Flowering Spirituality and Rooted Trees

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My fingers smooth out greens and browns until arriving to the image before me, a tree, resembling the shape of a woman with arms stretched strong and tall and thick roots disappearing into the earth. Looking at the female tree, strong and bold, captures the strength I needed after I was sexually assaulted as an undergraduate by a "friend". Having a mother and a grandmother who have been also sexually assaulted, I began to understand how pain is perpetuated from one generation to the next. During this time I began to read and to understand deeply Gloria Anzaldua's concept of an "open wound" (*Borderlands*, 25) as one that is perpetuated from one generation to another, and is constantly agitated by "isms." A year after I was sexually assaulted the image of the tree my fingers created reappeared as I was exposed to the work of writer Aurora Levins Morales, the performance artist Ana Mendieta, and photographer Laura Aguilar. Seeing their usage of the tree and the brown body in these three distinct artworks and art forms, I understood that it was no accident that my fingers stumbled onto this image while I embarked on my personal journey to healing. I realized then that I sought the earth for two reasons. The first, was to understand the parallels between the earth and women's bodies in relationship to power and abuse. The second, was to understand the grounding effect of the earth and the simple equation of giving to the earth and receiving what one harvests. As I sought to heal my own wounds, I stumbled on the medicinal mixture of female body and earth.

In her book *Chicana Art*, Laura Perez coins the term "curandera work" and defines Chicana artwork as a remedy. "Curandera work," healing work, [1] provides a lens for interpreting the use of the female body and the earth as spiritual and political artwork. According to Perez (2007), "curandera work" is for Chicana artists an act of "reclaiming and reformulating spiritual world views that are empowering to them as women, and that gesture reimaging what the social role of art and the artist might be" (23). "Curandera work," in other words, is artwork that uses elements of non-western spirituality in the act of reclaiming and/or reformulating spiritual worldviews as a political move. The need to return, and to move away from Western cultures of exploitation and alienation, is seen in the use of the element of earth in Chicana/Latina art forms.

In Melissa E. Feldman's "Blood Relations: Jose Bedia, Josephy Beuys, David Hammons, and Ana Mendieta" (1999), the element of earth in writing, performance art, and photography is known as earthworks, and is used as a method of signaling hybridity between the personal and the "different and distant aboriginal belief systems" (107). At the same time, the element is a response to Western alienation resulting from an imperialistic/capitalistic society that promotes individualism and separation amongst people, and between peoples and nature. Two elements used by non-western spirituality are the female body

and the earth and/or nature. Via the usage of the body, and through the medium of earthworks, artists seek out philosophies and traditions that step away from individualism, recalling traditions where "humankind lived in unison with nature and valued communal life, as a guide for their art" (106). Historically this unison has been seen as a threat to Western political and religious institutions because it begins to deconstruct the man-over-nature binary, and the man-over-woman binary. The thought is rather, man and nature/women are in unison. With this idea, nature and/or women are no longer objects of exploitation. This art creates a threat because the usage of the body and earth/land is a method of remembrance. Discussing the female body and the earth creates medicinal elements that are a component of what Laura Perez calls "curandera work."

Before I offer an interpretation of the work of Aurora Levin Morales, Ana Mendieta, and Laura Aguilar I will address their use of the female body and the earth as a form of healing, through what I call the medium of flowering spirituality and rooted trees. Flowering spirituality is an interpretation of the use of non-western spiritual elements such as the female body and the earth within the artists' discussion of their "open wounds" (Anzaldua, *Borderlands*), and at the same time a theoretical tool through which to looks at the reasons behind the use of nature alongside their own bodies within their art. Via flowering spirituality the artists incorporate non-western traditional elements that promote concepts of humanity and nature being in unison. The uses of rooted trees also become part of how Chicana/Latina artists articulate colonial resistance.

Puerto Rican author Aurora Levins Morales' book *Remedios: Stories of Earth and Iron from the History of Puertorriqueñas* (1998) illustrates the metaphorical representation the earth has with "the other," and particularly the female body. For Levins Morales, "the other" includes those that have been colonized such as the Taíno (the native population of Puerto Rico) and her own-raped Puerto Rican body (*Remedios,* 19).

In *Remedios*, the rape of the Taínos and Levins Morales' own raped body are connected to earthly elements such as the land, flowers, and trees. In the book Levins Morales reveals that as she worked on her dissertation, and uncovered the voices of women who were historically erased, she also began to attend therapy, and at the same time uncovered the healing needed for her own traumatic experiences (Medicine Stories/*Remedios*). Looking at the title of her book, *Remedios*, one may interpret the text as a method of healing, and a *remedio* or a remedy that recreates and reshapes history for women of color.

The healing useage of the female body and the earth/nature/land in *Remedios* is also found in the work of Ana Mendieta and Laura Aguilar. At a young age Ana Mendieta was sent to the U.S. and arrived as a Cuban exile. Mendita was one of the many children being sent to the United States to escape communism via Operation Peter Pan (Blocker, 52**).** Once in the U.S. Mendieta's move to Iowa transformed the artist. The fact that Mendieta was transplanted to

a place where she was surrounded by a dramatically and different language and culture, as well as the trauma of being away from her parents, led to Mendieta's experience of being uprooted, and to the "…reopen[ing]…wounds of colonialism..."(Blocker p.50). As Mendiata developed into an artist she centered her body and the earth as an open challenge to the hegemonic white male art world, while healing her wounds of exile.

Using natural elements as tools, Mendieta stated, "I decided that for the image to have magic qualities I had to work directly with nature. I had to go to the source of life, to mother earth" (Blocker**,** 45). Because the earth is endlessly connected with rivers, lands, bodies of oceans, etc.In working with the earth Mendieta returned to a place of belonging—her homeland, *su madre patria*. In her own words Mendieta declared, "'My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the Universe. It is a return to the maternal source'" (Blocker, 57). In returning to the maternal source and re-establishing the bond with the Universe, Mendieta also became a border jumper. The construction of borders cuts the earth into nations. Despite close proximity, the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba prohibits travel and Ana Mendieta's use of the land, as well as the use of earth/land by other Latina/Chicana artists, permits an articulation of the imperial and colonial wounds produced by political displacements from home/homeland.

Similar to Mendieta, Laura Aguilar also places her nude body on the earth in many of her self-portraits. Placing her nude body on the ground puts Aguilar in a vulnerable position but at the same time symbolically brings her body back to the place of origin. According to the Daily Bruin, Aguilar describes herself as a "Lesbian-dyslexic-full-figure-Latina-Southern Californian-photographer" (Dickerson, 2000). She challenges the essentialist framework by utilizing multiple identities. Aguilar's pieces "Nature Self Portrait #7" (1996), and "Stillness 23" (2001), are an example of her constant challenge to "American" standards of beauty, as well as the standards of her own Chican@ community, while providing a psychic remedy for her personal wounds, and the open wounds of "the other." Via these works feelings of exclusion because of her body, because of her figure, her skin tone (either for being too light for Chican@s or too dark for Euro-Americans (Yarbro-Bejarano, 286), her sexuality, her queerness, are healed.

Flowering Spirituality

These artists create works that remind us that there is a parallel between the experiences of women of color to colonialism and the earth to colonialism. Levins Morales in her description of "Madre Patria"[2] (*Remedios,* 189) gives insight into how land and nation are intertwined, and how the relationship between nation/land/women and men are parallel to one another.

In *Remedios*, Levins Morales speaks of the nation under the section "*Naranja*," Orange. *Naranja*, according to Levins Morales settles "…the heaving unsteadiness of lives upset by too much loss, too many changes, too much to figure out" (188). Further on Levins Morales provides a poetic medicinal remedy in the section titled, "1937: Madre patria" (189). In this section, Levin Morales writes, "Our country is like our mother, stretched on a bed of rape. Our country is courage and sacrifice. Our country is an imprisoned flower in a fist of iron." Land here—as a nation, is feminized and violated sexually. The feminization of the land is not only gendered as a female, but as mother. The "mother" has cultural significance in Latin America, *and* symbolically represents the nation. To fully appreciate Levins Morales' piece it is important to look at historical events occurring in Puerto Rico in 1937. The year was marked by a bloody massacre when Puerto Ricans protesting the U.S. occupation of the island were shot and arrested, and a total of 19 were killed. In returning to Levins Morales' description of the nation, both the people and the land experience violence. Here, violence afflicted on an "imprisoned flower" is similar to that of the rape of the "mother," the land. Puerto Rico is viewed as a "Madre Patria" raped by the United States, for Levins Morales the nation becomes a mother that must be protected from invasion and violence (Medicine Stories 1998).

However, the need to protect the "mother land," the mother-like identity of the nation establishes standards on who may, or may not, be protected. In the construction of the nation as a mother, women at the same time have to deal with the expectations of *marianismo,* the expectation of femininity, virginity, and docility. Those who do not fit these standards are easily categorized as "whores" and/or the "traitors." The women who do not fit under this category are excluded from the protection of the "sons" of the nation. Under U.S. patriarchy, women and land are exploitable. Under colonized male patriarchy, women who do not fit the standard of respectability are excluded within the nation. Here the idea of rape is associated with the nation/mother and the nation/flower. Applying this to Ana Mendieta's *Imagen d e Yogul* (1973) (Image from Yogul) provides a healing counter narrative and interpretation.

Mendieta's intention to return to the maternal source can be seen in her 1973 photograph *Imagen de Yogul*. Here Mendieta lays naked in a Zapotec tomb made up of large stones forming a box-like figure. On the dirt floor of the tomb there is sparse vegetation. In Olga M. Viso's (2004) essay "The Memory of History," Viso interprets the piece as a "reference to the cycles of life and the regenerative powers of nature and humanity … linked with an ancestral past" (52). Although the tomb in Western thought represents morbidity— as a marker of the end of life, Mendieta was in this piece freeing her body and connecting with the philosophies of Mesoamerican indigenous communities who interpret the tomb as merely a stage in a cyclical life (Carrasco).

In “Imagen de Yogul,” Mendieta’s body lays in the center of the tomb covered with white flowers with her arms to the side of her body. By laying nude Mendieta’s body returns to the place of origin—the place before restrictions were placed on her body, and she is free. In returning to the earth, Ana Mendieta literally grounds herself into the earth and is neither above the earth nor the earth above her body, both the female body and the earth are in unison. The white flowers that cover her body also represent her return to a place of origin, to her homeland. The white flowers appear to grow out of Mendieta’s body while her body becomes part of the earth, taking the role of the soil to nurture the flowers. When linking this image to the writing of Aurora Levins Morales, Mendieta’s piece can be seen as symbolically nourishing Levins Morales “imprisoned flower” (Levins Morales p189), the *madre patria.* In the case of Mendieta, the imprisoned flower is Cuba. Cuba is imprisoned by the geo-political relationship between the United States and Cuba, thus impeding Mendieta’s return to Cuba.

By becoming the earth and a nurturing source Mendieta begins to nurture Cuba and also those who suffer from being expelled from their homeland. Laura Aguilar also uses her body and the earth to challenge power binaries within the Chican@ community. In “Nature Self Portrait #7” Laura Aguilar’s (1997) body is purposefully represented as much lighter—whiter than the color of the earth. In this self-portrait Aguilar sits alone with her back facing the camera. Her head faces downward, both her arms and legs are tucked into her body mimicking the shape of the rocks behind her. The rocks behind her are darker and seem to form a group, ostracizing and excluding Aguilar’s body because it is not “dark” enough to resemble the earth’s complexion. The group of rocks represents the Chican@ community. Aguilar illustrates that there is no guarantee of acceptance within any identity category because of other variables, as is the case in this picture, where Aguilar’s skin color is “too white” for the Chican@ community. According to Gloria Anzaldúa, the idea of “trying to out-Chicana each other, vying to be the ‘real’ Chicanas…” (1987, 58) can be seen with language use. Language use is a mere example of prejudices against other Chican@s that exist in the Chican@ community. In the case of “Fear of Going Home: Homophobia,” Anzaldua speaks of the fear of rejection from the community, from the home, if the Chican@ is “out” (19-20). Aguilar fears rejection because of her complexion as well as because of her sexuality. This rejection or lack of belonging is seen as a wounding, or agitation, to already existing wounds Aguilar has experienced.

Resisting Trees

Aurora Levins Morales’ piece “Huracan” begins with a section titled “Penetration,” this is followed by a brief passage on the oppression of Jews in Spain titled “1492: Lamento sefardita,” and is later followed with a brief poetic

description of the medicinal use of the herb rosemary. Shortly thereafter the section titled "1492 to 1511: Leyendas—Puerto Rico," details the (her)story of "Guanina," a Puerto Rican Legend about an Indigenous woman during colonial occupation of the island. In this section the relationship between nature and the Taínos is further illustrated by Aurora Levins Morales' use of the words "bend" and "broken." In the retelling of this section Levins Morales crafts a narrative about a cacique Grandmother who took one of her granddaughters to the forest. It is key to note that in this retelling the grandchild does not have a name, thereby alluding to the countless witnesses that are erased from history because they do not hold an identifiable role within the western historical archive and thereby are lost within an archive that is dependant on crafting the tales of male winners and losers. Levins Morales crafts a story in which as the Grandmother walked she showed her granddaughter the trees and began describing the choices the trees have when facing the harsh winds of a Hurricane.

> My grandmother once took me out in a storm and showed me how the trees all move differently with the wind. She showed me how the stiffest trees, the ones that seemed made of iron, would shake and eventually shatter, their branches torn off, their trunks broken; others seemed to twist and dance, bending over with each gust, leaves flying. Their roots were shallow, like palms, they might be uprooted, but they rarely broke. After the storm we saw that those trees whose roots went deep into the earth and gripped it tightly, but who bent and turned with the wind no matter how often it changed direction, those trees had lost only a few leaves and twigs. But the stiff proud caciques of the forest, the ones who refused to give, lay splintered and twisted on the ground. This is how my grandmother led the people (68-69).

The story metaphorically depicted how when facing Spanish colonialism the grandmother had different approaches for securing the survival of her people, one of these options was to "bend" (Levins Morales 71). "Bending" is used to describe a tree's interaction with a storm. At the same time, it describes a possibility for the Taíno. Aurora Levins Morales also uses the word "broken" to further describe the bloodshed and violence used until "we or they were broken" (75). "Broken" can be interpreted as the taming of something wild—the taming of a people, or in this case, of the natives, who Levins Morales states even the "stiffest trees" would have their "trunks broken" (68). Here Levins Morals captures the relationship between the earth, trees, and the winds as one that is similar to the relationship between the Spanish and the colonized people of the Americas. For Levins Morales the *foundation* of a people is symbolized by the trees with their roots in the ground, and demonstrates the acts of resistance against the forces of the colonizers. Levins Morales states that those "whose roots went

deep into the earth and gripped it tightly" will only lose a "few leaves" while the "stiff caciques,"the ones who "refused to give, lay splintered and twisted on the ground" (Levins Morales p.69). The trees that firmly grip the earth, as the natives who firmly grip their culture, only lose "a few leaves." Thus signifying changes in the exterior appearance but the core/trunk of native cultural beliefs lives on. Although twisted and splintered, the trees represented the Taíno deeply rooted within Puerto Rican culture.

The concept and the power of deep roots was also a central theme within Ana Mendieta's photograph "Tree of Life" (1976). Comparing Mendieta's work to that of Aurora Levins Morales' use of trees is useful toward my reading of how these are symbols used to represent the oppressed. In Levin Morales' "Leyendas—Puerto Rico," trees are used to represent the natives of Puerto Rico, who are grounded in the earth. In Ana Mendieta's "Tree of Life" the artist utilizes trees to also ground herself into the earth and grapple with colonization, and how land was carved, shaped and drastically changed as agricultural colonization shifted the balance of ecosystems in the Americas.

Ana Mendieta in her piece *Tree of Life* embodies a rooted tree by covering herself from head to toe with mud. Small residue of vegetation can be seen on her lower body. Standing firmly in front of a tree, with her arms at a ninety-degree angle pointing towards the sky, Mendieta's position mirrors the tree behind her. Her feet are tightly pressed together creating a trunk, and her arms in the air take the form of branches. Her feet blend into the ground as if she has sprouted from the earth. The tree behind her is lighter and larger than her body. The tree behind Mendieta sways to the side, making Mendieta seem firmer than the actual tree. Mendieta's firm pose demonstrates how deeply grounded she is to both her roots and the earth. Although she stands next to a tree that is lighter in color and larger, as a woman of color in the U.S., she stands firm and deeply rooted, thus illustrating her resistance. In Levin Morales' case, the uprooting of trees by a hurricane suggests genocide. But the choice of resistance and/or survival is offered with Levins Morales' analogy of roots. The trees with strong, deep roots refuse to fall as those facing colonization chose to bend, twist, and continue to live rooted.

Laura Aguilar, like Ana Mendieta and Aurora Levins Morales, not only challenges the power binaries but also expresses the possibilities of healing through artwork. In "Stillness 23," Aguilar (2001) appears sheltered by the roots of a tree. Her body is in what yoga practitioners call "child's pose." The tree she is sheltered by stands at the edge of a body of water. Her body forms a bundle and the roots are visible below her as Aguilar touches the roots. Her body is grounded not only by the "child's pose" but also because she locates her body at the root of the tree. To a significant extent, these gestures parallel Mendieta's return to maternal source. Aguilar's body, although ostracized in the previous image discussed is now at ease in a calm setting where her nude body is

protected from harsh sun rays, the soothing sound of the river, and the cool soil bellow her body. There is no presence of rocks that exclude her or strong sunlight like in "Nature Self Portrait #7." Immersed in nature, Laura Aguilar is welcomed and grounded. In this image, she is at home, away from the restrictions and regulations placed on her queer and large mestiza body.

For these Latina artists and historian, the personal wound must be healed alongside the collective wound. An example is, Aurora Levins Morales' chapter titled "Discovery," in *Remedios* (1998). For the Taínos, the indigenous people of Puerto Rico, the open wound is the traumatic experience of conquest (including rape), for Aurora Levins Morales, it is experiencing rape at a young age and being racialized in the United States. According to Aurora Levins Morales there is a remedy and this remedy includes giving voice to those who are silenced and this begins the healing process. Levins Morales writes, "I wrote these words to break both the silences and embark as a people's historian, a wounded healer" (*Remedios,* 55). Through writing, Levins Morales is healing the colonized and herself because "there is no distance between conquest and abuse, battering and war. The journey of healing is the same" (55). By voicing what is made silent Levins Morales is remembering her body and at the same time allowing the reader to remember not only the bodies of those colonized but also their own. To a great extent Ana Mendieta and Laura Aguilar's usage of their own body and the earth/nature reinforces this method of healing. Their artwork brings to focus the discussion of gender and violence with the usage of the female body and the earth.

The female body and land/earth in Chicana/Latina artwork are key elements in reinterpreting history. The contributions Aurora Levins Morales, Ana Mendieta, and Laura Aguilar offer their readers and audiences is another method of expression and an act in re-appropriating the body, but most important, we are offered a medicinal mixture of flowering spirituality and rooted tree in discussing gender and violence.

The work of these artists allows the avenue of expression and healing to exist for other Latinas/Chicanas. For the same reason I have embarked on the journey of healing. I have also sought to break the cycles of pain being afflicted from one mother to the next. I began to understand my mother's pain and frustration has nothing to do with me, or the problems happening at work. It had to do with this "open wound" that is constantly agitated by any injustice. The attacks on brown female bodies and the brown earth continue. There are assaults that have the same face as 500 years ago, and others have transformed into new faces with the same outcome: to control and instill shame, victimization, and guilt within the brown body. But it is the return to what is grounding, the earth, from which Chicana/Latina artist have found a healing mechanism and have provided medicinal elements to discuss and remedy new forms of oppression.

The earth, the Latin American/Latina/Chicana body today not only is withstanding centuries of colonization, but also new forms of oppression. The denial of prenatal care, health insurance, pressures to meet standards of beauty, environmental racism, global warming, transgenic food, toxic waters are a few assaults on both the brown body and the land pushed by individualistic ideology, and capitalism. In looking at how Latina/Chicana women use both the female body and the earth, two elements under constant attack, one begins to understand the bond between both the female body and the earth in resisting and healing the body and the spirit. At the same time the female body and the earth's active role in the artwork reclaims the self because in the process of calling the audience's attention to oppression it is also offering a solution, a healing mechanism for the "open wounds" of colonization.

End Notes

1. Own Translation.
2. The Motherland (own translation).

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