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Vitalism's after-burn: The sense of Ana Mendieta

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This article considers the influential work of Ana Mendieta. Focusing on her *siluetas* series, Muñoz describes Mendieta's art as performing a modality of brownness that leaves resonant indentions on the world, what he calls vital materialist after-burns. Mendieta's after-burns are read alongside the poet's of Négritude and their investment in a critical *élan vital* that speaks to the historical precariousness of dispossessed people. The artist's work is explained as a meditation on a critical brownness that is theorized as the sharing out of the unshareable, the invaluable and the incalculable. Mendieta's intervention is ultimately described as the work of offering a brown sense of the world in which singularities flow into a politically enabling common.

Keywords: vitalism; Ana Mendieta; brownness; affect

What is attempted when one looks for Ana Mendieta? What does her loss signify in the here and now? More importantly what comes after loss? What is the afterlife of a violent and tragic end, a crash, that resonates across decades and is felt through that which remains not only after violent cessation but also after an art practice that was attuned to the frenzy of experience marked by historical dispossession? In this short essay I will suggest that Mendieta's art practice was saturated with an intense vitalism, a concentrated interest in life itself. Work about life itself is often most poignant for its ability to represent death-in-life. With this said it is certainly important to strive for a perspective where one sees and feels the work detached from any singular life no matter how tragic it might have been. But at the same time it's difficult to do insofar as many today still feel a mysterious sense of connection to the work, the artist and the various historical coordinates that allow us to locate her, or at least make that attempt. For some Mendieta's work is experienced through a shared sense of feminist outrage and mourning; for others the central point was her poetics of the primal and its emphasis on blood, fire, wood and earth as medium; for still others hers is a story of displacement and exile; for still others it is all about the accounts of her small brown female body manifesting itself in a field of possibility dominated by often hostile white men. It's all of these potential nodes of attachment with the work and artist I index under the term *brownness*. In the introduction to a

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graphic novel on the life of Ana Mendieta, Lucy Lippard asserts that even though she was a white Cuban Ana was in fact “Brown.”¹ This is to say that **even though she was born to a well-to-do family who were white in Cuba, her life in the United States had made her feel anything but white, and indeed all her sense of self was composed of feelings of alignment and commonality with others who found an important resource for self-description in the term “people of color.”** Lippard easily describes Mendieta as brown. In her case this a personal reflection about a deceased friend, and she need not theorize that sense of Mendieta as performing, radiating, enacting and being brownness. This is the project that I take up in this writing. I wish to offer **an account of life lived as brownness, attending to the mimetic practices that help one encounter brownness. Mendieta’s work poignantly offers us access to a sense of brownness.**

The slogan “Where is Ana Mendieta?” famously emerged during 1992 protest outside the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in SoHo. The phrase was featured on one of the banners held by the approximately 500 protesters outside of a group show that included the artist Carl Andre who had been accused of murdering Mendieta, his wife. Those words were a cry of feminist outrage, a call born out of militancy. The question spoke to a moment where the politics of representational and actual lived modes of violence collided. But it is more than that. It’s a question we ask for the purpose of making sense of Mendieta’s work, life and death. Such an undertaking often, as in the case of her death, seems like a futile attempt to make sense of the senseless, but indeed this impossibility of (making) sense may be one of brownness’s most salient characteristics. It is imperative to constantly reassert that while Mendieta’s work powerfully vectors with her biography, it most certainly cannot be reduced to it. This is to suggest that it seems difficult to know Mendieta separate from her life’s end, what many believe to be a violent and tragic death.

In the same way that one can’t make sense of Mendieta without confronting her violent end, we cannot know her without considering her origins, the displacement that marked her early life, her removal from Cuba via the Peter Pan program that relocated (or perhaps dislocated) her to Iowa. **In roughly the same manner that the violence that ended her life is prefigured in so much of her early work, the displacement that brought her to make art in the United States is constantly signaled in what remains.** So much of the weird vitality of Mendieta’s endeavors emerged from the strain of the kind of negation that is loss of homeland, *ethnos* and other vagaries of selfhood. It is the straining of life in the face of various modes of loss that constitutes the work’s strange intensity. This is to say that through violence, the straining and making precarious of life, a vitalism emerges and lingers after the official ontological closure of life itself.

The works in Mendieta’s *silueta* series seem like the after-burns of mimetically generated intensity. So much of her work looks like world markings or markings of world. They can be glimpsed like stagings and renderings of *élan vital* that manifested the ontological force of brownness as a mode of particularity in multiplicity. But it’s important to note that this self-portraiture was not a figurative representation but instead a deeply symbolic indention in the world around her. In this series a general

female form is carved or indented or molded or sometimes burned into the earth itself. Sometimes the form is captured in mud or dirt or the walls of a cave. All these *siluetas* resemble a rough outline of something that was once present and is now absent or entombed but nonetheless partially unconcealed and lingering, like a visual echo. If we take the artist at her word in various artist statements and consider the *siluetas* a mode of self-portraiture, what may the work tell us about the self and/in the world? These *siluetas* are the evidence of expired life that nonetheless hints at return or Prometheus-like regeneration. Mendieta's work insists on a kind of mysterious understanding of life and death-in-life as something like mystical force. She was certainly drawn to the metaphors of magic and spirituality. But one need not simply know the intensities performed by Mendieta as spiritualist escapism. It is clear that Mendieta partially invested in a kind of vitalism or *élan vital* that many would dismiss as irrational.

In her study of the influence of Henri Bergson on the poets of Négritude, Donna Jones identifies a strain of philosophical vitalism whose implications lead to racialist thinking. Jones's study makes an excellent case for being wary about some of the repercussions for what she identifies as a New Bergsonism. Jones's careful genealogical approach identifies certain risks in Bergson's vitalism, particularly the manner in which race stands for God in Bergsonism's evolutionary schema. Jones's work deciphers an internalist metaphor of race in Bergson. She describes this as a "noumenal racism" (117). Her analysis also points out the way in which Négritude "share[d] the attempt to recover a sedimented African tradition, a syntax of revolutionary traditionalism." This careful study outlines the problems of an uncritical return to Bergson that so many contemporary critics, especially those influenced by Gilles Deleuze, participate in. Jones's work shores up serious misgivings about the racial implication of *élan vital* in Bergson and contemporary practices of thought that she classifies as New Bergsonisms.

Deleuze famously attempted to stage an escape from metaphysics through the revivification of older philosophers who had fallen out of vogue in the mid-1960s. He first turned to Bergson in an essay on Hume, and later in a book that was provocatively titled *Bergsonism*.² Indeed Deleuze's Bergson is a central presence in almost all of the younger philosopher's work. Bergson allows Deleuze to think through the affective and its relation to movement and duration. The example of Bergsonian thought permits Deleuze to think about intuition as method and the implications of multiplicity and subjectivity. Perhaps most importantly for Deleuze, Bergson allows him a certain grasp on multiplicity. Deleuze delineates two modes of multiplicity: one that is an extensive multiplicity associated with space, while the other is an intensive multiplicity associated with time. Multiplicity is also described by another dyad of concepts: the virtual and the actual. For Deleuze these two notions are not mutually exclusive but in fact complementary. In the virtual multiplicity we encounter a pressing possibility for change. We live along actual multiplicities (these are the components of the world we engage daily) but it is through virtual counterparts to these actual multiplicities that something becomes shareable. This is the argument for a redeployed critical engagement with Bergson and *élan vital*.

At the center of Jones's critique of Bergsonism, old and new, is the idea that Bergson was an irrational thinker whose philosophical systems vectored on mysticism. In this respect Jones's concerns echo those of Judith Butler, whom Jones cites and echoes throughout the book. In Butler's criticism of Deleuze, Deleuzians and "New Bergsonists," she describes what she perceives as "Deleuze posing as 'an ahistorical absolute' his 'aracadian vision of precultural libidinal chaos'."³ Butler, a specialist in Hegel, would most certainly not be pre-disposed to find much use in Deleuze or his Bergsonism. It is important to recall that Deleuze turned away from what biographer François Dosse described as the Hegelianism that dominated French thought in the 1960s, by turning to Hume and Bergson first.⁴ This particular refusal of the dialectic posited another and particularly reworked notion of *élan vital* or vitalism in Deleuze.

Jones's nuanced analysis parses out what she sees as a potentially *critical vitalism* in Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor's oeuvres. She observes that "... the negritude poets offered Africans poets the Bergsonian promise of rebecoming who they really are..." Jones is quick to explain that this notion is of course historically contingent on the legacy of new-world colonialism and one of the main points of her text is to call attention to paradox at the center of Négritude, "that colonial writers would 'forge weapons' out of the 'arsenal' of this vitalist form of European irrationalism..." This forceful repudiation of any thought than can be interpreted as a racist *élan vital* or racial thinking is nonetheless invested in the strange trajectory of Négritude's potentially liberating redeployment of vitalism. Thus nineteenth-century European ideas about a life force, even those tinged with a racist irrationalism, can be reframed differently when considering the work of twentieth-century artists like Césaire and Senghor who were interested in larger projects of decolonization and a genuine poetics of dispossession. The example of Négritude's creolized vitalism serves as a potential precursor to a story about what, through the path of aesthetic protocols like Mendieta's, may be a useful account of the sense of life and world that is Brownness.

The goal here is not to take a definitive stance on the philosophical debate sketched above. The point here is neither to agree nor to disagree with Jones's admirable study, but to work through similar questions around the concept of *élan vital* for the purposes of describing a general concept of brownness and, more specifically, to unpack a particular notion of the idea in relation to the poetics of dispossession practiced by Ana Mendieta. When considering the world of Afro-Cuban imagery that Mendieta called upon one need not visualize it as real or imaginary, nor about belief or disbelief. **Mendieta relied on the figural language of African, Afro-Cuban and Taíno Afro-Cuban religiosity. Olga M. Viso mentioned the concerns that surrounded her use of sacred symbolism. Some believed her use of this image lexicon inadvertently "conjured forces that she did not fully comprehend."**⁵ The question of the artist's intention or deliberate belief in relation to these images is somewhat beside the point insofar as the work instead suggests a sense of the world as the shareability of life that is attentive to the precarity and affectivity of brownness. The images are all imprints of life that call upon some potentially unifying notion of a real or imagined past world, a plane of simultaneous

difference and singularity. It is an image repertoire that works to perform redeployments of a symbolic notion of vital force by colonized or dispossessed people whose shared sense in common or common sense constitutes a central aspect of the performance and enactment of brownness. For some, racist thinking is among the worst traps facing the intellectual or artist of color. Yet it seems that if we displace the predictable good dog/bad dog argumentation around concepts like essentialism we might see the mimetic operations and enactments, or “doings” presented in certain performances of *élan vital* (or what I am calling the vital force of brownness) that might be something other than a conservative or even reactionary appeal to heritage or common memory. It may indeed be a matter of building a cosmology that responds cogently to precarious histories of singular and multiple dispossessions that may seem different at first glance, like the histories of violence against women and the imperial subjection of Caribbean people. These histories of violence coalesce in Mendieta’s art practice, in her life and her iconicity. Mendieta’s work traded in captures of life as strivings in the face of negation. Which is to say that her visual lexicon is detectable as a visualization of, marking on, a precarious and valuable sense of world. Her earth and body art works all attempt to burn, dig, or mold a mark in the world. When we encounter the traces of life that we know as Mendieta’s *siluetas* we see the indentation left of some kind of force. This inquiry suggests that what we might be seeing is the after trail of a vital force that is brownness encountering the actual multiplicities of studio walls, caves, beaches, fields and other mounds of earth and world. Mendieta’s work stages encounters with the actualities of a corresponding virtuality, as a performing something else, is being keyed or signaled, and this is exactly the possibility of change signaled in the work. But that change need not be understood as “a precultural libidinal chaos” but instead a composed commentary of what social life is and could ostensibly be for dispossessed people.

It may be productive to move in closer and describe one particular encounter with the traces of *élan vital* left by Mendieta. This is not the first essay to suggest that Mendieta’s work called upon the affective. In his stunning book *Cuban Palimpsests*, José Quiroga offers a beautiful account of returning home to Cuba and looking for the famous earth works in the caves of Jaruco National Park in Cuba. Quiroga’s chapter is a chronicle of his own return to Cuba in the wake of Mendieta’s over a decade earlier. That trip ended in the frustration of not finding Mendieta’s cave etchings, which most probably did their own temporal disappearing acts. Mendieta returned to Cuba on seven trips after 1980. Quiroga describes the artist writing the work as an attempt to reconstruct her belonging to a feeling of Cubanity as wholeness. This sense of Cuba, from the perspective of politics is impossible. The Cuban people have been fragmented not only in relation to the island and its diaspora but also in relation of various monolithic understandings of politics. Quiroga argues that “[t]he nature of the engagement Mendieta produced through her art was affective at all levels; we script ourselves in the art, and read our own lives through it. There is nothing to be gained by resisting this process of identification because it was one she demanded.”⁶ Through Quiroga’s narration of the spectators interface with a certain brown *élan vital* via the trace of the intensity which is



Figure 1. Nao Bustamante performs *Given Over to Want*. Photo by Jorge Aceituno.

brownness on and of world left behind, one can start **the work of tracing lines of influence and brown-becoming that emanate not so much from Mendieta as source but indeed through Mendieta**. Along these energized lines we can decipher Richard Move's powerful identification with Mendieta in the reconstructions he stages in his documentary *BloodWork*. Alongside that, we can consider some of the work produced by Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera who channeled the affective force of Mendieta in her early bodywork. Nao Bustamante's work powerfully resonates on some kind of axis with Mendieta in that the female form is a *silueta* that is performed as iconic. While Bustamante's work might not immediately remind the viewer of Mendieta's blood work in Iowa, it nonetheless insists on the female body as monumental in very elemental and visceral ways. Similarly, in a piece like 2008's *Given to Want* we see a new kind of blood work that depicts **the often degrading trajectories of violence that mark the brownness of being in the world** (Figure 1). All of this work displays Quiroga's description of a demand to identify with Mendieta. There are certainly various identifications, "disidentifications" and counter-identifications in Mendieta's work that can be understood as interfaces with the vital force of brownness. In revisiting Quiroga's formulation I suggest that there is something else in and about the work that is not so much about a demand to identify, but instead **the sharing out of the sense of brownness in and of the world that Mendieta's images present**.

Jean-Luc Nancy reminds one that the work of existence isn't just about operativity or utility. Indeed it about a certain sharing (out) of that thing that is without value precisely because it is invaluable. **While Mendieta could not absolutely defy the system of valuation that is essentially the art world, her work did point us to**

another way of desiring, of feeling, or radiating a value that resisted accumulation and ownership. Think of *siluetas* in the sand erased by the tides or time. So many of these earth works were not meant to last. Or picture the flickering of gunpowder flame sculptures that are now only available to us only through documentation or re-enactment.

The argument here is not that Ana Mendieta's work resisted the commodifying logic of the art world. Instead I want to suggest that so much of it is about a sharing of the unshareable. For Nancy, the unshareable is that thing that is shared out as the incalculable, the inoperative, the invaluable; he explains that we know these things as art, friendship, love, thought, knowledge or, most importantly for me, emotion.⁷

Ana Mendieta radiates a world of brown that we can now begin to describe as that thing that is not politics but “*not not*” politics, something that is beyond a demand for recognition. Affect is contagious. Good and bad affects touch the world around us and permeate the other's sense of the world, and one's world is just that, plural senses of the world that are singular in their plurality. Another philosopher's words might help further illustrate that thing that can be deciphered as the convergences and correspondences of the virtual and the actual I am describing as brownness. Antonio Negri describes the diagram, an idea borrowed from Foucault carefully reworked by Deleuze:

Naked life and clothed life, poverty and wealth, critical desire and the construction of the real – these are the elements that constitute the [Foucauldian] diagram of immersion in true reality. Only then can one participate in the composition of the swarm of singularities. Singularities wish to flow together into the common, but they also want to maintain their own freedom, their difference.⁸

Mendieta's work demands identification as Quiroga suggests, but there may be more to the complicated ontological choreography I am calling brownness. Brownness is more than the providence of identifications or even counter-identifications. It is certainly akin to what I described as disidentification⁹ but even that description may hinge too much on linearity of direct alignments. Brownness is about something else. As a concept, even a method, it offers us a sense of the world. This sense of the world is the simultaneous approach and object that Mendieta could so elegantly and urgently present, a sense of the world as brown. It represents a “swarm of singularities.” These Brown feelings are not the sole province of people who have been called or call themselves brown. It is, instead, and more importantly, the sharing out of a brown sense of the world, a flowing into the common, that nonetheless maintains the urgencies and intensities we experience as freedom and difference.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Lippard 2011.
2. Deleuze 1991 and 1988.
3. Jones 2010, 174.
4. Dosse 2010, 130.
5. Viso 2004, 66.
6. Quiroga 2005, 174.
7. Nancy 2010, 17.
8. Negri 2011, 121.
9. Muñoz 1999.

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