

Ana Mendieta: Art, Artist and Literary Afterlives

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Ana Mendieta: Art, Artist and Literary Afterlives

Resumen

Pintora, escultora, artista de performance y realizadora, Ana Mendieta fue una de las más prolíficas y consagradas mujeres artistas cubano-americanas del siglo XX. La influencia de Mendieta en generaciones posteriores de artistas es innegable, y un creciente número de estudios centrados en ella atestiguan su relevancia en la historia del arte feminista tanto cubano como norteamericano. Sin embargo, casi nada se ha escrito sobre cómo es representada en la literatura, y cómo esas reconstrucciones literarias abordan algunas de las cuestiones sin resolver que todavía persisten en relación a la artista, su obra, su relación con Cuba, su vida personal y su trágica muerte. Este ensayo pretende abordar esa falta a través de una discusión de textos de escritoras cubanas, cubano-americanas y canadienses. Ofreciendo un ángulo diferente sobre el legado de la artista cubano-americana, este ensayo también pretende dinamizar los debates sobre el papel de la literatura en la conservación del arte y de la historia. Además, contribuye a revelar e interpelar una amplia gama de temas relacionados con las relaciones entre Estados Unidos y Cuba, las políticas raciales en Cuba, la violencia misógina y las respuestas feministas a ésta. El artículo investiga, por tanto, el potencial de la memoria literaria a la hora de participar y examinar discursos centrales de género, cultura e identidad nacional.

‘What comes after loss?’, asks José Esteban Muñoz in an attempt to map the cultural, social and philosophical indentations left by the life and work of the Cuban-American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985). As part of the process of making sense of Mendieta’s life, work and death Muñoz raises the crucial question ‘what is the afterlife of a violent and tragic end...after an art practice that was attuned to the frenzy of experience marked by historical dispossession?’ (191). Painter, sculptor, performer and filmmaker, Ana Mendieta was one of the most prolific and certainly the most prominent Cuban-American woman artist of the late twentieth century. Born into a highly influential, upper-class white Cuban family, her parents sent her to the United States, along with her elder sister Raquel, in 1961 under the auspices of the programme Operation Pedro Pan. This would be the beginning of a life marked by multiple uprootings and which would terminate in a violent death at an early age. To make sense of Mendieta, Muñoz insists, we must confront her violent end and to know her we must consider her origin and the displacement which defined her life (192). Muñoz’s question and the many possible answers to it are crucial for our understanding of the role of artists in shaping key cognates of cultural identity; they figure the significance of artistic legacies in contemporary politics of belonging and centralise the ‘often degrading trajectories of violence (196) which can hound women and people of colour in the world.

In her landmark study, *Where is Ana Mendieta?* Jane Blocker notes that Mendieta’s performative practice was marked by disappearance and that dissolution is central to interpreting her oeuvre (30). Her carvings, earthworks, fireworks and work with mud were not meant to last. As ‘disappearing acts’ they emanate the instability and insecurity of the identity politics in the complex gender, racial and national contexts in which Mendieta constantly remade herself through art. Muñoz discusses her art practices in terms of ‘a kind of vitalism or *élan vital*’, (193) which leave behind affective ‘after-burns’. The ‘visual echoes’ of her artworks ‘once present and now absent’ speak to a multi-layered politics. Being a woman, immigrant, Latin (all modalities of what Muñoz calls brownness) made Mendieta attuned to the poetics of dispossession and her works, for him, suggest ‘a sense of the world

as the shareability of life that is attentive to the precarity and affectivity of brownness (194). This essay is not about art *per se* but about the imaginative literature which Mendieta and her art have inspired and it shows the multiple debates which these literary afterlives serve to explore. Addressing what happens after loss involves not just death and what happens after but is also bound to the exploration of Mendieta's life which itself was characterised by loss. One of the most significant possibilities afforded by literature is the reversal of disappearance; the grounding of ephemerality. The texts I discuss in this article convey this idea powerfully as they write into perpetuity an evanescent life and a deliberately evanescent art practice.

The 'Where is Ana Mendieta?' protest which was staged on Friday June 17th 2016, at the opening of the new wing of London's Tate Modern Gallery¹ is one of several events that have taken place recently which highlight the fact that despite the current revival of interest in her work, Mendieta remains for many a symbol of the sexist exclusionary ethos of major players in the art industry.² At the opening party in London Ana Mendieta's work was not shown but on display were pieces by her former husband Carl Andre. The action of the protestors, draping a banner reading 'Carl Andre Killed Ana Mendieta' over one of Andre's sculptures, crystallised José Esteban Muñoz's argument that 'histories of violence coalesce in Mendieta's art practice, in her life and her iconicity' (p.195). Similar issues are raised by the protest staged in May 2014 by the No Wave Performance Task Force outside the DIA Art Foundation in New York. The NWPTF left entrails, blood and guts outside DIA ahead of a reception planned to celebrate the foundation's major retrospective of Carl Andre's work. The bloody protest was carried out by people wearing white jumpsuits bearing the slogan 'I wish Ana Mendieta was alive'. Ana Mendieta 'fell' to her death on the 8th of September 1985 after having a heated argument with her husband Carl Andre. Charged and tried for her murder three times, Andre was acquitted on all three occasions and in 1988 the case records were permanently sealed. The 2014 protest by the NWPTF, the 2016 Tate Modern protest in London as well as the other 'Where is Ana Mendieta?' protests, which date back to the early 1990s, all seek concrete restitution for a miscarriage of justice (actual or perceived) in a harrowing case of domestic violence. But the question 'where is Ana Mendieta?' and the expression 'I wish Ana Mendieta was here' also encompass issues of culture and representation as well as pressing concerns of gender and invisibility. These are also some of the questions explored in the literary afterlives of the artist that I discuss in this piece.

The influence of Ana Mendieta on successive generations of artists is undeniable and a growing bibliography on her recognises both her relevance in Cuban and North American feminist art history. However, there is almost nothing written about how she has been represented in literature and how these literary reconstructions address some of the many unanswered questions which remain concerning Mendieta, her art, her relationship with Cuba, her personal life and her tragic death. This article begins to address this gap through its discussion of literary texts produced by Cuban, Cuban-American and Canadian women writers. In opening a new angle of seeing the legacy of this Cuban-American artist the essay also invigorates discussions about the role of literature in conserving both art and history, reinserting them in debates which both exceed and perpetuate the art/history which they engage.

¹ Where is Ana Mendieta? <http://www.huckmagazine.com/perspectives/reportage-2/ana-tate/> [Accessed 7th August 2016]

² For a recent article on the renewed interest in Mendieta see Guelda Voein's 'The Remarkable Story of a Rebel Artist, Her Mysterious Death and Cult of Resurgence' <http://observer.com/2015/11/three-decades-after-her-sordid-death-ana-mendietas-work-is-finally-getting-its-due/> [Accessed August 7th, 2016].

Cuban-American Dialogues: Political Discord and Creative Rapprochement

Nancy Morejón's 1993 poem 'Ana Mendieta' facilitates a dialogue between Cuba and the United States in the late twentieth century which not only transcends but seeks to repair and re-inscribe the politics of the time. This text is an occasion of the restorative poetics practised by Cubans on the island as well as in the United States throughout five decades of fractious politics between the socialist state and its capitalist northern neighbour. These poetics of restoration between family, friends and neighbours and a range of other relationships broken through migration (forced or voluntary) and ideology have been practised on multiple levels and are not restricted to literary narratives produced by established poets. Rather, this poetics of restoration involves a wide gamut of quotidian acts that gesture towards repairing the injustice of forced separation authored to varying degrees by both states. These acts (literary and non-literary) become resistant counter-narratives which forge personal healing and anticipate an alternative politics.

One such act of restoration through the written word is the aptly entitled *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* edited by Ruth Behar and first published in 1995. Through visual art, creative writing, and academic essays *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* showcases the numerous informal trellises which have consistently sought to destabilize the cold war politics which even now (despite the Obama initiative of 2014) continue to frame the terms in which US Cuban relations are often imagined and expressed. In her introduction to the 20th anniversary edition of *Puentes a Cuba* Behar talks of the collection as an attempt to 'weave together two countries, two cultures and two political systems torn asunder by revolution and exile' (1). The wide-ranging, multi-generic, cross-disciplinary anthology focussing variously on memories, ruptures and reconciliation is a landmark text which does not flinch from exploring the trauma of political polarization even if its objective is healing. Ultimately the emotional, cultural and artistic bridges constructed in this project fulfil, as Behar notes in an interview with Richard Blanco, what for José Martí was a seminal function of literature 'cerrar las heridas que las armas abren'. An English translation of Nancy Morejón's poem, 'Ana Mendieta', to which I return later, is collected in this anthology. Another significant event in the literary afterlife of Ana Mendieta, a moving testimonial essay entitled 'Silhouette' by Mendieta's cousin Raquel Mendieta Costa written while she still lived in Cuba, is also staged in the collection.³

The boundary crossings, negotiations of space, transcendence of cultural barriers and disavowal of political norms which inform the textual afterlives of Ana Mendieta also defined her biography and artistic practice. Luis Camnitzer uses the term 'Spanglish art' to indicate the productive synthesis which constitutes Mendieta's Cuban-American artistic production. Spanglish art 'bridges the abyss left by travel' (91). As an 'individualistic and immediate solution' Spanglish art translates clashes between cultures into a composite iconography which incorporates 'the richness of both imaginaries' (91). Cuba and the United States therefore merge fruitfully in Mendieta's work. It is precisely this amalgamative character of the artist's work which makes it difficult to locate both aesthetically and politically. Laura Roulet points out that while Mendieta's work encompassed the full range of the 1970s *avante garde* (conceptual, performance, earthwork, feminist) it was also profoundly Cuban (21). And Jane Blocker has highlighted, the conceptual difficulties

³ Raquel Mendieta Costa was affectionately referred to as Kaki by those in her circles. Throughout this essay I also refer to her as Kaki in order to avoid confusion with Ana Mendieta's sister whose name is also Raquel Mendieta and to whom I refer on a number of occasions.

involved in locating Mendieta within either US artistic movements or Cuban cultural traditions. José Quiroga sums up her relationship to both nations astutely: ‘She placed her body between two geographies and aimed to join them into one temporality (183). As an artist Mendieta drew from both sources, troubled the parameters and cultural expectations of both, belonged to both worlds simultaneously and belonged exclusively to neither.

In the final years of her short life Mendieta also traversed the art worlds of Cuba and the United States in practical/professional terms. According to Camnitzer she was the ‘ideal mediator between Cuban artists and the outside world (89). He describes her as a ‘two-way carrier of information about art between Cuba and the US (90) and Laura Roulet details a variety of ways in which Mendieta, as what she terms ‘cultural communicator with Cuba’, facilitated dialogue between Cuban and US artists on both personal and institutional levels. As tour leader with the *Círculo de Cultura Cubana* Mendieta brought several artists and writers from the US to Cuba. And she was also successful in navigating the administrative mechanisms of both Cuban and North American officialdom in order to secure fellowships for young Cubans to take up residencies in prestigious US universities. In Ruth Behar’s project of privileging bridges, rather than reinforcing barriers, between Cuba and the United States Ana Mendieta becomes emblematic. In addition to pointing up the spiritual dimensions that inhered in Mendieta’s quests to re-establish connections with her Cuban roots Behar (1995) highlights what she sees as the distinctiveness of the artist who ‘inspired the trust and hope that was missing in relations between Cubans on the island and those in the diaspora’ (10).

Clearly, negotiating these official and cultural borders in Cuba and the US in the early 1980s was bound to carry with it a variety of incongruities from within and without and the scepticism that some of Mendieta’s contemporaries held for her political positioning within both worlds has been recorded in several places. In *Fuego de tierra* (1987), a film on the artist’s life and work made by Kate Horsefield and Nereida García-Ferraz shortly after her death, the divergent consequences of Mendieta’s ‘bridge building’ are articulated quite sharply by two different participants. While African-American poet Jayne Cortez (1934-2012) who travelled with Mendieta on one of her tours to Cuba recalls the need that the artist seemed to have to show her country to her US counterparts and the way that resulted in Americans becoming aware of the complexity of Cuba, art critic John Perreault (1937-2015) states candidly that Mendieta’s pro-Cuba sentiments did her no favours in the New York art world. In one of the more scathing commentaries on Mendieta’s role as cultural broker between the two art worlds Ileana Fuentes-Pérez links the artist’s acceptance of Cuban sponsorship to the dismissal of pivotal aspects of the materiality of Cuban-American exile lives, pro-Castro activism, and the furtherance of the Revolution’s propagandistic agenda. It is completely comprehensible that Mendieta would espouse a politics which underscored the injustices of a punitive embargo that imperilled all aspects of Cuban production, including that of art. However, Fuentes-Pérez argues that Cuban artists under Fidel Castro were crippled by a totalitarian suppression which made exile an inevitable condition. A further level of complexity to the situation suggests itself when the change in Mendieta’s own attitude towards Cuba from enthusiasm to disillusionment is considered. Interrogated and searched by Cuban customs authorities she is prevented from taking china that once belonged to her grandparents out of the country as the state did not consider it personal property (Quiroga, 186). Whether or not it is true that Mendieta vowed never to return to Cuba because of this, the irony thrown up by the incident is noteworthy. A member of the old aristocracy with an idealised view of Cuba’s new revolutionary order falls out of favour with

the new officialdom because of the terms in which it re-semanticizes notions of patrimony, ownership, legacy, and belonging⁴.

If Ana Mendieta's crossings to and from Cuba had significant implications for the contest between communist and capitalist institutionalization of the art world, they also had profound meaning on a far more personal level. Her crossings (both physical and artistic), were impelled by deep existential imperatives of recovery; recovery of self, family and nation. Mendieta's departure from and return to Cuba encompassed exigencies of intimacy and identity which went beyond way beyond cold war politics even as they were both initiated and exacerbated by them. Both Kaki Mendieta and Nancy Morejón bear powerful witness to these complexities in their different textual recreations of the artist's life and death. Raquel Mendieta's 'Silhouette' is a memorial essay told in four sections which she calls profiles. The narrative recalls the abrupt ending of an idyllic childhood and the catastrophic rupturing of a harmonious family. The incipient Castro Revolution of 1959 is the background for the psychic and emotional turbulence that undergirds the reconstructed memories. Each of the four profiles details different aspects of the ensuing drama of fragmentation and ultimately turn to art, Ana Mendieta's art, as the only potential source of salvation and repair. Robert Katz's, detailed biography of Mendieta, *Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta*, not only mentions Kaki Mendieta but also navigates in detail the same terrain of childhood in Havana and Varadero as her essay does. Katz notes that 'the Revolution spelt the end of the sacred family' (43) as 'blood turned against blood' (44). Most poignantly, the essay recalls the violence of forced separation from Cuba and grapples with the impossibility of return. In 'Silhouette' the pain of irreparable damage is as visceral as it is potent: 'They had split you like the wing of a dove and you could never come back to roost' (73-74). Destruction marks Ana's relationship with self, family and nation and reconstitution is only representable in terms of impossibility.

This literary memorial to Ana Mendieta is also a means of recreating the political tensions of the early years of the Revolution which disrupted the fairy tale childhood which they would have inhabited previously. Throughout the memoir the big house in Varadero becomes a symbol of the changing fortunes of the family and the bewildering upheavals within the nation. According to Katz's account 'sometimes fifty people dressed in all their finery would come to dinner. The living room had a staircase of seventy-five steps ... It was called the old house, and with time it had grown so revered that it had its own birthday parties, family members bringing gifts to adorn it' (37 – 38). In Kaki's essay the new political order transforms the house from light to darkness. The text laments the disruption of family fellowship and what occupies the place of the lost family harmony are ideology and the slogans of a revolutionary language which are only intelligible to the children in terms of aggression (73).

'Silhouette' begins with the evocation of the author's saint's day, the 26th of July and the feast day of Saint Ann. The significance of the Catholic heritage to the aristocratic old family is unmissable. The saint's day of the author/cousin becomes indispensable in staging a poetics of loss and simultaneously writing reconnection to the lost artist/cousin. The entire essay in fact consists of a delineation of the processes that lead to Ana's disintegration and the text becomes an event which seeks to reassemble her fractured body and soul. The evocation of Catholic iconography here is bitterly ironic. The Cuban church was, after all, a key player in orchestrating the initial moment of loss and disruption between writer and subject, artist and nation, the body of Ana and the spirit of Cuba. Of course the 26th of July

⁴ According to Lourdes Gil, long conversations with Carlos Franqui during her time in Rome also contributed to the change in Mendieta's attitude towards Cuba. [Conversation with the author, August 2016].

also embodies an elemental moment of revolutionary rebirth which both connects and disconnects Ana from Cuba.⁵ The text synthesises Cuba's revolutionary history with key aspects of Roman Catholicism and in so doing author/narrator (Kaki) and subject (Ana) become products of two conflicted facets of 20th Century Cuban identity. In this memoir then, the feast day of Ana and the dawn of the Castro Revolution serve jointly as the portentous epithets to the disconcerting future which the text goes on to narrate. The conflicted and contradictory affiliations evinced in 'Silhouette' were also a feature of Ana Mendieta's life, work and death.

'Silhouette' narrates a childhood defined by privilege and carefree abandon in elite white society in pre-Revolutionary Cuba. I mention the racial question here not only because it will become a conscious feature of Mendieta's life in exile but because it is also embedded in the dynamics of memory and self-recognition which inform this very tender eulogy to her. Having been out on a boat all day during the height of a summer spent in the old house in Varadero, the cousins acquire a tan which make them 'targets of the stupid phrase you're so black they will be asking you for your papers' (72). In this instance, the use of this childhood anecdote to reference Cuban anti-black racism grounded in the society's past stands as a sign of foreboding which anticipates the anxieties of the adult Mendieta's gathered in the 'great house' speaking 'in whispers about the situation' (72), (Revolution) which undoubtedly spelt the end of white Cuban privilege as it had been lived up to that point. Ana Mendieta's story as it unfolds at home in Cuba and in exile in the United States demonstrates, quite strongly, the ephemerality of race and the contingency of its associated privileges. Some forms of whiteness lost their power within Cuba from one day to the next as the Revolution took hold and declared itself communist. And the privileges accorded to Caribbean whiteness simply do not 'travel well'; they fracture easily, become unrecognizable, inadmissible and swiftly lose their legitimacy. White in Cuba, Ana Mendieta becomes Latin in Iowa and brown in cultural discourse. These issues resonate in 'Silhouette'. The racism which young Ana experiences in the US and the hypocrisy of the religious institutions responsible for her care are communicated with piercing sardonicism in Kaki Mendieta's memoir. 'Suspiciously Latin' Ana and her sister Raquel are wrongfully accused of stealing in one of the foster homes in which they find shelter. The defamation of the young girls in racial terms and the hostility of conditions in which they are hosted are painfully communicated in the text. But what seems most urgent for the family back in Cuba is the extent to which this accusation of stealing threatens its honour and casts doubt on the religious background and moral education of Ana and her sister. The girls' names are eventually cleared and the fear of the family's reputational disaster is assuaged⁶. What remains however is a sense that both the sacred Cuban family and the racist US institution collide in betraying Ana and her sister and consolidating their sense of orphanhood.

Orphaned, only art remains for Ana. It is worth highlighting here that the dedication at the beginning of the essay reads 'To Ana Mendieta, *artist*' [my emphasis]. The incantatory structure of 'Silhouette' invokes art as a material and spiritual solution to the subject's sense of dispossession. The artist's silhouettes, in all their ephemerality, remain her only possession, her only possibility for the identity for which she searches. As exile becomes imminent Ana's vocation as artist emerges and she gives birth to herself by leaving her silhouette with extended arms and legs on Varadero beach (73). The family is divided, the

⁵ The guerrilla movement which eventually defeated Fulgencio Batista had its genesis in a failed attack on the Moncada army barracks in Santiago de Cuba that took place on the 26th of July 1953.

⁶ It is eventually discovered that the theft had been carried out by the daughter of the white North American family who had taken Ana in as a foster daughter (p. 74).

house destroyed but the art and artefacts of the family's heroic past remain: 'the sword of your *mambí* great grandfather, the shell collection, the flea circus' (74). Just as this memoir mourns the pain of separation it bemoans the impossibility of return and it ends poignantly with Ana 'carved, forever, indelibly into a New York street' (75).

'Silhouette' is a plaintive remembrance of a family member and artistic muse who died tragically. But it is also an exercise in self-mourning. Kaki Mendieta's biography and psychobiography are intertwined with those of Ana Mendieta; the broken Ana Mendieta is also the broken Kaki Mendieta. 'Revolucionaria, no Fidelista' is how Ruth Behar (2008) recalls Kaki Mendieta communicating her commitment to Cuba when she met her there in the early 1990s (134). Firmly rooted in the realities of a Cuba caught in the throes of the Special period and all its privations, she was going to remain in her country 'hasta el último capítulo' (138). Four years after 'Silhouette' was published she put a gun to her mouth and ended her life spectacularly in a public park in San Francisco, California. Like Ana's, her tragic death prefigured in the essay, is also actualized away from Cuba on US soil.

The sadness and overwhelming sense of tragedy which overwhelm Kaki Mendieta's memoir to her cousin are also palpable in Nancy Morejón's elegiac poem 'Ana Mendieta' (*Paisaje celebre*, 1993). The death of Ana Mendieta haunts the poem and the fragility which marks her life in the USA, is evoked from the very beginning and reverberates throughout the text. 'Ana era frágil como el relámpago en los cielos. / Era la muchacha más frágil de Manhattan'. Lyrical enactments of both intimate and public performances of belonging are staged as Morejón writes Mendieta into the literature of Revolutionary Cuba. Woman, body, art and nation are all enlisted as subjects as the poetic act of remembering the artist/friend also becomes an occasion to negotiate a series of artistic, cultural and political imperatives. Within the series of dialectical relationships established in 'Ana Mendieta' the USA is the inhospitable counterpart to Ana's original Cuban home. The American dream lies in 'un Norte ficticio que no alcanzamos a vislumbrar'. And horror is the bedfellow of the ostensible material benefits of US modernity in its cities 'enardecidas de confort y espanto'. Havana, on the other hand, is imaged in 'colores radiantes'. The Cuban city is associated with sweet memories (dulces remembranzas), nobility of place and vocation. These sentiments replace the violent alienation and nothingness of an exiled childhood in the USA with knowledge, identity and firm intractable Cuban roots.

Nancy Morejón's poem is unequivocal in its claims to its apostrophised subject as Cuban. Her North American experiences are registered, celebrated and (mostly) lamented but there is no hesitance about roots, belonging or birthright, no crisis of citizenship in this poetic afterlife. Inscribed as a Cuban *ceiba* (silk cotton tree) and inseparably moulded into the physical, historical, cultural and (especially) spiritual essence of the nation, Ana Mendieta, Morejón ensures, is accorded her rightful place in her homeland. Dolores Alcaide Ramírez (2011) has noted that in this poem Nancy Morejón veers away from the official discourse of the time in her incorporation of Mendieta's art and life as symbols of the Cuban nation. This is partially correct. However, it is also important to note that there was also often incongruence between revolutionary discourse and revolutionary practice. Ana Mendieta was, after all, invited to return by the Cuban government ten years before this poem was published. The poem was published at the height of the economic crisis of the 1990s when the Revolution was being forced to shift its priorities and rewrite itself. Nancy Morejón herself had for at least a decade before then maintained fluid and productive relationships with Cubans based in US institutions travelling there with some frequency. Be that as it may,

what is certain is that if Mendieta, in life felt that she had neither 'tierra' nor 'patria this text posthumously consigns both to her.⁷

For Gerardo Mosquera Ana Mendieta's life is seamlessly connected to her art: 'Ella y su arte eran una sola pieza'.⁸ Morejón's 'Ana Mendieta' acknowledges this continuity between the art and the artist. And in this homage 'the visual art of the sculptor is indelibly inscribed in the language of the text' (DeCosta-Willis, 242). Art, artist, body and soul are thus the essence of Morejón's ekphrastic text. Mendieta's earthworks, body art, installations, sculptures and filmmaking are the content and technique, the mechanisms and meaning of the poem. The evanescence of her silhouettes and other earthworks are registered in the poetic inscription of the fragile body of the artist/subject. Mud, clay, sand, rocks, water, all primary materials of Mendieta's work are fundamental to the structure of the poem and are also the means employed by the poem to convey the sad ephemerality of her physical life. And the text also mourns Mendieta through the evocation of her work with fire: 'Calcinada su historia en las más tristes celosías'. Cinematic metaphors are deployed to transport Ana back to the Cuba of her memory but simultaneously these 'figuraciones' that Ana observes from her window in Manhattan recall her own exile and marginality in that space. The poem, therefore, images Mendieta as both voyeur and participant of a tragic drama which culminates in her demise.

Mary Lou Emery has noted the significance of ekphrasis in transatlantic Caribbean modernist creativity. Caribbean ekphrasis has often functioned to stage productive disobedience, transgress ideological boundaries and trouble notions of home, nation and diaspora. Contemplating the evanescence of Mendieta's artistic practice and products, Emery argues that 'they resist the assumptions of ekphrasis. They deliberately negate the notion of art as...reproducible, and they depend upon their own erosion, transformation and loss'(219). Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, powerful ekphrasis has been generated by Mendieta's works and the aesthetics of disappearance which is fundamental to them is also the pivot of the text that Morejón has crafted. At the end of *No telephone to Heaven* (1987) by Jamaican author Michelle Cliff, the protagonist Clare Savage, having returned from the United States and after a particularly agonizing struggle with history, place and identity ends her life burnt to ash in the landscape of Jamaica. For Cliff, while Clare Savage's death is tragic it also signifies resolution. In her death, Cliff confirms, 'she has achieved complete identification with her homeland' (45). Cliff credits Ana Mendieta as the inspiration for this ending to the novel. 'The ending of the novel and the sense it conveys is connected to the works of the artist Ana Mendieta. Her work, like mine, has been a movement back to homeland and identity (45). Mendieta's literary afterlives, therefore, move beyond Cuban and Cuban-American literature to incorporate wider Caribbean diasporic creative events.

The reuniting of a diasporic body/soul into a Caribbean earth space is also the *denouement* of the drama which unfolds in Nancy Morejón's 'Ana Mendieta'. Like Clare Savage, the Ana of the poem, comes full circle and the traumas of her life are resolved on the soils of a Caribbean home. In death, Ana can no longer be contained within the borders of the United States. There is decided urgency in the departure of the dead artist from the USA and Cuba becomes the site of a creative rebirth. Her silhouettes flee Iowa and come to rest on the mountains of Jaruco. In Raquel Mendieta's essay the sense of exile is, in the words of Edward Said, 'an unhealable rift' (173). Morejón's 'Ana Mendieta' however, while it does

⁷ 'Como no tengo tierra, y no tengo patria' yo trabajo con tierra'. Ana Mendieta is recorded making this declaration while explaining her use of earth in her artistic productions. *Fuego de tierra* [min?]

⁸ 'Gerardo Mosquera Ana Mendieta' <http://performancelogia.blogspot.co.uk/2007/08/ana-mendieta-gerardo-mosquera.html> [Accessed 30th May 2016].

not fail to expose the sorrow of separation is a powerful transformative text which engages homeland and diaphora in productive artistic renewal.

Childhood Alienation, Grievous Racial Histories and the Sanctuary of Art

Like Nancy Morejón's 'Ana Mendieta', the short story 'Ana en cuatro tiempos' by Sonia Rivera-Valdés might also be located within a wider project of connecting nation to diaspora. It is also a story which negotiates past and present as it attempts to resolve conflicts engendered in personal, national and international relations. Published in her 2003 collection *Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas* the story enunciates the deep emotional investment of the author Sonia Rivera-Valdés with the narrative of the life which it reconstructs.⁹ The level of emotional investment which permeates the story is indicated in the preface to the collection in which it is anthologised: 'En el caso de los cuatro relatos inspirados en la vida y muerte de Ana Mendieta, quiero aclarar que sin vacilar los hubiera cambiado, de haber tenido opción, por evitarme la necesidad de borrar su nombre y dirección de mi libreta de teléfonos (7). The story, according to its author, is intended to present key moments in the fragmented existence of Ana Mendieta and it has been charged with the artist's 'pasión por la vida' her spirit, her emotion and what Rivera-Valdés believes to have been her way of feeling and seeing the world (10).

Divided into four fragments variously captioned (luna, varita mágica, nieve, toronjiles) 'Ana en cuatro tiempos' tracks the fortunes and misfortunes of the protagonist, Ana, from early childhood in a socio-economically privileged aristocratic home in Havana through her years in a foster home in Iowa, her brief return to Havana as an adult and her tragic and mysterious death in New York. Certain major biographical details of Ana Mendieta's are therefore marshalled (though rather loosely) as a means of structuring the narrative. The exploration of family life and race relations is crucial in the narrative. Additionally, the story focuses on the potential of art as a source of salvation and of reconciliation with history. The bourgeois family and its conventional assumptions are fiercely scrutinized in the story. As a site of privilege within pre-Revolutionary Cuba, the family is also used as a means to reflect on childhood in both socio-historical and psychological terms. All Ana's whims are indulged within the comfortable home of her financially solvent parents. But she is abruptly sent away to the United States where solitude and emotional self-harm come to define her existence. She is eventually reunited with her parents but what the story foregrounds is the fragmentation of the traditional family and the decentering of its values and its influence on the child with the rise of the new political order in Cuba.

Anita Casavantes-Bradford's recent book on children within the early years of the revolution has highlighted the significant role played by the politics of childhood throughout the twentieth century in Cuba. The Castro regime, she notes 'has based its legitimacy on the assertion of a unique moral imperative expressed in the slogan "La Revolución es para los niños" (1). Through detailed analysis of substantial evidence Casavantes-Bradford shows convincingly the extent to which the representation, uses, and abuses of children have been indispensable in the political polarization of Cuba under Castro. The literacy campaigns of 1961, the concept of and struggle over *patria potestad* and the exodus of thousands of children to the United States were to become pivotal terms in the negotiation of the politics of

⁹ Rivera-Valdés and Ana Mendieta were close friends.

childhood within the early years of the Revolution.¹⁰ Robert Katz claims that the idea of the campaign, which required school children of fourteen years and above to dedicate time to teaching literacy, was greeted with horror in the household of many old catholic families, including the Mendieta (43).¹¹ And the horror, from his account, seems to have been rooted in racial fear, religious bias, classism and the anxiety of loss privilege: 'Girls, good girls... would be wrested from the family by the same men who had robbed saints from the altars, assembled dark skinned and white skinned together, to live in proximity with other children of unknown provenance, thrown at the mercy of toothless sugar-cane workers with rifles and machetes at hand' (43). Children, however, were not simply hostages to the political contrivances of the institution of the family or of the revolution. Casavantes-Bradford shows that children played 'active roles in the nation-making projects' on both sides (8) and Ana Mendieta and her older sister, Robert Katz suggests, were involved in circulating anti-revolutionary propaganda as a part of a movement which, unbeknownst to them, was generated by their father, among others (45). Mendieta's mentor and friend, Lucy Lippard claims that the sisters distributed the counterrevolutionary material 'at the behest' of their father' (12).

'Ana en cuatro tiempos' participates in the debate concerning one of the most egregious indices of the fallout of the politics of childhood in the nascent Revolution, Operation Pedro Pan. Between 1960 and 1962 over 14,000 boys and girls between the ages of six and sixteen were transported from Havana to Miami, unaccompanied by their parents. The clandestine scheme, which later became known as Operation Pedro Pan, was a joint manoeuvre between the CIA, the Catholic church and counter-revolutionary cells working underground in Cuba. Effectively an alliance between the Cuban Catholic Church and the US government, the operation was supposedly intended to ensure the well-being of children of counter revolutionaries and to protect them from being brainwashed by Fidel Castro's Revolutionary ideology. But as María de los Angeles-Torres argues it is an example of how in the 1960s the needs of children were manipulated in a political contest between democracy and communism. Torres shows that both Cuba and the US benefitted politically from Operation Pedro Pan. Once the children were in the US they served as 'cannon fodder for propaganda wars' and in Cuba the operation helped to 'denationalize the disaffected' (242). Flora González Mandri who, like Torres, was a child victim of the coerced Pedro Pan exodus, has commented on both the trauma engendered by the project as well as on some of the vicissitudes involved in remembering the experience in the face of governmental and wider social investment in silencing the memories. In her article 'Operation Pedro Pan: A Tale of Trauma and Remembrance' González Mandri recalls the repressive secrecy of the operation and laments the fact that 'isolated in their lack of knowledge about their experience children were left alone to repress their painful memories (258). It is in this emotional territory of isolation, pain and the struggle for remembrance that Sonia Rivera-Valdés's story is located.

The evocation of project Peter Pan in 'Ana en cuatro tiempos' is a symptom of the wider dynamics of betrayal and estrangement that mark the relationship of the child, Ana, and her family. The family home is a site of terror, relationships between the adults are marred by

¹⁰ For a detailed study of the campaign and its historical and global implications see Mark Abendroth (2009) *Rebel Literacy: Cuba's National Literacy Campaign and Critical Global Citizenship* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books).

¹¹ Like many similar initiatives of the early years of the Revolution, the literacy campaign continues to be contested terrain with opinions at times diametrically opposed to each other. For a recent and highly affirmative view of the campaign as an 'effective means of transforming gender roles, challenging racial stereotypes and breaking down class barriers' See Sarah Cooper's review of Catherine Murphy's *Un año sin domingos* in *Women's Studies* 2016:45 (3). Pp.298-302.

divided loyalties and the child is deemed to be strange by everyone including her mother who says of her 'esa criatura vive en la luna' (26). Attempting to pacify all her anxieties and perceived eccentricities with material gifts the family fails to understand the nature of the girl's emotional problems and the extent to which they have been engendered by the conflicts of the adults: 'nadie notaba que las angustias familiares ocupaban gran parte de la existencia de Ana (31). Living in a politically divided household Ana's alienation is exacerbated by the fact that she is an only child.¹² The illustrious public status of the Mendieta in pre-revolutionary Cuban history is completely undermined in the story as numerous indices of the moral duplicity of the fictional family are enumerated.¹³ Enigma, dishonesty and silence, define Ana's relationship with her household in Havana. Much of the enigma and disappointment emerge from her parents' relationship with each other. As a child, Ana is not completely able to understand the concepts of abortion, the difficulty of conception and marital infidelity. But she knows that these are things that are linked to her mother's sadness and the fact that she cries every night. And the bond which at one point the child shared with her father is broken definitively one day when she returns home from school earlier than usual, goes in search of Zuleika (one of the servants in the house who is only a few years older than her and who doubles as her playmate) and finds her father having sex with the young girl. Bewildered, Ana turns to her paternal grandmother for an explanation of what she has witnessed. Dismissing the significance of the event, the grandmother simply tells her to forget what she has seen. Complicit with this act of sexual abuse, the hypocritical bourgeois matriarch complicates the confusion of the child and reinforces her separation from the family.

Arriving in Miami 'enmudecida y con ojos de espanto' (55) Ana realises that she has been the victim of a plot of deception by her family. Having been told that she was going to Miami for a short time to visit with her favourite Aunt the child looks forward to the trip with great enthusiasm. As soon as she arrives however, the ideological motive for the trip and the fact that she is a pawn in what Torres refers to as the 'competing state building projects' of Cuba and the US (22), is communicated to Ana: 'fue necesario hacerlo para salvarla del comunismo, que ahora estaba segura, nadie la llevaría para Rusia..' (55). The voice of the family, and particularly that of the mother, becomes the voice of treachery. Just as language heightens Ana's separation from the adult world of her family in Havana it serves as a barrier to identification on her arrival in the US. Instead of her Aunt Clemencia she is met at the airport in Miami by a man who pronounced 'Rusia con una "r" como de decir "pero" no "perro" como que es como se dice Rusia' (55-56). Transported to Iowa, the emotional distance between Ana and the family begins to translate itself into the mental undoing of the child protagonist. Silence, trauma, self-harm and vengeance now surface as the principal motifs in her life. In this new phase of estrangement Ana avenges both self and family for the sadness of her childhood, the unhappiness of her mother, the machismo of her father and the hypocrisy of her grandmother.

In 'Ana en cuatro tiempos' the estrangement of the girl from her family is counterposed with the close relationship which she shares with the household's long-serving black cook, Domitilia. The black servant becomes a narrative opportunity for Rivera-Valdés to address the vexed question of race relations in Cuba (historically and contemporaneously). The

¹² This is one of the instances in which Rivera-Valdés opts not to follow Mendieta's biography strictly in order that she might communicate the 'essence' of the life and spirit of her deceased friend.

¹³ Ana Mendieta's great grandfather was a colonel for the *Mambises* (the guerrilla army who fought against Spain for Cuba's independence) and Carlos Mendieta, her great uncle, was president of Cuba for a brief period in the early 1930s. Her father Ignacio Mendieta became a political prisoner under Castro but before then he was a supporter and confidante of Fidel Castro.

portrait is scathing. The story sets up a variety of oppositions in which the poor Afro-Cuban woman is used as a foil for the patrician family and its Europhile ideals. More importantly, the interaction of the young Ana with Domitilia will become indispensable in her acquisition of a set of 'knowledges' (historical, cultural, spiritual, emotional) which will be fundamental in her formation as an artist and her identification as Cuban. Fortified through coffee and conversation, the relationship between Domitilia and Ana doubly defies the norms of the household. Children are not allowed to drink coffee (15) and the silence of denial rather than the act of speech is the family's preferred strategy to deal with trauma or conflict. The mulled secrets of the family lead to emotional disquiet and, interestingly, both maid and child are similarly denied a voice in important family affairs. The black woman is perceived by the adults as mentally retarded: '... la atracción de Ana por ella los hacía figurársela de mente bastante infantil' (72). And the stern silence used to rebuke Domitilia when she attempts to intervene in the family's secret plot to send Ana away to Miami crystallises the compendium of colonial prejudices to which black female servitude continues to be subject in the Caribbean and beyond: '-Están locos si piensan mandar a Ana sola y engañada para Miami. La miraron sin responder, ni siquiera sorprendidos. Para ellos Domitilia era una presencia taciturna de cuyas manos salían manjares. Esas eran importantes, las manos, sobre todo su pulcritud y que no padeciera enfermedades contagiosos.' (72). Reliant on her, they nonetheless refuse to acknowledge her humanity nor accord her the respect of voice.

On the other hand, the conversations between the white child and black servant woman channel a poetics of revelation through which Ana learns the racial history of Cuba, the power of the imagination and the power of storytelling. The history told is harrowing. It entails the multiple physical and psychological abuses endured by enslaved blacks in Cuba. It recounts the tragic destiny of black men and women who are prevented from loving each other and, eventually from living. It recalls the excruciating choice of filicide as mothers kill their babies rather than have them face a slave life of privation and indignity. Domitilia is therefore located within a genealogy of violence, abandonment and loss. But the black woman also passes on to Ana powerful narratives of resistance and self-liberation. One of Domitilia's female ancestors wreaks revenge on the plantation on which she is enslaved and in so doing liberates herself and her children from suffering. Her subsequent suicide (she would rather be free in death than bound in life) is figured in the narrative as a flight to Africa and establishes a nexus of violence, liberation and creativity which will later inform Ana's own burgeoning artistic practice. Domitilia will become written into Ana's consciousness as the core essence of Cuba. Deterritorialized against her will, it is the memory of the black woman's touch and her smell of *Hiel de Vaca* soap that comforts the child when she arrives in Miami. Her most acute moment of trauma in Iowa is expressed in her inability to visualize the face of her elderly black confidante. And when Ana returns to Cuba years later she searches for Domitilia's grave in the cemetery in Pinar del Río where the old black woman is buried. Unable to find her grave in 'el mal cuidado cementerio' (76) Ana leaves her offering of flowers on an arbitrary grave and dedicates them to 'todas las negras viejas que descansaban, en el sentido más literal de la palabra, allí.' (76). This return to Cuba helps to focus the symbolism of the servant's continued anonymity and invisibility in death as in life. The dead woman of whose grave there is no trace comes to stand for the exploitation and silencing of black women throughout Cuban history.

'Ana en cuatro tiempos' references the decline of an old regime, the fracturing of established family hierarchies and the supplanting of Eurocentric tastes and customs. It narrates both the injustice and the ignominy of a racially stratified history and invests the child protagonist with the moral courage to decentre this history. The different phases of the fragmented existence of Ana invests her with different ways of seeing from those of her traditionalist

family. In her quest for freedom (artistic and personal) she goes beyond the household, its expectations and its meanings. When she returns to Cuba the mansion in Havana has become a cultural organisation and the Mariquita Pérez doll with which she stubbornly refused to play as a child has also disappeared. The new order has banished the whimsical tastes and impulses of the formerly privileged and has transformed the conspicuous wealth of the few into patrimony for the many. In light of Ana Mendieta's acknowledged sympathies for the Revolution this might be read as a tacit alignment of the protagonist with the aspirations of the new regime.

Gender Violence and Feminist Outrage

Machista abuse undergirds the workings of the Cuban household and the culture that sustains it in 'Ana en cuatro tiempos'. In the story, the tempestuous nature of the relationship with Carl Andre is acknowledged as Rivera-Valdés has her protagonist regret, at the hour of her death, 'la ira de su última noche' (83) However there is no explicit accusation of spousal abuse. Raquel Mendieta's essay completely writes out the figure of Carl Andre and the theme of spousal homicide as does Nancy Morejón whose poem, according to Miriam DeCosta-Willis, 'has loftier aims' moving from the material to the spiritual and from human mortality to the immortality of art' (243). In *Who is Ana Mendieta?* however, Redfern and Caron focus squarely on gender violence and filter the life, career and death of Ana Mendieta through strident feminist lenses. Feminist arguments concerning spousal violence serve as both the context and meaning of this collaborative project. The text revisits key moments of femicide in the art world and evinces Ana Mendieta's death through each of these moments. Simultaneously *Where is Ana Mendieta?* becomes an opportunity to revisit key moments of feminist activity in the past as the creators use the graphic novel to reinscribe the life and work of women artists who have disappeared from the consciousness of the public and have been suppressed in art history.

If Douglas Wolk is correct that the world of comics is 'an annoyingly male world' with a self-perpetuating culture of maleness (70) then it is also true that it is a world that has strong potential for feminist sedition. As Laura Portwood-Stacer and Susan Berridge have recently suggested comics 'an important site for the development of gender representation and feminist subjectivity (522). In that vein, and in a very insightful reading of a graphic novel by the Soviet-Canadian cartoonist Nina Bunjevac, Deborah James has highlighted the efficacy of the visual language of comics in reconstructing memory and providing 'shared recall' (527). Bunjevac's comic, *Fatherland* (2014), unsettles official (male-centred) narratives and becomes, James shows, a productive opportunity for feminist counter-memory (527). Described by the authors as 'a mash-up created from various digital and printed sources' (39) *Who is Ana Mendieta?* exemplifies this potential of the graphic novel for feminist contestation of various forms of gender oppression.

Through a series of around thirty panels accompanied by sharp, piercing and sometime gritty dialogue Redfern and Caron restage key moments in the biography of Ana Mendieta, celebrate her artistic accomplishments and recall not just the horror of her death but also what it suggests about society's attitude towards male violence and the (quite often) female casualties of it. In an interview with Jessa Crispin, editor in chief of *Bookslut*, Christine Redfern draws parallels between Carl Andre and O.J. Simpson in her discussion of the way American society enables, forgives and certainly forgets male violence against women.¹⁴ The retrospective of Mendieta's life and work to which we are invited in *Who is Ana Mendieta?*

¹⁴ <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/bookslut-christine-redfern-who-ana-mendieta/> [Accessed 5th August 2016].

candidly interrogates the violent and self-serving misogyny of the art establishment in the United States. Mendieta's struggles within that world are used to reflect its inherent sexism and her death is presented against the backdrop of a society in which violence against women is normalized. Lucy Lippard sees the book as a 'diatribe against violence against women (29). What Redfern and Caron have staged is 'an activist protest in itself, one of which Mendieta would have approved' (9). The comic transmits the passion with which Mendieta confronted her socio-political milieu as she pursued self-knowledge through art. In so doing *Where is Ana Mendieta?* poses a strong feminist counter narrative to the 'Boys Club' ideology against which Mendieta herself battled courageously.

The comic is all black and white. At the top right hand corner of the cover of the book appears the quote 'Ana, your work is unforgettable' from the Guerrilla Girls¹⁵. On the bottom right hand corner is a drawing of a skeletal male figure and a young vibrant female figure (Ana Mendieta). The drawing clearly echoes Mendieta's 'On Giving Life' performances which Jane Blocker describes as breathing 'life into the body in a process of death and regeneration (65). The cover design of *Who is Ana Mendieta?* also announces the discussion of oblivion and legacy in which it engages. A significant aspect of the purpose of the book is to address what the creators see as the lamentable oblivion into which both the life and work of Mendieta had sunk in the years following her death. Despite the status and impact of Ana Mendieta's art practice, when the proposal for their book was brought before an editorial committee for review, Redfern says, no one under forty years old recognised the name Ana Mendieta (40). The uncomfortable truth to which this points is that society does not often value women's creative work sufficiently and neither does the US art world privilege the longevity of women's reputations and impact as artists. The evocation of the words of the Guerrilla Girls and their feminist insurrectionary project thus signals the reversal of this tendency which this graphic novel seeks to encourage. The black and white of the comic registers much of the macabre, deathly aspects of the politics of art explored in the book but it simultaneously re-grounds Mendieta's story in history and perpetuity; in black and white.

The opening panel of *Who is Ana Mendieta?* features stark images of women as victims of male violence and recklessness. It also shows an image of a woman shooting a gun at a man. The caption of the following page recounts the historical events that the cartoons recall: William Burroughs killing his wife in 1961; Norman Mailer stabbing his wife in 1960; Edith Metzger, among others dying in a car crash driven by a drunk Jackson Pollock who refused to let her out of the car even though she had pleaded with him to do so; Valerie Solana shooting Andy Warhol in 1968. A speech bubble beside the caption uses a bee to communicate the authorial message of the panel: 'The violent actions of men are unfortunate incidents best forgotten. The gal though, she's wacko' (20). In the same panel, below the caption, a naked young woman (Ana Mendieta) is depicted inside an oyster holding on to a pearl and declaring 'the world is my oyster' (20). But the oyster is rather eerily enveloped in the mouth of what seems like a shark with sharply pronounced teeth. The creative passion and naivete of youth are pitted against the unrelenting sexist violence of the world into which Mendieta will find herself. Here the text is also enunciating its unequivocal commitment to the politics of feminist remembering. The comic thus becomes an opportunity to resist the social amnesia which often surrounds acts of male violence. By insisting on bringing to light deeds which evidence a misogyny that society would either prefer to trivialize or find it

¹⁵ Formed in 1985, the same year as Ana Mendieta died, the Guerrilla Girls are a feminist anti-racist group of artistic, intellectual activists. Their official website describes the group as 'feminist masked avengers in the tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Wonder Woman and Batmam. <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/#open> [Accessed 5th August 2016]. See also *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls by the Guerrilla Girls (Who They Really Are)* (London: Pandora, 1995).

expedient to forget completely, the text decidedly opens up space for strident feminist contestations of these realities.

The aesthetics of remembering which are negotiated in *Who is Ana Mendieta?* involve revisiting key moments of 1960s counterculture and the politics of subversion which was in vogue in the 1970s. Free love, gender bending and the insurrectionary supplanting of previous forms of artistic production are amply represented throughout the comic. The recollection of individuals and movements claiming these freedoms also bring into sharp focus the racism, sexism and American imperialist violence in its 'nation making' abroad against which the highlighted images of cultural revolution were reacting. In one such panel, featuring numerous examples of struggles against injustice, the main graphic weight is given to an image of the artist Carolee Schneemann depicted completely naked, with her right hand in her vagina and her left hand holding on to a scroll from which she appears to be reading. The image is an intertextual homage to Schneemann's performance piece, *Interior Scroll*, which she staged twice during the 1970s. The section of Schneemann's famous scroll reproduced in this graphic novel foregrounds the deeply entrenched bias which her performance called into question: 'He said we can / be friends / equally / though we are / not artists / equally'. (23). In addition to Schneemann, other major feminist artists who came to prominence in the 1970s and who were either important mentors to or friends of Ana Mendieta appear in the text. Nancy Spero, Mary Beth Edelson, Lucy Lippard and Mary Boone are all incorporated in the comic in ways that dramatize the monumental ideological and aesthetic challenges against which women artists of the twentieth century had to battle in order to contest the sexist exclusions of both art history and art practice.

Jane Blocker believes that, despite its exclusionary sexism, the decade of the 1970s is 'notable because it marks the most prolific production of feminist art and theory in history' (7). The argument of *Where is Ana Mendieta?* supports this view. Through both image and dialogue the text suggests that Ana Mendieta's emergence into the art world comes at a time of both feminist productive change and masculinist intransigence. The comic vividly captures the tense ideological struggles of the time. It depicts a scandalised, threatened (male-centred) establishment redoubling its efforts to maintain the status quo and a highly talented feminist *avante garde* staking its rightful claim to space for artistic production. At the bottom right hand corner of one of the drawings, below the utterances of established men declaring 'They just aren't as talented as us' and 'No, not minimalist. I think mini-art is best because it reminds one of miniskirts and long legged girls' ¹⁶a tiny Ana Mendieta holds on with determination to the handle of a small door. The thought bubble above her head says 'I had to react' (26). The message is clear. The paradoxical context of constraint and empowerment facilitates her entry into the art world and Mendieta seizes the moment.

The different phases in Ana Mendieta's short lived yet highly productive trajectory are all traced in *Who is Ana Mendieta?* and the fact that Mendieta's own body was her major canvas is conscientiously acknowledged throughout the graphic novel. One of the performances which Redfern and Caron feature is Mendieta's 1973 *Rape Scene*. Lucy Lippard recalls that 'art against rape was very common in the feminist art movement during the 1970s' (9). However, she also doubts whether 'any had a more devastating impact' (9) than Mendieta's. The graphic novel portrays the feminist empathy which led Mendieta to the enactment of *Rape Scene* by recalling the domestic abuse that Mendieta's sister Rauquel suffered at the

¹⁶ This quote is attributed to the minimalist artist Sol Lewitt (1928 – 2007). Lucy Lippard takes exception to the portrayal of him as a chauvinist highlighting that 'no well-known artist supported women artist and their work as much as he did (10) and in her acknowledgements at the end of the work Christine Redfern apologises for portraying him as a patriarchal accomplice.

hands of her husband and, more tragically the rape and murder in 1973 of Sarah Ann Otten, a coed at the University of Iowa. These crimes prompted her to join the dialogue and draw attention to 'all sexual violence' (27). For Angelique Szymaneck Mendieta's *Rape Scene* is less to do with outrage and empathy and more about the viewer's relationship to violence that unlike empathy can be as disquieting as the fact of rape itself (903). Szymaneck argues that the performance constitutes an example of the potential of art to present a 'critical glimpse into the human predilection for violence, particularly the voyeuristic pleasure of viewing pain' (925). While there is no doubt that this comic sustains the thesis of feminist empathy, it is also highly censorious of the male voyeuristic responses to *Rape Scene* at the time it was staged. The violence which the performance sets out to condemn is reinforced by the men depicted in the comic who, using the event as just another opportunity to consume an objectified female body, obviate any possibility of progressive outcomes.

The comic depicts the wedding of Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre with a huge three tier cake which takes up most of an entire panel in the sequence. The marriage is presented as doomed from the very beginning; fatal, to use the term of Robert Katz. The top tier of the cake presents a picture of ostensible wedding bliss with two ribbons on either side of the couple in wedding garb reading 'the duet of stone and leaf'.¹⁷ However, the façade of marital bliss is simultaneously and definitively disrupted through the asymmetry in the gaze of both spouses. Mendieta's eyes are askance and Andre appears slick and castigating in equal measure. She tells him that his moment has passed, 'be content as a famous has been' she says, and he belittles and dismisses her with a sexist orientalist insult 'Shut up Tropicanita' (34). The middle tier of the cake reiterates the theme of Andre's presumed professional decline: 'minimalism is dead'. And it alludes to his sexual infidelity through the image of a woman, glass in hand and perched seductively on the cake saying 'he bought flowers, dinner and then my artwork' (34). An image of the Haitian-American artist Jean Michel Basquiat slumped on the floor with his back against the base of the cake places the fate of Ana Mendieta within a broader context of 'brownness' and tragedy within the art world of the urban US of the late twentieth century.¹⁸

The text is decisive in its ascription of guilt to Carl Andre for the death of Ana Mendieta. In a portrayal of events that follow very closely the version presented by Robert Katz's *Naked by the Window*, the Andre in this comic implicates himself definitively in word and deed. But what is decried even more vociferously is the US legal system which is at best shown as inept and, at worst, contaminated by a racist, sexist and classist complex. The comic makes a point of remembering that the police did not photograph the body of Ana Mendieta when they came to investigate her supposed suicide (35). Later on Andre is imaged pressing down on the back of a judge who, dressed in full legal regalia, is crouched on all fours while he sheepishly mutters 'the evidence has not satisfied me beyond a reasonable doubt' (37). The art world is represented as equally complicit in this injustice and the associated politics of identity. Robert Katz is unequivocal in his belief that 'if Ana had been an Anglo and if Carl had been black, the art world would have lynched him (375). In the final panel of the sequence Ana Mendieta's head is served on a platter at what appears to be a reception in an art gallery. Viewing the platter with one hand outstretched, a complacent, self-assured Carl Andre opines that 'justice has been served' while a contented art entrepreneur shouts 'hooray for the arts'. Across the room there is a group of artists with taped mouths. A speech bubble

¹⁷ Towards the end of Mendieta's life she collaborated on a book of prints with Carl Andre. For a discussion of the collaborative project see Laura Roulet, 'Ana Mendieta and Carl Andre: Duet of Leaf and Stone' in *Art Journal*, 63. (3), 2004, pp.80- 101.

¹⁸ Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) was a neo-expressionist painter of Haitian and Puerto Rican background.

indicating their self-serving conspiracy of silence reads ‘shhhh, if you say anything you’ll never get a show here’ (38). In the aftermath a monstrous episode of gender violence a collaboration of silence and the clichéd language of a conspiratorial justice system prevail. The gendered status quo is maintained and the art world grows from strength to (male) strength.

A poem by the Cuban-American author and critic, Lourdes Gil, chimes with the sentiments expressed in *Who is Ana Mendieta?* ‘To Ana Mendieta Who Was Pushed Over a Balcony by an Artist’s Hand’ is unwavering in its imputation of culpability for the death of Mendieta. The poem mourns the loss of a friend but expresses no surprise at her fate:

And though I was shocked beyond belief
the morning I heard about the brutal crash
—your body falling
scorching flash of indigo and red
in the pitch dark
your naked, interrupted body breaking up
into a clump
a thunder noise over the deli’s roof
your last sculpture spread on humid tar—
I cannot say
the end
was entirely unpredictable.

I saw the violence.

Redfern and Caron recall and condemn the violence which resulted in the loss of Ana Mendieta’s life. Their mourning implicates a wide range of social institutions and it apportions blame both to historical and contemporary manifestations of gender violence. But the book does not reduce Mendieta to her death nor is it mired in victimhood; a powerful feminist voice resists paternalist silencing in the art world and beyond. The most striking image of the last panel in the sequence is that of a Guerrilla Girl roaring with rage and determination implying continued progressive feminist activism. In 1999 Jane Blocker wrote that Mendieta was ‘as yet unclaimed by historical discourse’ (131). In an attempt to redress that position Blocker set out to ‘produce a narrative for her, to legitimize her work and to claim a space for her in the art historical cannon’ (131). The writers whose works I have discussed in this essay are engaged in similar projects. But they move beyond the history of art and inscribe Ana Mendieta in a wide range of personal, social, national and global discourses.

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