives in discourses of sexual violence, not only because witnessing trauma may recreate trauma but because this framework may disable other perspectives, too: "Rape traumatizes, yes, but it does other things too. It might, for example, prove useful to think of the *labor* extracted by sexual violence—the labor of caring and recovery, of managing fear, of checking the backseat—rather than of the trauma it inflicts." The *Siluetas*, too, are about labor: they show the iterative extraction

of value from bodies earthen and human in order to symbolize the permanent condition of possible victimization.

This leaves us with two ways of interpreting the hesitant, but final, identification of the camera with the symbol, the taking up of a position as if the silhouette is one's shadow. On the one hand, it is a hesitant identification with the symbol of victimization. On the other hand, it may be to take up the position of one who has authored this victimization, the one whose conversion of raw material into symbolic value is before us. Here, we take up the position of complicity in a structure of violence, and the looks away and awry are like a bystander's efforts to avoid accountability. What the co-presence of two competing indexical interpretants provides is the knowledge of their actual inseparability, or the artificiality of the separation. What the *Siluetta* shows is that a position that dominates today may be dominated tomorrow, for no body is exempt from vulnerability; indeed, a desire both to control and be controlled may be within each of us, just as the camera is both afraid of finding a crime scene around the corner and yet eager to go looking for it.

In this dual staging of perpetrator and victim, Mendieta's camera anticipates the cinematographic form of the slasher films that would take America by storm in the next couple of years—in which movies like the 1978 *Halloween* have us alternately occupy the perspective of the sadist and the victim, as Linda Williams (1991) has demonstrated in a groundbreaking article—and also echoes an earlier art film on the relation of the camera to forms of abuse, Yoko Ono's *Film No. 5 (Rape or Chase)*, more commonly known by the simpler and provocative title, *Rape* (1969). For that film, Ono instructed a cameraman in London to relentlessly follow and film a twenty-one-year-old woman from Austria for three days. The crew received the consent of the subject's sister beforehand, but she herself was unaware of the setup and became increasingly distressed by the attention. The film is not just a representation of violation but is itself a violation, a nonconsensual encroachment of personal space and autonomy, although not the violation named in the film's title. Joan Kee (2016) argues that the film was called "rape" because "there was yet no language to describe what was talking place": stalking, the action this film performs, "was not yet a legal concept in Britain" (192). In turn, the film has a complicated politics; it victimizes a woman, but in turn it also makes visible, raises consciousness about, a form of victimization that was, to the law and to the official culture of which it is an instrument, invisible.

The legal perspective introduces a further complication, however, and one that helps bring out a further dimension of Mendieta's project. As Joan Hawkins (2000) explains in her analysis of the film, it matters that the object of stalking is not only a woman, thereby enabling a gendered allegory of men's belief in their access to women's bodies, but an Austrian woman in

England, lacking both proficiency in English and the proper documents authorizing her stay. “Certainly the gaze of the camera goes a long way toward emphasizing (for the audience) her status as foreign, ‘exotic’ Other,” Hawkins explains (134). In thus staging the collusion of patriarchy and imperialism, *Rape* provides a proto-intersectional account of systems of subjugation. In *Laberinth Blood Imprint*, too, the fact that rape iconography is produced as a desecration of Indigenous spaces suggests that what partially mediates between the alignment of environmental and sexual violence is the specter of colonialism, itself a process of rending apart bodies, natural and human alike. In cycling through the positions of perpetrator and victim, the camera documenting *Laberinth Blood Imprint* stages the inheritance of this legacy as one that continues to produce harm in the present.

Importantly, this cycling through positions of perpetrator and victim, in order to access a more fundamental ambivalence that cannot simply resolve into one or the other, is not one of empathetic exchange, in which, for instance, we experience the emotional reality of a rape survivor or perpetrator. Angeliqe Szymanek (2016), writing in this journal, has criticized how Mendieta’s *Rape Scene* is often read as “an empathetic activist gesture” that detracts from the ways in which Mendieta in fact rejects empathy and witnessing as the grounds for “civic duty and moral certitude” (904). Similarly, *Laberinth Blood Imprint* does not give us subject positions to inhabit but symbolic vantage points from which to have a structural perspective. In thus focusing on a structure of violence, Mendieta also moves beyond the individualized psychological terms in which rape is usually understood, whether in discussions of empathetic bystanders or, more frequently, the consent or nonconsent of participants in a sexualized scene. Instead, Mendieta has us focus on our relation to symbolic structures. To shift the focus from empathy to symbol, from interiority to structure, is not to claim some dispassionate or neutral viewing practice. Writing about the *Rape Scene*, Leticia Alvarado (2015) has argued that “Mendieta makes visible the Kantian expectation of a disinterested spectator but also the violence and complacency inherent in the passive contemplation of the taste-bearing subject of judgment” (79). The hesitant camera work documenting *Laberinth Blood Imprint* similarly rebuffs the expectation of disinterestedness. What we see instead are our own investments in the production of symbols of harm, our desire to go looking for it, like detectives, however sheepishly we round the corner of the maze.

What Mendieta’s indexical practice does, however, is disappoint the desire to go looking for expressions of personal trauma as the index of rape. In departing from individualized trauma, what I want to emphasize here is not that Mendieta is uncaring about the individual victim, and indeed we can read the gesture of making a silhouette, of putting *this* body into the

frame, as one of particularizing the universal. But what the *Siluetas* says is that, from the perspective of structure, individuals are interchangeable, not because their psychological experience is the same but because their symbolic functioning is the same, just as the scars of coal mining symbolize not only that particular violence against nature but man's dominion over nature in general. This interchangeability was evident in Mendieta's first intuition to place her own body in the place of Sara Ann Ottens's. Her increasing moves to abstraction, first to blood without bodies, then to the blood tracks in the studio, and finally in the filled forms like in *Labyrinth Blood Imprint*, are evolving realizations of the abstract valence of violence, its immediate end the violence itself but its final end the forming of lasting symbols that memorialize it. At the same time, it again matters that it is through the desecration of Indigenous space that environmental and sexual violence are aligned, for colonial violence as a means of securing the symbol of the rapability of the body tells a story about whose and what kinds of harm can be memorialized or, as Judith Butler (2009) might say, "grievable." That is to say, although all bodies can be violated, only some bodies are culturally understood as rapable, and the exclusion of the colonized body is repeated in the way in which this actual desecration of Indigenous space is not taken up or interpreted as an index of colonial violence.

In this way, Mendieta's work is a kind of obverse to how the conceptual and performance artist Adrian Piper would develop indexicality in the following decade. In a pair of lectures on "Xenophobia and the Indexical Present" presented in 1989 and 1992, Piper explained her efforts to immerse her audience in the "concrete, immediate here-and-now" she called the "indexical present" (1999, 247). The idea was to get people to engage with her as a Black woman without the intermediation of an abstract concept like Blackness: "xenophobia can be overcome by focusing on the specific, unique, concrete qualities of individuals" (257) in a "direct and immediate experience of the complexity of the other" (248). In contrast, Mendieta seeks not to dismantle intermediary concepts but to abstract from her body's imprint in the dirt a new kind of concept that can relate structures of violence. Furthermore, whereas Piper would go on to say that her strategy for combatting sexism was different from her strategy for combatting racism—because the kind of interpersonal intimacy that could overcome the latter was often an "obstacle to liberation from sexism" when women are, precisely through their intimate relationships, conscripted into patriarchal gender roles (247)—Mendieta's indexical practice uses this conceptual space to intersect, rather than disentangle, these structures.

Because the *Siluetas* form a series, they also suggest the iterative structure of environmental and sexual violence, the way a memorial to domination

over earth and body is propped up by the continued exercise of extracting symbolic value. For what environmental and sexual violence both seek to deny is a larger symbiotic relationship in which humans and nature and humans themselves are entangled. Ecologically, humanity is part of nature, but the man/nature binary emerges from a disavowal of this entanglement, in the taking up of a position of mastery that morphs the circular shape of an ecological circuit into the oppositional shape of a dichotomy. So, too, does sexual violence create a victim/perpetrator binary by disavowing the actual vulnerability of all bodies and the fundamental ambivalence at the heart of sexuality, in which drives to sadism and to masochism are mutually constitutive within a single psyche. But because the underlying fact of entanglement and ambivalence is permanent, this exercise of erecting binaries—so that one is not *both* a part of nature and outside of it, or *both* dominant and submissive—requires a sequential, iterative rehearsal. The symbolic differentiation of two bodies, the splitting of ambivalence and entanglement into a neater economy of opposition, must be elaborately performed. In thus both performing and memorializing violence as an iterative extraction of bodies for the purpose of producing symbols, Mendieta dramatizes and visualizes the alignment of environmental and sexual violence at the level of structure.

Metaphoric discourse: A coda

In saying environmental and sexual violence are aligned in a structure that iterates the forceful conversion of raw bodies into symbolic value, and in pointing to, by indexing, the shared features of this structure in reducing circular ecologies—both planetary and psychological—to binary pairs, Mendieta's *Labyrinth Blood Imprint* advances a new function for metaphor specifically and aesthetic discourse generally. What metaphoric thinking opens up through this earthwork is a space in which environmental and sexual fields can speak to one another in coauthoring a theory of rape. By saying environmental degradation and sexual violence are both rape, the earthwork does not look away from rape but instead generates a new concept of rape that can intersect two domains of domination.

This essentially conceptual function of art differs from the task art is most often called upon to perform in discussions of sexual violence: expressing or representing the emotional experience of survivors. Especially when viewed in relation to other discourses—in particular, the legal discourse that has monopolized the conceptualization of rape in the past generation—esthetic discourse is tasked with humanizing impersonal abstractions. The law converts personal experience into other metrics, especially in determining the severity of harm, or the years in jail, or dollars in punitive damages that an event

of rape warrants. In contrast to this mode of quantification, art is supposed to return us to the lived experience of actual people (Peters 2005). But this defense of art has tended to overlook the kinds of abstract thinking art itself performs—and is good at performing. In conceptualizing rape at the level of structure, Mendieta does not deny the importance and legitimacy of emotional forms of expression. But Mendieta’s work is able to visualize harm even without requiring that survivors do the emotional labor of making themselves available for empathy; it preserves the importance of personal experience by making it inessential to the structural conception of harm it theorizes. Mendieta’s earthworks embrace abstraction and metaphoric thinking to expand rather than narrow our understanding of the theaters of violence.

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