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GEOGRAPHIES OF THE SELF / ROOTS IN THE DARK

von

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..-Allowing the images to speak to and through me, imagining my ways through the images and following them to their deep cenotes, dialoguing with them, and then translating what I've glimpsed.

— Gloria Anzaldúa

The role of the artist is to make you conscious of the things you don't see. If you alter the way people look at reality, then you can change it.

— James Baldwin

A veridic memory conserves what is yet to come. And even that which will never arrive.

— Ino Moxo

## Geographies of the Self / Roots in the Dark

A work on the plurality of the self, the physical and emotional fences, the galleries of colonial wounds. I make reference to the concept of Geography of Selves developed by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Light in the dark/Luz en lo oscuro: Rewriting identity, spirituality, reality*, who writes that we are in constant interaction with environments, people and objects around us which are internal and external, real and virtual, past and present, that everything we've ever lived has left an imprint in our psyche, and that the universe is a web of all these past, present and future circumstances tightly woven.

In these *geographies* I trace one of my roots to the Amazonian Andes and allude to its cosmovisions and insights of reality. I present an offering because of framing the role of the artist as being similar to the one of a healer, a curandera, a shaman, someone who invokes to material conditions as well as to symbolic and spiritual forces. I underline the continuity between the material and the spiritual and channel the shamanic power of the artist to re-vision the personal and the transpersonal in self-creation.

Drawing, which also means to bring close, is a device to ground my individual and collective history. I carefully weave strokes to trace the paths that lead to me and the roots that keep me up. My reference to roots in the dark is a nod to the radix and the radical, but it also relates to my interest to explore what role darkness plays in Enlightenment, a project that describes itself as coming out of the dark ages of medieval era. Where the night and the underground become a place of the marginal and the morally condemnable, where control cannot be fully exercised and thus becomes a topos of danger, potential violence and the unknown – yet also a protection from the outer gaze. Like an x-ray revealing a reality underlying beyond what is apparent, in the darkness I explore the self-consuming energies that are part of all processes of creation, and trace rivers of meaning to navigate the multidimensional perspectives of my biography.

When I talk about colonial wounds I mean the weight of several axis of history in the biographies of indigenous and indigenous descendant people. I mean the structural systems of domination that appeared during colonial times and

continue to manifest until today, the colonial looting of indigenous cultures for the existence of ethnological museums, and disinheriting people of their cultural production, of their meaning as a culture, and of their sense of reality. I mean the distorted and renamed geographies, the celebration of discoveries of what was already known, the historiographies that begin in the north of the world. I mean the binary understanding of gender and not the continuous spectrum that was reconstituted and racialized through colonial relations of power. I mean a history where art is the neutral description for Occidental European art to which now inclusions are added but whose origins remain the same, I mean indigenous art deemed as crafts and a history that says we have no genealogy of aesthetics we can claim as our own. I mean the violence enacted at the borders when we want to travel and a migratory control system with its crowded camps, crashed boats, detention centers, and forced deportation flights, and continuous production of death and mourning.

Unfolding and overturning constructions of life based on domination is connected to undoing colonial visions. Recovering a plurality of symbolic meanings, spiritual relationships, and ancestral mythos, I seek through art to contribute to the reconfiguration of a new consciousness.



## ***Roots in the underground***

Given that I make reference in my work to my roots, I find it important to state that I don't write this as an indigenous person. While I identify with the indigenous lineage of my mother and father, back in Lima, I am not read as indigenous but as *mestiza*. My access to university studies has only accentuated this difference.

I grew up with the materiality and the codes of *cholo* culture. Living in these places meant existing in the economic, ideological, spiritual, and political locations of being *cholo*: getting food daily in a *paradita de tierra pisonada*, dressing with clothes from *avenida Abancay*, studying with and having indigenous descendant friends at school, going to *La Parada* early in the morning at least once a month, or having as my neighbors and *barrio* friends, other provincial migrants.

Growing in these spaces also meant practicing ancestral rituals. We wore wayruros against el *mal de ojo* y el *susto* caused either by one strong gaze or by being "looked at too much by too many people". We lighted up cigarettes for the *ekeko* to bring good luck to our economy. We received *limpiezas*, *pasadas de huevo* and *florecimientos*. We had the house cleansed of negative energies, with bowls of salt in different corners of the house. We hanged aloe vera upside down in the frame of our kitchen door to protect ourselves from negative energies, and we had a san pedro cactus and aloe vera as guardian plants in the garden.

I identify with these beliefs I grew up with and in doing so I am respecting the knowledges of my family, and the means they had to keep us safe during hard economic and political times. Their understanding of plants as beings that can guard us, is in tune with the beliefs in plants as our older relatives, ancestors that have particular knowledges, and thus by extension, subjectivity, individuality and consciousness. This aligns with my view that in relating with types of knowledge that has historically been deemed as invalid, we can reconstruct the complexity and totality of our beings transcending the limitations of the narrative of modernity.

It is in this regard, that I produce this work as a ritual offering and as a recognition of those roots that have for long kept me up.

### **Frames of practice**

I use as main referents authors who are at the same time political activists, poets, thinkers, and that bring the individual and the self in the same breath of reflection of the structural. As healers via the sounds of meanings and words, they carefully reflect and balance what it means to be inside and outside at the same time. As Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, in *Not You / Like You*: “the moment the insider steps out from the inside she’s no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out. Undercutting the inside/outside opposition, her intervention is necessarily that of both not quite an insider and not quite an outsider. She is, in other words, this inappropriate other or same who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming ‘I am like you’ while persisting in her difference and that of reminding ‘I am different’ while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at.”

Precisely in reflecting the structural complexities of material realities, the peruvian thinker José Carlos Mariátegui argues in 1928: “The problem of the oppressed in a colonial system has a material basis. Any attempt to solve it with protective legislation, administrative, or police measures, through education or by a road building program, is superficial and secondary as long as the figure of the oppressors continues to exist. . . The concept of inferior races was useful to the white man’s West for purposes of expansion and conquest. . . The tendency to consider (the oppression of indigenous people) as a moral one, embodies a liberal, humanitarian, enlightened nineteenth-century attitude that in the political sphere of the Western world inspires and motivates the ‘leagues of human rights.’ The anti-slavery conferences and societies in Europe that have denounced more or less futilely the crimes of the colonizing nations are born of this tendency, which always has trusted too much in its appeals to the conscience of civilization.”

In these crossings, of feeling/thinking, is that my work reaches to different disciplines to provide important sources of material for an exploration of my

history. In what I write, there is a dialogue with the heritage of early anticolonial activists and thinkers, and there is, specially, a grounding within the concerns of the decolonial approach that was expanded by the marxist based and sociology based discussions on coloniality in Latin America. In this background, I write in order to draw my thoughts and feelings about my lived experiences, but I also draw, in order to write in the language of symbols and I explore the iconographic production of the precolonial era with the purpose of making sense of the history I come from.

### ***Tying Ourselves Together***

Myths are not naive fictions of archaic peoples. In *Faith and Modernity*, Karen Armstrong writes, that the 'mythos' of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their day to day lives and it was also rooted in what we would call the 'unconscious' mind.

*Khipus* are a Andean mnemonic device of tied knots that would seem to be inspired by the roots system of an ancient plant, or even by the veins complex that traverse our bodies. The chronicler José de Acosta writes in 1590: "Quipus are memorials or records made of branches, in which different knots and different colors mean different things. It is amazing what (Andean peoples) achieved in this way, because what books can tell about stories, and laws, and ceremonies and business accounts, all of that, the quipus they admire can supply so punctually. (my translation)" Since no connection has yet been found between a khipu and the Quechua language, it is thought that khipus have no phonetic referent. but as Gary Urton suggests in the Khipu Database Project of the Harvard University, they would be the case of a language recorded in a 3-D system.

The colonial destruction of cultural and ritual material, done systematically to the territories in the Americas, do not allow us to access many of the myths and information enclosed in the artifacts that survived until these times. It is this meaning of information loss, memory and bridge between eras and spaces that I am interested to explore in the figure of the Qhipu, an artifact that was long used by several cultures in the Americas, as it is attested by the findings in Caral, one of the earliest complex settlements of the Americas.

## ***Foreign Tongues in Known Land***

“¿Imaykitaq hampisqa? / What part of your body will I cure” reads the translation of a Quechua sentence in a drawing that displays four dictionary entries that relate to knowing and understanding. Spoken by ten million people, especially in Andean countries such as Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, Quechua is the common term used to describe a family of languages spoken in the territories of what used to be the Tawantinsuyu. Some time after the big indigenous rebellion of 1780, that took place in the south of Peru, Quechua was banned on the fear that it had worked up to that point as an identitarian reference and as a code that had helped to plan the rebellion in secret. Ultimately, Quechua was seen as a tool that could lead to new uprisings. The death sentence against the revolutionary Tupac Amaru carried the lines “in order that these Indians remove the hatred of Spaniards which they had conceived . . . they are to dress in our Spanish clothing and speak the Castilian language.” Quechua literature was banned along with the Quipus.

Only in 1975, almost two centuries after, Quechua was declared again an official language in Peru. The story of this language is just one of many stories of struggle for cultural survival.

## ***Divine Law***

In their book *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans*, researchers Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker remind us that in 1493, the pope declared that Spain owned every inch of the Western Hemisphere, and all the people contained within it had no longer any rights to their land, for it belonged to the king and queen of Spain. The relevance of this Papal Bull is also significant in that it became the basis of European international law. “After the wars of the Reformation, one of the resolutions of these wars was that the Holy Roman Empire had to concede that Protestant kingdoms can also have that right. That was the basis of international law, to arbitrate these conflicts among Europeans – with no protection whatsoever for all the native peoples concerned.”

### ***The sound of healing***

The Shipibo-Konibo people, an indigenous group that inhabits the areas near the Ucayali River in the Peruvian Amazon, have for long used sound and singing as medicine to cure and heal. Through singing *icaros*, a shaman can communicate with other beings and forces in the universe and redirect these energies towards specific purposes. It is in this understanding of the potency of sound that I include a sound installation that combines precolonial devices for ritual sound making with outerspace recordings of the vibrational sounds of neighboring bodies within the milky way galaxy.

### ***Embrace of the Amaru***

The amaru (quechua) is a mythical serpent most associated with the mythology of Amazonian and Andean civilizations of South America, and is/was believed capable of transgressing boundaries to and from the spiritual realm of the subterranean world. In most indigenous cultures, reality is/was divided in three realms: the upper world, the middle world and the underworld. In Inca mythology, the world above is the realms of the gods and of the condor, the middle world is the realm of the puma, and the world below is the realm of the death and of the snake.

The connection of the snake to the underworld, is also a connection to the inner world and to the subconscious. But the amaru has the magical capacity of acting as a crossing between worlds, and of being able of crossing borders. Thus in several precolonial artworks, the amaru is illustrated with wings and feline characteristics. Early iconography in the central north coast of Peru displayed bifurcated serpents that departing from one body have two heads that go in different directions. The Nazca culture produced art where serpentine bodies protuded out of anthropomorphic figures as bifurcated tongues.

The earliest known mural in the Americas, in Caral, depicts two snakes that face each other. The Q'eros, still refer to the rainbow as "amaru of the day"

and the Milky Way as “amaru of the night.” The figure of the amaru presents the possibility of thinking of beings that are associated with renewal and transformation, that inhabit outside of fixed realms, and that because of this quality, can provide a complex meaning of reality.

### ***Everyday deities***

Around 1615, the Peruvian writer and illustrator Guaman Poma de Ayala, draws the Inca surrounded by different *huacas* or local deities, as he demands them to reply whom of them has said “to not rain, to not freeze, to not winnow?” The local deities reply to the Inca: “it wasn’t us.” This drawing reveals much about the political imagination of the Andean peoples, specially when compared to the ideological frames that subtend Western Christian paradigms. Foucault exemplifies this well in *What is Critique?* when he talks about how the Church pastoral “developed the idea that each individual, whatever his(sic) age or status, from the beginning to the end of his life and in his every action, had to be governed and had to let himself governed, that is to say directed towards his salvation by someone to whom he was bound by a total, meticulous, detailed relationship of obedience. And this salvation-oriented operation in a relationship to the truth: truth understood as dogma, truth also to the degree where this orientation implies a special and individualizing knowledge of individuals.”

In making this comparison it is pertinent to point out that the Andean deities are not supernatural entities that are beyond our material lives and world, as Marcelo Fernandez-Osco writes, but rather “they inhabit a symbiotic world in which everyone facilitates life for everyone else, regardless of their status. . . . Access to resources is justified by the sacrality and age of the gods – the more ancient they are, the stronger the right and stronger the guarantee they provided. . . . While Catholic values were determined by the dichotomy between good and evil, in contrast, indigenous values were part of a wide system of knowledge and practices based on a pluriverse that connected other lives and the cosmos.”

Any political project seeking to contest the current turns of the democratic system towards authoritarianism, needs a decolonial approach and its critique of government, of modes of life, of our relationality to others and our ideas of inhabiting the world. Only us can save ourselves, in this world. Salvation can

only come from disobedience, and, paraphrasing the Bolivian collective Mujeres Creando, only through disobedience is that we can achieve happiness.

It is my wish to connect us through art in this work to moments of our multidimensionality, our constant state of becoming, our plurality, makes us whole and gives us la facultad, a perspective and power that's all our own. Living in multiple worlds is not a hindrance because thanks to our multiple identities, we have a unique perspective on the world which allows us to see what lies in the dark, what is hidden just beneath the surface.



## **Literature**

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## ***Biography***

Imayna Caceres (Lima, Peru) Artist, writer, anti-colonial activist, and occasional curator. In my work I seek to weave meanings that contribute towards an understanding of the sequels of colonial structures in the current organization of life, the colonality of being and power, knowledge and the arts, gender and spirituality, and the fracture between mind and body. Graduated in Peru in Sociology and Media Communication, I am part with other Latin American women\* of the TRENZA collective where we organize political actions and we seek to build community.

## ***Selected projects***

2018 Back/s Together: Gloria Anzaldúa, her drawings, our connections to her. VBKÖ. Co-curated with my sister Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, who I am very grateful for having take the difficult task to bring more awareness on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa in Vienna.

2017 Book 'Anticolonial Fantasies, Decolonial Strategies.' Published with the support of Zaglossus, ÖH Uni Wien, ÖH Akbild, AFG and Wien Kultur.

2017 Decolonial Borderlands / Reflecting colonialism in the art academy. Rundgang of the Akademie of Fine Arts Vienna. Co-curated with Sophie Utikal.

2016 Anti\*colonial Fantasies / Decolonial Strategies. At Friday Exit, Vienna. Co-curated with Sunanda Mesquita and Sophie Utikal.

2016 A Look Back Into The Museum. A lecture performance with Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, Exhibit, Vienna. Commissioned by Elke Krasny and Barbara Mahlkecht for Unheimliche Materialien. Gründungsmomente der Kunsterziehung.

2015 Territory. Exhibition at Blutengasse 9 off-space. Vienna. Curated by Alfredo Ledesma.

2015 Wer Hat Angst Vor Dem Museum? Intervention at the Weltmuseum, part

of Wienwoche Festival. Co-curated with Verena Melgarejo Weinandt, Marissa Lôbo and Pêdra Costa.

2014 Zona Intrusa 7 Artistic educational project in Mataró, Barcelona. Co-curated with Daniela Ortiz, Nuria Güell, Levi Orta and Xosé Quiroga.

2013 Wahlwexel jetzt. Voting action for non-citizens in Vienna. Co-organized with Erinmwionghae A. Clifford, Fanny Uri Müller, Kurto Wendt, Hansel Sato and Martin Birkner.

2013 Book Utopia of Alliances, Conditions of Impossibilities and the Vocabulary of Decoloniality (Contributor).

2013 Your comfort is my silence. Performance and art auction for third country students. Concept and organization together with Joanna Wilk, Miriam Raggam, Marissa Lôbo and Verena Melgarejo Weinandt and the support of the Pcap Class.

2013 Where do you come from? Collaboration with Verena Melgarejo Weinandt.

2012 Bleibeführer\_in Wien Guide for refugees and asylum seekers who stay to live in Vienna. A project by Erinmwionghae A. Clifford and Hansel Sato.

2012 Aus mit länder. 'Foreigners/Off with countries' music workshops. Festival Soho in Ottakring. A project by Petja Dimitrova and Esrap.

2012 The art auction as destruction of structural discriminations. Performance and action. Also known as the first auction at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Conceptualized and organized with Joanna Wilk, Miriam Raggam, Ekoj and the support of the class of Postconceptual Art Studies.

2011 The Darker Side of the Academy. Workshop, tour, installation and intervention. A collective work group of different classes.

2011 Part of Plattform Geschichtspolitik. First project: Intervention, please! Database of problematic history-politics sites in public space.

2010 Entry Exam. A collective project with other applicants to the Post Conceptual Art Class asking for the admission of all the people who were applying together with us to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

## **Thanks**

I would like to thank the people whose collective support contributed to this work, to my different communes that share my cosmovision and desire for social justice, and that altogether make the task of feeling/thinking possible.

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Claudia Bielich

Gisselle Canales

Daniela Paredes

Monica Adighibe

Luisa Lobo

Rosa Garrido

Monica Lucia

Lukas Oberndorfer

Amaru Saya

Marissa Lôbo

Pêdra Costa

Sandra Monterroso

Tatiana Kai-Browne

Sheri Avraham

Katharina Ebert

Veza Quiñones-Hall

Sam Osborn

Elisabeth Freudenschuss

Gina Bonetti

Ahmad Abouchaar

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Alessandra dos Santos

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pcap class

contextual painting class

kunstdokumentation

Trenza