LA MANO IZQUIERDA: AN ESSAY ON ERASURE

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LA MANO IZQUIERDA: AN ESSAY	Y ON ERASURE	
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ABSTRACT

La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure is an archival exhibition that utilizes video, installation, performance, alternative storytelling, and textiles to develop a multi-sensory space that incorporates strategies inherent to the museological and archival disciplines. All these elements come together to form a museological display of the hand-made remains of the lives and memories of a biomythographical queer guerrilla group called La Mano Izquierda. The artworks that compose the exhibition explore issues of identity, queerness, race, loss, memory, erasure, reclamation, and revival.

AKNOWLEDGMENTS

"A mi mamá, que me enseñó la importancia de seguir soñando. A mi abuela, quien me enseñó la importancia de seguir recordando. A Diego, quien me enseñó la importancia de seguir intentando."

It would be impossible for me to thank every single person who made *La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure* possible–so I refuse to have an endless list of names that would mean nothing to the reader of this pages. Long lists have the power to turn individuals into small particles of a bigger *thing*, and I believe in the power of having an identity to claim your own.

However, I also believe in the importance of being thankful, so I would like to especially thank:

Benjamin Rosenthal, who never gave up on me until he made me realize that it was okay to call myself an artist.

Thank you for guiding me through the process of finding my voice as an artist and for chairing my thesis committee.

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APOLOGIA (AS A MATTER OF INTRODUCTION)

"But is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?".

Milan Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The following pages are a compilation of the different theories, concepts, and ideas that have accompanied me while developing the works in this exhibition. They are not only the tools I have used to inform my art-making process—they help me justify my decisions as I am immersed in that process. Like the works in the exhibition, these ideas are not inscribed hierarchically. They all possess equivalent importance for me and for the works. They exist here as a sort of list only because of the intrinsic limitations of written language.

I understand the impossibility of explaining all of the factors that came into the formation of these ideas. However, I know the forced performance of an othered identity that has been my life has allowed me to form a relationship with these ideas. I will try to explain as many of the factors that went into the creation of these ideas and my relationship to them as I can. Nevertheless, they, much like the works in the exhibition, rely heavily on the connections and interpretations that the viewer (and in this case the reader) makes of them.

Think of these few pages as my personal *vade mecum*. A sort of intellectual handbook I have kept next to me in the development of this project. All the definitions and ideas included in it come from a broad variety of sources and are manifested in very diverse ways. Some of them are my personal interpretations of specific ideas and thoughts; while others hold a more "academic" notion of rigor. Some of them are just one lonely thought that grasps, for me, the full meaning of an idea; while others require more thorough explanation. Some are a direct documentation of my words; while I have decided to appropriate other people's words to describe some others.



Figure 1. La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure, Installation Shot, 2018

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I have four names. The first one is my diseased uncle's first name. The second, my diseased grandfather's second. The third one is that same grandfather's third, which is also my father's third. The fourth one is my mother's third.

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I was born in a family that cares about and for its history and memories. For the last five decades, my family has told the histories of its past because it helps us to imagine that we are better–richer, smarter, and

more interesting. The reality of our situation has never been important. Our lack of wealth, for example, has been metaphysically transformed into a *temporary* situation by the act of repeating the stories of my much wealthier ancestors. It does not matter that the last two generations did not experience the wealth of the past. Or that those same generations have, by now, made and lost their own fortune. We continue talking about our family's legendary wealth, trying to believe that we could never be "new money."

I was raised with the help of my grandmother-a remarkable woman who took it upon herself to educate me into a better man by force, telling me the stories of all the good men in my family as an example. And all the bad ones as a warning. It is a tradition of my family for men to leave and to refuse to take responsibility for those they love-for women to find men who do this. All the good men die before it is their time. Thus, the strongest presences in my life were the memories, once removed, of absent men-and the present women who remembered them.

But my grandma didn't only keep memories. She kept the evidence of the existence of all those menboth gone and dead-in her mother's chest, under her bed. It was an old, black chest that time had worn out until it cracked open. The inside was lined with old wrapping paper, in an attempt to create a beautiful, maybe happier surrounding for the treasures it contained. The treasures were odd. They were not just the vessels that contained the memories she had embedded in them by means of her desire—they were the evidence of all the absences and loses she had suffered throughout her whole life.

Amongst many photo albums, letters, and other objects more regularly connected to the acts of collecting memory, she kept my uncle's adult teeth-which he lost in the accident that took his life-standing in for the ones that he lost as a toddler and she forgot to collect. She kept her mother-in-law's missal and shawl,

though she was never a religious woman and was better known for having fled a convent in her youth to join the circus and travel the world. She kept her father-in-law's handkerchiefs-soaked in the dry sweat of his deathbed. When a heart attack took him before he could finish his life's greatest achievement: tracing the path between the two biggest cities in the country.

I was always fascinated by my grandmother's collection of specimens. More than an archive of memories, they constituted a reliquary of mythological evidence. The only testament of the fantastic lives of the most eminent members of my family-those whose lives I would have to reckon with at some point in life.



Figure 2. Untitled, Wooden display-table, silk velvet couture sequins and beads, found wedding gown, found silk scarf, 2018

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I am a photographer and an artist, but I am first and foremost a storyteller.

I tell stories about people like me [queer, brown people]-and how we've been imagined. Trying to understand the way in which my body exists in institutions of meaning like museums and archives–I create works that reference those institutions to question their perceived authority. By appropriating the language of the masters, and by queering their language through the use of poetry, I aim to create spaces of disidentification that welcome the histories of the margin I aim to tell into existence.

My work relies greatly in segmentivity for I believe it is a concept that speaks directly to the fragmented existence of queer people of color. I aim the viewer to draw their own relationships to and between the different components of a piece.

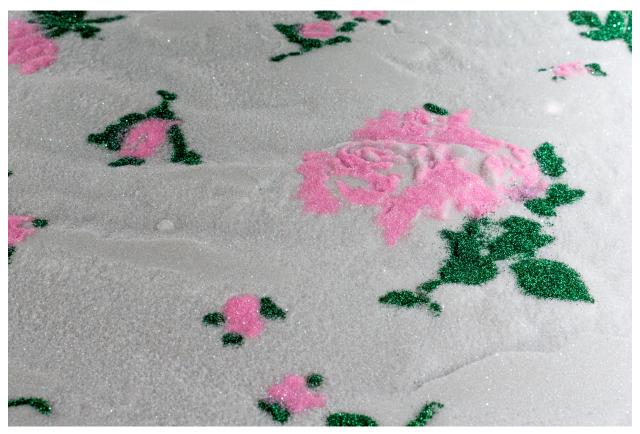


Figure 3. Untitled (The Archive), Detail Shot, Glitter, 2018

I make art because I want to understand the world around me. This is why my work is so heavily informed by situations of victimization in my country of birth, Colombia. I extrapolate the situations of erasure, exclusion, and misrepresentation of othered bodies in the archive to the figure of the disappeared: that eerie creature that lives in the border between existence and oblivion in Colombia.

I create works that explore the state of in-betweenness prevalent of queerness and the margin. I define the margin in its broadest sense. The moment between the clicking of a camera and the impression of the image on its sensor. The time between the occurrence of an event and its posterior narration.

In this way, my work is also autobiographical in reconstructing and re-imagining moments of my own desire, longing, uncertainty, and vulnerability-often taking form as an archive. As the creator of such archive I aim to give substance to the missing histories that mirror my projection of identity.



Figure 4. La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure, Installation Shot, 2018

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Memory is a powerful tool. Michel Foucault argues that memory is an essential factor in the battle for power. Whoever controls the memory of the people controls also the social dynamic¹. This is mostly due to the fact that history and collective memory begin with witnessing, and therefore with memory², of events that are

¹ Michel Foucault, "Film and Popular Memory," in *Foucault Live (Interviews 1966-1984)*, trans. Martin Jorgin, ed. Sylvere Kitrunger (New York: Semiotext[e], 1989), 92.

² Abdelmajid Hannoum, Violent Modernity: France in Algeria (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 97.

later documented, narrated, and processed by archives. It is in the happening of the archival event that history is constructed, when both the inclusion and exclusion³ of discourses take place. Thus, archives are regulatory institutions that "determine what can and cannot be said about any historical period"⁴. But archives are also a hegemonic tool to narrate and imagine not only the *self*, but the *other*. Unfortunately, this interpretation of the other is usually made through what Susana Rotker calls "Prospero's gaze"–according to her definition, "Every conqueror defines the Other in terms of what he lacks in relation to the self: he is ugly because he does not look

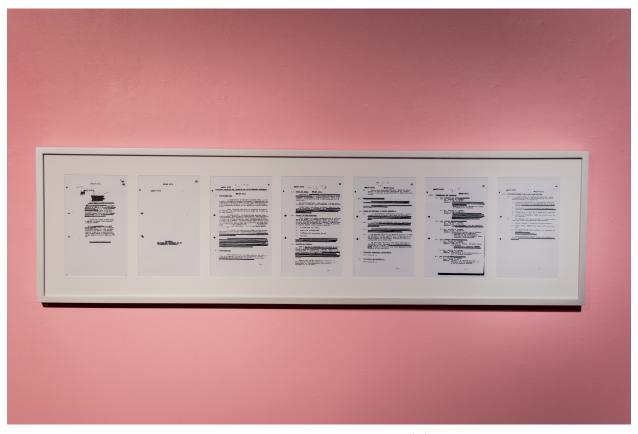


Figure 5. Untitled (Manonegra), 18' x 6Ft., Xerox Prints, 2018

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972. The original citation is from Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part One: Historiography as Process", *e-flux journal #69*, no. 69 (2016) http://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60594/walid-raad-s-spectral-archive-part-i-historiography-as-process/

like the dominator, he is barbaric because he stammers the language of the master (he uses *barbarisms*, hence the qualifier), and so on⁵.

It is clear, then, that memory has to be articulated by the *present* for it to exist as history. I would say this dynamic speaks directly to the desires of the communities of the present to imagine themselves both currently and in the future. If "what is chosen to be represented in culture and in memory-since all memory is representation-says much about the identity of individuals, social groups, and nations" 6-then the systematic disappearance of *queer*/brown identities from the archive speaks to the desires of the present for itself and for the future. Erasure and exclusion are not just used by all hegemonic powers adverse to our existence to satisfy their desire of obliterating *queer*/brown identities in the present-they facilitate the disappearance of *queer*/brown representations in the future, permanently affixing *queer*/brown identities to the margin.

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Queers of color have no power to tell our stories and, therefore, to represent ourselves. This means that when we're growing up–surveying the world around us, trying to build our own identities through the identification to similar bodies–there are only a few ideas of [not]being that align with our existences.

Our identities have always been *represented* in the media as either absent or dead. Our histories are only narrated-if at all-by the tabloids of that very same margin to which our identities have been fixed. *Queerl*

Figure 2. *Untitled*, Wooden display-table, silk velvet couture sequins and beads, found wedding gown, found silk scarf, 2018

⁵ Susana Rotker, Captive Women: Oblivion and Memory in Argentina (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 26.

⁶ Ibid, 2.



Figure 6. Untitled (Gloria), Xerox Print, 8.5' x 11', 2018

brown youth grow up surrounded by the images of our *cuerpos maltrechos*–only testimony to what queerness can *be* in a culture deeply concerned with the slaughter of our bodies. Imagined as some dangerous creatures with an uncontrollable impulse to take each other's lives, our images are presented as an offering to the gods of decency and good manners who crave our blood and flesh as a means to appease the ire awaken by our ill existences.

We have also been narrated as dangerous creatures of the margin of the margin of society. Godless beings that feed the concerns and prayers of the pious, honorable mothers of the mainstream. But that is not the only danger related to our experiences. Queerness has always been constructed as a sort of contagious illness, mental for the most part, that lurks in the shadows of the lower classes-trying to find a way to climb up

the social ladder, into the *best* parts of our communities. This was heightened by the emergence of the AIDS epidemic in the 70s and 80s, which was rapidly regarded as a *gay thing*. However, this construction denies how queer-identifying bodies have only been able to find ways of constructing communities through the performance of *marginal* acts of sex. Bathhouses, glory holes, and gay beats have not just been places of debauched queer desire, they are also spaces where we could transmit knowledge and love-the glue that holds communities together.

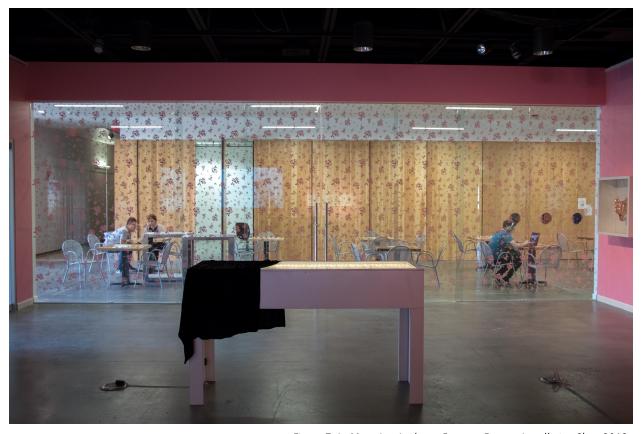


Figure 7. La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure, Installation Shot, 2018

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"Queers of color experience the same problems (as women of color) in that as white normativity is as much a site of antagonism as is heteronormativity. If queer discourse is to supersede the limits of feminism it must be able to calculate multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender, and race, as well as sexuality."

José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications

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Queerness, and especially homosexuality, has always been linked to femininity. This, in a way, talks of the desires of toxic masculinity and how our *queer*/brown bodies had to be made into an *other* type of *man*–so that the heterosexual, macho desire of our bodies could be justified. However, queers have been tied to a very particular type of femininity. We are the fallen woman, the deceptive woman, the slut. Never the virgin. We have been imagined into a villainous species whose only purpose is to trick and deceive heterosexual machos into *lying* with us, in an attempt to spread our illness. This is what makes it so imperative to erase our bodies and the idea of us from the master narrative and, therefore, from collective memory.



Figure 8. Untitled (Falsas Mujeres), Detail Shot, Xerox transfer on silk organza and silk thread, 2018

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"Yes our story is tragic. Yes it is sordid. But you have to remember it is first and foremost a story and in this way it is familiar to you"

Souheil Bachar, Hostage: The Bachar Tapes (English Version)

I enjoy telling people that *La Mano Izquierda* came to me in an inspired state of possession. According to my own legend, I stumbled upon their history on a Sunday afternoon while I walked around a flea market in Bogotá, Colombia. I love flea markets. They are for me the perfect anti-museum: lost places of oblivion where thousands of forgotten objects go to rot away completely deprived of context. There is not any effort put into making meaning of them–they are just objects that exist without the possibility to fulfill their potential as evidence. The idea of the flea market in Colombia is particularly uncanny, as the chances of buying the belongings of a victim of a violent death are terribly high.

I was sauntering around the flea market, not paying attention, when I saw a pair of tiny, red high-heels. They had *probably* belonged to a little girl whose name was Tránsito. She had grown up to become a legendary trans sex-worker of *las calles de Lovaina* in my hometown of Medellín. The shoes had been her big sister's when they were kids-before Tránsito took them out of the trash when they no longer fit her sister. She wore them every night, in the outside bathroom of her grandparents' farm, where she could hide away from her family and the shame of wearing women's shoes. Finally, when she outgrew them, she kept them in her old suitcase, the one she had packed in a hurry when she had to flea her hometown, Segovia, to go to Medellín seeking to escape her grandfather's abuses after her grandmother's death.

I will never know how the shoes made their way into my life, but that is unimportant. I just know that they found me because they needed me to tell their story and find them a body (or the image of one) so that

they could be reunited with their place in history. The truth is, however, that I imagined them into existence in a state of visceral necessity inspired by a rosary of coincidences.

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Figure 9. Untitled (Intimidad), Detail Shot, Video Still, Dimensions Variable, 2018

I found the shoes in the summer of 2016⁷, when I was on a trip to Bogotá visiting one of my closest friends–a queer historian who works for the museum in charge of recovering the memory of all the victims of the Colombian conflict of the las 65 years. At the time, I was doing research about the experiences of *queer*

⁷ 2016 was a very complicated year for many peoples who live marginal identities. It was the year of Brexit, the year of the Pulse nightclub's massacre of 49 queer people of color in Orlando, FL, and it was the deadliest year on record for transgender people (according to GLAAD). There were also two horrible events in Colombia that moved me deeply. There was a march against LGBTQ+ identities under the guise of a march "in defense of the family", and the referendum to ratify the final agreement on the termination of the Colombian conflict between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas (the oldest guerrillas in the Western hemisphere) was voted negatively on October 2, 2016.

communities and how those experiences had been directly affected by the ongoing war. I visited archives, libraries, and museums-both in Medellín and Bogotá. And that is where I found them-the owner of the shoes and the members of *La Mano Izquierda*-lurking in the shadows of the archive that tried to obliterate their memory by any means necessary (erasure and misrepresentation). I tell their histories using the scraps of *othered* histories available to me (to us) through partial information, rumors, and mediated news reports.

Memories once removed from their bodies, twice removed from mine. I make my body theirs through the performance of their memories.

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"Whenever a poet employs a figure or a story previously accepted and defined by culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible."

Alieia Suelia Ostrilar Starlian the January of The France and Microsoft Poetroin Association.

Alicia-Suskin Ostriker, Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America

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My work exists in the margin between narrated memory and oblivion created by the archival event-for it presents itself soaked with possibilities. Even though it is a thin space of time, it allows for any narration to become factual. And those narrations, as I witnessed growing up, have deep and meaningful consequences in 'real life' for those of us who are narrated as the *other*. But I construct their memories not only in an attempt to create a counter-memory. I aim to lure the viewer into investigating the ways in which queer/brown bodies and identities have been erased, excluded, disappeared, and misrepresented by the institutions in charge of the production of memory.



Figure 10. Untitled (Study on The Gaze), Video Still, Dimensions Variable, 2018

If we can only inhabit the margin, then we have to find new means to articulate our own memories in a way that allows us to create new representations for the future. In the context created by the inability to narrate our own experiences, my work is a *disidentificatory*⁸ effort through which I repurpose the tools of the hegemony while introducing marginal means of re-imagination of the self, such as biomythography–a literary term that weaves myth, history, and biography in epic narrative defined by Audre Lorde in her book *Zami: A New Spelling*

⁸ In his book, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics, José Esteban Muñoz defines disidentification as being "about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and disidentifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture". José Esteban Muñoz, "Disidentifications: Queers of Color and The Performance of Politics", (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31.

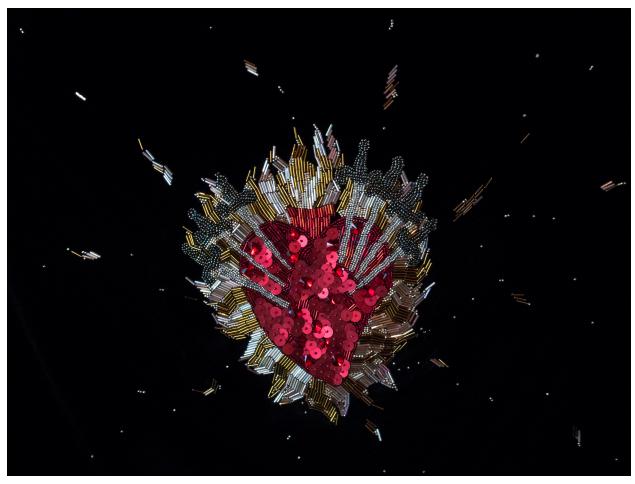


Figure 11. Untitled (Mortaja), Detail Shot, Couture Beads and Sequins, Silk Velvet, 2018

of My Name⁹. Through the use of othered ways of mediating the past, I imagine a new *queer* imaginary that problematizes hegemonic representations and proposes new means of (self)representation.

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The exhibition is a piece of three-dimensional, performed biomythography. Like any work of poetry, *La Mano Izquierda: an Essay on Erasure* relies, maybe too heavily, on the idea of segmentivity–that is, according to Rachel Blaw DuPlessis¹⁰, "the ability to articulate and make meaning by selecting, deploying, and combining

⁹ Audre Lorde, "Zami: A New Spelling of My Name", (Watertown: Persephone Press Inc., 1982).

¹⁰ Rachel Blau DuPlessis to William Watkin, June 20, 1999. Rachel Blaw DuPlessis and William Watkin, "'Draft 33: Deixis' / Notes on 'Deixis': a Midrashic Chain: an exchange of thoughts", *Jacket Magazine*, no.36 (2008) http://jacketmagazine.com/36/watkin-duplessis.shtml#fn9



Figure 12. *Untitled (Tránsito)*, Found shoes, 2018

segments", which makes it "the underlying characteristic of poetry as a genre." As a result, the exhibition presents viewers with a broad variety of media, materials, and ideas. In a way, this amalgamation of *things* aims to be reflective of the fragmented identities built by queer people of color. Through installation, textiles, photography, and video I explore the exclusion and erasure of othered bodies (these *othered* bodies being both brown and *queer*) by the institutions in charge of substantiating master historical narratives.

LETANÍA

Aquí se siente el mismo frío que sentí esa noche, hace cinco meses, cuando encontramos a Tránsito tirada en el corredor de entrada de la casa de Lovaina. Me acuerdo que Amparo salió gritando hasta la puerta, donde estábamos mi Rocío y yo, pero ya era muy tarde. Se la llevaron a tiros. Un tiro limpio en el corazón y un

charco de sangre en el suelo.



Figure 13. Untitled (Mortaja), Couture Beads on Laser Engraved Silk Velvet, 2018

En eso se nos fue Tránsito, y lo único que nos quedó fue un cuerpo frío. Ese cuerpo que tantas veces habíamos poseído en un abrazo y que tantas veces habíamos sentido en una caricia, ese cuerpo menudito de quienes se rehusan a quitarle espacio al mundo, caía ahora sobre nosotros con todo el peso de su inercia. El cuerpo de Tránsito no era más que la confirmación de esa mortalidad que nosotros estábamos determinados a negarnos. Esa mortalidad que duerme en la vigilia de los cuerpos. Ese cuerpo silenciaba la leyenda de Tránsito de una vez por todas.

A la policía nadie la llamó. Nos pudo más el miedo de perder ese cuerpo que era lo único que nos quedaba de ella. Único rastro de la vida de la vieja en este mundo.

Me acuerdo que Bernardo quiso que el velatorio fuera una celebración. Una celebración de la tristeza y del vacío, pero una celebración al fin y al cabo. Al fin de cuentas celebrábamos el tránsito final de Tránsito.

Celebrábamos que ya por fin iba a encontrarse con ese novio misterioso que la había sacado de pobre hacía tres vidas, como ella decía. Celebrábamos que por fin iba a reencontrarse con esa abuela que se le había ido antes de tiempo, como ella a nosotros, que la queríamos para toda la vida. Esa abuela que sin saberlo le había cambiado la vida y le había dado un nombre nuevo. Tránsito.

Negándonos a aceptar su ausencia, nos conformamos con convertirla en la protectora que siempre había sido. Negándonos a aceptar su muerte, nos decidimos a prepararla para su último tránsito. Despojada para siempre de su cuerpo, Tránsito despertaba a una eternidad de devoción y cuidado. Patrona ahora para siempre de nuestros delirios. De nuestras luchas. De nuestras tristezas y desesperanzas. Tránsito transubstanciaba así en la del cuadro y desde entonces esa sería la imagen grabada en mi memoria.

Amparo, que era la que sabía de los asuntos de la muerte por su trabajo en la funeraria, nos mandó a que trajéramos de su cuarto un frasco de formol que mantenía en el closet y que usaba para limpiarle los hongos a los zapatos, y otro de alcohol para secar las heridas. Rocío sacó las botellas de aguardiente que la vieja mantenía en la casa para atender a los clientes y que nosotros usamos para abrir las heridas del alma y llorar todas las putas ausencias que se nos habían acumulando en veinte años de lucha. Y ahí si comenzamos a reclamarle a la muerte lo poco que nos quedaba de la vieja. Rocío y Amparo se encargaron de limpiarla y de vestirla con sus mejores pintas domingueras. Ahí fue cuando me di cuenta de todo el peso que había perdido mi vieja en los últimos meses. La única ropa que le servía era la que había usado hacía muchos años, cuando era una pipiola convertida en dueña y señora de su propio caserón por cuenta del novio rico que se había

enamorado de ella. La enterramos en ese vestido de novia que solo había sido usado una vez, por mi Rocío, casi una década atrás.

Bernardo, el mono y yo nos dedicamos a recoger todas las flores de plástico con las que Tránsito decoraba los cuartos del caserón convertido en motel de mariquitas que tenían que putear para poder pagar una cama dónde dormir. Cuando volvimos al cuarto ya la tenían lista y emperifollada. Recostada sobre la cama, maquillada y con el pelo recogido en una moña negra de tres pisos. Parecía dormida.

Luis había movido el cuadro de la sala para que pudiéramos ver bien cómo era que había que organizarla. Y así se nos fue la madrugada. Llorando, tomando aguardiente y organizando el último lecho de Tránsito para que se pareciera al del cuadro de la virgen que ella se había traído de Segovia cuando salió huyendo de los abusos de su familia con la ayuda de la abuela muerta y de su trabajo limpiando baños de cantina por una miseria al mes.

Ese cuerpo abandonado se convertía así en el altar sobre el cual honrábamos la memoria de Tránsito, la de nosotros, y también la de muchas otras Tránsitos que en su vida no habían hecho más que amar, y sufrir, y cuidar de los demás. La vieja, que hacía años había hecho la transición de puta a madre, se convertía así en guardiana y santa. Y así pasará la eternidad, atenta a hijos propios y ajenos. Pendiente de las luchas e iniquidades, pagando con su sufrimiento el éxito de las mismas.

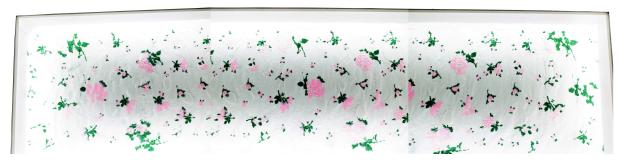


Figure 14. Untitled (The Archive), Detail Shot, Glitter in Wood Display Table, 2018

CONCLUSION

I was given wings at a very early age, when I did not know what to do with them. After a while, the weight of those wings dragged me to the lower ends of society, where I was met by a colossal array of mythological creatures. Beautiful beasts with impossible bodies whose lives had been forever bound to the margin of the margin, where they waited patiently for death and oblivion. I found my body. I was home.

I crawled out of their lair and vowed to tell their histories into existence—as if the power of my word could bring them into light and carve them a space where they could live in the realm of the heroes. But they have no substance in this realm to serve as evidence. Their matter so long gone that all there is left are my memories of them.

I roam around, looking for a trace of their existence, trying to give them a name, and a body, and a voice. But memory is stubborn-and all I can do is tell the history of their oblivion. Creating relics that tell the story I have imagined for them, I hope they come to me, so we can be reunited again.



Figure 15. Untitled (To Build The Self A Body), Couture Sequins and Beads, Nylon Underwear, 2018

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