

Roland Barthes, Ana Mendieta, and the Orphaned Image

Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see.

-Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

With thanks to the estate of Ana Mendieta for their kind permission to show the images in this essay.

The photograph, Roland Barthes reminds us, is invisible: all that we see in it depends upon an image that reminds us of a displaced plenitude (material, pastoral, maternal). Where is the Winter Garden Photograph? Look for the Winter Garden Photograph, in *Camera Lucida*, and one finds an elision that keeps it elsewhere, never seen (*Camera Lucida* 73). The unseen core of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is this photograph never shown. Around this not-shown garden *Camera Lucida* spins a compelling theory, analytical and ontological, of the photograph. In the Winter Garden Photograph, Barthes seeks his dead mother, and this configuration of a connection that cannot be severed and also cannot be fulfilled governs the book, *Camera Lucida*. The photograph's connection to its referent, as Barthes argues, makes it a signifier of a singular kind, a signifier that is "never distinguished from its referent" even as it may convey, along with other information, a "message without a code" (*Camera Lucida* 76; *Rhetoric of the Image* 120). A photograph records a physical space or object at a point in time: that is its referent, from which it cannot be divorced (*Camera Lucida* 80). Yet the image's lamination onto its referent both causes and elides that aspect of the photograph which Barthes calls "the melancholy of Photography," this quality of bearing meaning that exceeds code, showing the very ground that is gone in the presence of the image (*Camera Lucida* 79). It remains ambiguous, in *Camera Lucida*, whether the Winter Garden Photograph consoles or only obsesses.

"Where is Ana Mendieta?" the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) protested outside the Guggenheim Museum in 1992, looking for her work and finding it absent from museum collections, with the work of Mendieta's accused killer, Carl Andre, installed in the museum.¹ Yet as Jane Blocker points out, Mendieta's work already conceptualizes her absence (Blocker 10). Long before her premature death, Mendieta's ephemeral projects already engaged a paradoxical performance of vanishing: performance art/earth work and the photographs documenting it. My purpose in this paper is to trace, in the arcs of two careers (Barthes's and Mendieta's), the conceptualization of the photograph's invisibility, looking at how the inscribed trauma of what we do not see maps the bounds of theory: as in Barthes's trajectory of thinking about images (from the third meaning to the neutral to the punctum) and in our understanding of Mendieta's moving from a relatively unviewed performance artist to a well curated artist whose body of work now is largely known through photographs and films.

But what kind of artist was Ana Mendieta? The Guggenheim, which subsequently displayed Mendieta's work, limns an ambiguity by stating of Mendieta's art: "The photographs of Ana Mendieta document private sculptural performances enacted in the landscape to invoke and represent the spirit of renewal inspired by nature and the power of the feminine."² Here, Mendieta's work is recognized as photographic but she, the artist, is read as engaging in "private sculptural performances enacted in the landscape," rather than in producing photographs. It is as if the photographs were beyond her intent. And yet Mendieta kept her camera with her and took these photographs that propelled her to posthumous recognition, fame that in a literal sense can be said to have occurred in response to her photographs. My task in this paper is to show

how Barthes' multiple articulations of the signifying force of the photographic image open important paths for interpretation of Mendieta's work. The hermeneutics by which Barthes approaches the photograph, the multiple paths of his interpretive approach that uncovers the "genius" of photography, allow us to see that Mendieta's work is a radical photography, mapping the way that loss stands as the unseen-seen of the photograph (*Camera Lucida* 3). Pressing the photograph into the service of a generative mourning, both Barthes and Mendieta connect the photograph with the maternal: photographs not only stand for but also stand *as* orphanhood's site and remedy in Barthes' commentary on the Winter Garden photograph and in Mendieta's *Siluetas Series*. For Barthes as for Mendieta the photograph is a double turn that marks and relieves the unbearable state of orphanhood.

My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy, which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to specter, from specter to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral

sap

Ana Mendieta³

Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948-1985) is typically described as a performance and earthworks artist, a designation that rubs against the less noted fact that her work now is known primarily through photographs and films documenting her performances and earthworks. Since she frequently worked with a very small audience, or without audience, few people have seen a Mendieta performance. Mendieta often photographed and filmed her work, recording her performances and earthwork installations in remote locations in rural Mexico, rural Iowa, and, toward the end of her life, in Cuba.⁴ These photographic images catapulted Ana Mendieta, after her violent death in 1985, to the kind of reputation and fame that generates posthumous retrospectives at the Hirshhorn and the Southbank Centre. Posthumous representations are also presented at Galerie Lelong, and at the Alison Jacques Gallery, as well as in books and essays discussing Mendieta from the likes of Olga Viso, Jane Blocker, and Julia Bryan-Wilson et al. Her photographs are 35 mm slides and sometimes prints; Mendieta also created some eighty films of her performances. Mendieta's best-known work is her *Siluetas Series*, a series that began in 1973, but that she described as having no ending.⁵

The *Siluetas* are almost exclusively known to us through photographs, and in that sense they are known to us *as* photographs [figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5].⁶ Mendieta, however, conceived of this work as performance, body and earthworks, so critical appraisal of her work aptly has followed this designation. Critics such as Olga Viso, Jane Blocker, Julia Bryan-Wilson et al., Susan Best, and Kaira Cabanas create powerful and important commentaries on Mendieta's work and describe the work in connection with 1970s practices of performance art, body and earthworks.⁷ And yet, as Blocker quietly states in midst of her book-length study *Where Is Ana Mendieta*, she has *never* seen Mendieta's earthwork and body performances, never "witnessed a single performance" by Mendieta (Blocker 96). Few people have, cedes Blocker. Indeed, almost every critic who writes about Mendieta since 1985 writes in response to filmic and photographic representations of her performances: slides, prints and films. Yet in the commentary on her work, the fact of the photograph, or what one may call the photographicity of Mendieta's work, is given short shrift.

In the reception history of Mendieta's work the photograph disappears into the image; the photograph's facticity becomes the unread, the unseen. Hence in foundational critical works on Mendieta the photograph disappears into discussions of Mendieta as an earthworks and body artist. This disappearance of the photograph is made all the more striking by the fact that, as Coco Fusco points out, in *Better Yet When Dead*, Mendieta's reputation as an artist has soared since her death. In this paper, I read the *Siluetas* images by drawing from Barthes's work, in "The Third Meaning," *Camera Lucida*, and *The Neutral*, leveraging his critical practice to locate Mendieta's photographs in their suspension between paradigms, that is, between the genres of earthwork, body work, and documentary photography. Hers is a different kind of photography, one that documents invisibility and, uncannily, has often been invisible as photography. Mendieta's act of photographing her work vanishes in interpretation of the very photographic images that constitute much of her posthumously celebrated oeuvre.

The power of the photographic images she produced, it may be argued, is central to any aesthetic analysis of Mendieta's strength as an artist.⁸ The *Siluetas Series* is a *photographic* exploration of different kinds of

invisibility. And yet, if Mendieta's photographs of her earth and body works have garnered greater critical attention and acclaim than did the live artist when she was producing earthworks and performances, Mendieta's experience of invisibility preceded her photographing of the *Siluetas*. Born into a wealthy and politically powerful family in Cuba, she and her sister, as part of Operacion Pedro Pan, were shipped to the U.S. when Fidel Castro came into power. Mendieta and her sister, their parents decided, would be safer away from Cuba where their father ultimately was imprisoned for political reasons (Blocker 52). From the age of 12, then, Mendieta was raised as a ward in what turned out to feel like enemy territory. Iowa, where she was called "the little whore" because of her dark skin, introduced Mendieta to American racism and misogyny (Blocker 53). Here, Mendieta learned of the invisibility of the subject, learned how it is to be the subject who is erased by virtue of being seen only through the false lens of racism. Mendieta's violent and untimely death extends this biographical thread of disappearance (Blocker 2).

Mendieta's photographs carry this thread of invisibility in ways that I will map by drawing on tactics of analysis offered by Barthes in his later work *Camera Lucida* as well as his earlier work in "The Third Meaning" (collected in *Image, Music, Text*) and the more porous text of *The Neutral*. Not to elide the changes in Barthes's thinking over time, I suggest that Barthes's understanding of the photograph as an uncanny apparatus of signification develops from the early to late work: Barthes's terminologies of punctum and studium, obtuse and obvious, myth and code, need not be read as entirely conflicting with each other but as developing resonances with each other especially in places of apparent or stated conflict. Points of attraction (though never identity) between Barthes's theory of the third meaning and his later development of the concept of the neutral are of significance to interpretation of Mendieta's photographs. Even as Barthes suggests that the "neutral" as "Adamic language" is not the same as the "third meaning" both concepts operate in an interstitial zone of signification (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 132). This interstitial space of meaning that is not paradigmatic and therefore stands as a problematic Eden, if not "Adamic," is also the domain of Mendieta's photographs: images that resist their own visibility.

Barthes tells us, in *Camera Lucida*, that "whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: *it is not it that we see*" (6; italics my own). Here is a claim that would seem to be exceptionally true in relation to the reception of Mendieta's oeuvre: the things of which her oeuvre is predominantly composed—photographs, filmic representations—are often elided in critical appraisal of the *Siluetas*. Of the photograph that is the medium comprising the *Siluetas*, we may say "it is not it that we see" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 6). The *Siluetas* indeed only manifest as a series through these photographs, the juxtaposition of which imparts a serial aspect to the works. Seen individually, each *Siluetas* performance would have been experienced by the audience as a singular performance, since Mendieta created the *Siluetas* over the course of years and in different countries. A chthonic (in earth) real for which Mendieta seemed to long: the earth, or rather the cavity of the body's impression in earth, that Mendieta photographed and commented on as indices of the maternal real seemed to draw her longing in ways that emerge with the force of myth from the photographs. We read her photographs as if they were chthonic, in earth, when in fact they are photographs.

But if Mendieta's written explanations of her work offer depictions of the earth as maternal and nourishing, her photographs of these very same earthworks depict anything but maternal plenitude. In the images' presence as photographs, Mendieta's art transcends the 1970s body-centered feminism from which it sprang. Indeed, if Blocker connects Mendieta with the goddess movement via the "goddess pose" that Mendieta's *Siluetas* figures assumed in the middle of the series, Blocker also moves to disconnect Mendieta from the goddess movement by showing that it was primarily a movement of white feminists, from whom Mendieta felt estranged (Blocker 19). Blocker asserts that Mendieta's *Siluetas* stage disappearance in the guise of the goddess pose, as if the pull of vanishing set in motion by the *Siluetas*' status as silhouettes erased the images' feminine contours (Blocker 59- 61). Instead, one may well see that it is the images' contours, as traces, that *persist* in Mendieta's photographs; what *persists is* the goddess motif. In attempting to distinguish Mendieta from the now disparaged goddess movement in women's art, Blocker almost essentializes Mendieta's race, sealing Mendieta in an identity of racial other. But Mendieta used the goddess pose in the *Siluetas* images, working in connection with the 1970s goddess movement, not because she felt left out of the goddess movement—a movement, reaching beyond the fine arts, by which second wave feminists sought a path to a society in which the female body could be celebrated—but because she

wanted to express, at least iconographically, a profound connection to the goals of this avowedly feminist movement. Mendieta's *Siluetas* as photographs, however, diverge from the celebratory impetus of the goddess movement. In the context of Mendieta's spare and haunting *Siluetas* photographs, the pose with upraised arms presents a posture of defense, self-protection, pleading, or mourning. The legible meaning of the goddess pose changes in Mendieta's photographs, and not her race but her *camera* alters the connotations of the pose that she without question invoked.



Figure 1. Untitled (Silueta Series), 1976, Earth/Body work Mexico, 35 mm color slide. Copyright The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

Mendieta's work is interpreted, correctly, as earthworks and body performances, insofar as her *Silueta* were performed and inscribed in earthy spaces—by the ocean, by the swamp, on sand, and on dirt. And yet while Mendieta did create some lasting earthwork sculptures, her work that remains is predominantly composed of photographs, slides, and films taken in the 1970s, and 1980s, images marked with the materiality of the photographic and filmic equipment of that time, but very thin in the materiality of earth. Mendieta's *photographs* of her earthworks contain not one grain of sand, not one seed or flower petal, no mud, no animal blood, and, paradigmatically, no real geologic depth, only depth of field. The photographs are pictures of these earthy materials, but the images themselves only signify and do not contain these materials. Her photographs are not natural artifacts.⁹

Mendieta's *Silueta* series, as it has survived Mendieta, raises questions about whether the artist's intentions ought to override interpretation of the work. Mendieta considered herself an earthworks artist. But *she kept her camera with her* during many performances of *Siluetas* and recorded many earthworks with it. Indeed, as Susan Best indicates of the *Siluetas* "There are a number of uncertainties about the limits of this series... They include...the relationship of the films to the photographs...and whether the series should only include lifetime prints (photographs printed during her lifetime), be extended to include estate prints (prints made after her death), or whether it should encompass all the slides – while she made over 100 silhouettes, according to Mary Sabbatino, there are thousands of slides in Mendieta's archive" (Best, "Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta" 58). What is the photograph, in Mendieta's oeuvre? What does Mendieta's *Silueta* series, its reception history, and its persistence, tell us about the photographicity of the work? What does Mendieta's work tell us about the photograph, as such? Barthes's idea of the third meaning, his development of the concept of the neutral, along with his notice of the invisibility of the photograph as object, chart ways to unpack the enigmatic force of Mendieta's photographic art. If the photograph, as Barthes argues, is "not it that we see," what do we see in Mendieta's oeuvre that so compels us to keep looking (*Camera Lucida* 6)?



Figure 2. *Untitled (Silueta Series)*, 1976, *Earth/Body work Mexico*, 35 mm color slide, Copyright The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

***Siluetas* and the Third Meaning**

For it is another nature that speaks to the camera than to the eye.

-Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography"

The photograph and its referent are laminated together, argues Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (4). But in earlier work, such as "The Third Meaning" and "The Rhetoric of the Image," Barthes suggests that the photograph's power inheres in its capacity to comment on its yoked subjectivity. With its banal capacity to reproduce what was there inheres also the capacity of a given photograph to prick us with powerful details that belie this banality. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes most fully develops this nuanced understanding of the photograph through the concept of the punctum, prick, puncture, or the wound caused by the photograph, but the ground was laid for this understanding of the punctum already in Barthes' earlier work on what he called the third meaning (*Camera Lucida* 51, 96).

The third meaning exceeds signification, participating instead in *significance*, a term that Barthes uses to describe a mode of communication that does not settle into a fixed meaning ("The Third Meaning" 54-55).¹⁰ The message without a code, as Barthes defines one of the photograph's signifying modes, captures a force both enigmatic and iconic in Mendieta's photographs, a self-placement in conceptual aporia. According to Barthes, a photograph can contain a "message without a code;" and Mendieta uses this capacity of the photograph when she produces the haunting photographic images that now stand as the *Silueta* series. This liminal momentum of the privative photographic act, as Mendieta practiced it, coheres with Barthes's practice of cultural and aesthetic criticism, his practice of locating his writings between genres, his capacity to theorize the photograph's liminality, contending with boundaries between presence and absence, sight and blindness, life and death. *Camera Lucida*, for example, could be read as an elegy. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes shows that the photograph's message of unfixable and unfixable meaning contains the proper elements of elegy: grief, melancholy, anguish, and a dispassionate capacity to translate grief into cognitive and aesthetic structures.

But before the elegiac aspect of the photograph came into focus for Barthes, he developed the concept of "the third meaning" in the filmic image. The "third meaning" for Barthes is what an image conveys that is not informational and not directly and clearly symbolic. Instead the third meaning is "evident, erratic, obstinate" ("The Third Meaning" 53). The third meaning, Barthes argues, works through "significance" as Julia Kristeva developed the term in *Desire in Language* ("The Third Meaning" 54). *Significance*, in this context, conveys meaning that is obtuse: because the third meaning, Barthes argues, extends "outside culture, knowledge, information" ("The Third Meaning" 54-55). It "opens to the infinity of language" and also is "on the side of the carnival" being "indifferent to moral and aesthetic categories" ("The Third Meaning" 55). Mendieta's *Silueta* series photographs act like film stills of her performances and in this way partake of the third meaning—that is, the *Silueta* photographs move outside easily apprehended categories of "culture, knowledge, information" even as the *Silueta* photographs can be understood to echo or resonate somewhat enigmatically through these categories. And surely here is part of the explanation for their uncanny persistence: for the ongoing interest in Mendieta, evinced by Bryan-Wilson et al. and the retrospective at the Southbank Centre, is prodigious.

Why do we still care so much about the earthworks and performances of Ana Mendieta? We care because of her photographs. We are compelled by the *Silueta* photographs' power of being sublimely "indifferent to moral and aesthetic categories" ("The Third Meaning" 55).¹¹ As Barthes argues, the written text suffers from a dearth of the image, and the photograph suffers from a surplus of the image. What Barthes means when he writes, in "The Third Meaning," that the photograph suffers from surplus of the image is that the photograph gives us too much detail (61). It silences us with its overabundance of visual information, precisely because, as Barthes argues in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph fills the frame by force, incapable

of leaving out details. The photograph, as Walter Benjamin argues, operates by an optical unconscious; that is, it shows us visual details we routinely edit away in quotidian vision (Walter Benjamin *A Short History of Photography*).¹²

Mendieta's spare *Siluetas* work by resisting the surplus of photography, encoding a connection to the tracing of shadows.¹³ As Barthes argues, the photograph functions as trace and plenitude, the signifier of presence and the signifier of the impossibility of sustained presence. Mendieta articulates and dramatizes this betwixt and between aspect of the photograph's modality, its liminal function, with her *Silueta* photographs, that function as lacunae in the photographic mode. Mendieta's practice is of a kind of skiagraphy. Mendieta shapes her *Silueta* series around a feint by which the signified—the body of the woman—is proleptically removed *before* the photograph is shot. Of course, this approach does not alter Barthes's claim that the signifier and the signified are ineluctably tied in the photograph. Instead, Mendieta's approach to the photograph speaks to Barthes's conceptualization of the photograph's uncanniness, its capacity to present aporia, to capture vanishing in the space of the image, and to show this vanishing precisely because the photograph fills the sight "by force" with details. Mendieta chooses the medium of over-signification and strips it.

Of Mendieta's *Silueta* photographs one might say that the images are hauntingly elegiac, suggestive of a human presence that has been erased from the landscape but has left its trace. And yet for all their elegiac force, they are daylight photographs. Barthes's *Camera Lucida* also performs the trajectory of elegy, moving into daylight after loss. The Winter Garden Photograph performs in *Camera Lucida* in somewhat analogous fashion to Mendieta's *Silueta* series images: both the Winter Garden Photograph and the *Silueta* images are bucolically set, photographic markers of doubled absence—not simply the photograph as that which encodes the noeme "that has been" the Winter Garden Photograph and the *Silueta* images are doubly removed from presence (*Camera Lucida* 67, 76). The arc of *Camera Lucida* that moves from winter into light—after the Winter Garden, the spring-like light of the photograph is invoked, after the meditation on the *eidōs* of death, the partial resurrection of the body is invoked through the photograph—traces the contour of the traditional elegy that moves from burial to rebirth (*Camera Lucida* 88, 73). And yet the book is not an elegy but a treatise on the properties of the photograph. Barthes states that his goal in writing *Camera Lucida* is to discern the genius, the unique governing spirit of photography (*Camera Lucida* 3). *Camera Lucida* yokes mournful images of a former slave, a man on death row, a child murdered in Nicaragua, together with Barthes's never-shown photograph of his deeply mourned mother, the photograph as the genius that might retrieve the lost mother whose face is eerily supplanted and effaced by Nadar's photograph (68). The disappeared woman, *sui generis*, haunts the book as Barthes meditates on his love for his gone mother. The disappeared woman also haunts Ana Mendieta's photographs of her *Siluetas*, elegiac images that resist the contours of renewal promised by traditional elegy.



Figure 3. *Untitled (Silueta Series)*, 1976, *Earth/Body work Mexico*, 35 mm color slide, Copyright The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C. Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.

I alone am limited like a savage. I alone, I differ from the others in that I respect the Nourishing Mother.

-Lao-tzu¹⁴

The Neutral

As we seek to understand the way that Mendieta's photographs are missed as photographic objects meriting critical attention, Barthes's theory of "the neutral" provides an essential frame of interpretation. In his work on the neutral, Barthes claims that signification's meaning often "rests on conflict," but that signification that does not work by either/or is *the neutral*. Here is the gap into which Mendieta's photographs fall. It is not that Mendieta's photographs are not seen: since Blocker wrote her important 1999 book, Mendieta's fame has only increased, and Mendieta now is by no means an artist ignored by the establishment. Instead, what is unseen is the photographicity of her project. This gap can be understood through Barthes's concept of the neutral. The idea of the neutral emerges from Barthes's work in semiotics: it is the place where he contends rigorously with the boundary of the unsayable. Barthes, here, attends to Eastern apophatic traditions, albeit from the perspective of the West.

The apophatic, in the Eastern church, reflects the belief in the impossibility of speaking directly of the divine, and a consequent need for signifiatory modes that approach but do not encroach this boundary. Mendieta's photographs of the *Silueta* series engage what Barthes calls the neutral, the semiotic domain of the past that resists the teeming paradigms of the living. As the signifier that defuses the urge to signify by either/or, the neutral can be understood as a kind of summation of Barthes's work, pulling close the late and early Barthes, insofar as the conceptualization of the neutral reflects his understanding of signification as troubled by desire. Indeed, as the neutral is described as a "third term" yet differing from the third meaning Barthes aligns the neutral with negative theology, the apophatic tradition (*The Neutral* 55, 59). In the neutral, against the grain of either/or systems of signification, Barthes develops from Saussure's theory of *la langue* the notion of a "reservoir" of meaning upon which we draw, and which we never entirely reach.¹⁵ For Barthes, the neutral is the reservoir.

This neutral terrain is what Mendieta seeks in her performances recorded in photographs that hide themselves as such. As noted, Mendieta describes her work as irrigation veins of the ancestral sap, a reservoir of meaning. Mendieta's haunting *Siluetas* tap the partly elided and the partly emerged reservoir. The *Siluetas* act as reservoir in the way that Barthes theorizes the neutral: the images form a kind of subterranean space of signification from which we pull the idea of exile, orphanage, death, and the lost mother.

As Carol Mavor notes, Barthes places the photograph in the realm of the mother, that is, Barthes seeks, in the space of *Camera Lucida*, to find the essential meaning, power, and worth of the photograph by putting it to the test: can it console the inestimable loss of the source of life, the loss of the mother (*Camera Lucida* 75)? Since it is by no means a given that the photograph should be connected with the mother,¹⁶ it is notable that Mendieta and Barthes share this idiosyncratic sense of the photographic image's mothering capacity. Mendieta states that her art connects her to the "ancestral sap," this mothering element, while Barthes demands of the photograph that its worth be measured in its capacity to undo his state of orphanhood—to show him his mother as she truly was, hence consoling him of the unbearable. The photograph shows Barthes that after his mother's death he can only await his "undialectical death" but also it gives him his mother in the Winter Garden Photograph that may typify the neutral for its Adamic force, originary and unrepeatable.

As a Freudian reading might suggest, the realm of the mother is not distinct from the quiescent field of the death drive (Bronfen). But this quiescence, the dissolve into nothingness, is resisted by the fact of Barthes's writing *Camera Lucida*, just as Mendieta's spectral and haunting *Siluetas*, not unambiguously performances of disappearance, were piquantly described by the artist as a way for her to mark the earth, as she described it, "like a dog pissing" (Best, *Visualizing Feeling* 100). Barthes and Mendieta use the photographic image as a signifier of maternal plenitude lost, as well as resistance to loss, and both view, or use, the photographic image as a signifier that exceeds this statement of loss, a signifier that veers from traditional elegy into the realm of the neutral. Reading Mendieta through Barthes returns us to the haunting power of a meaning that cannot be fixed, a meaning that structures ambivalence, a house for ambiguity.

Full Frontal Invisibility

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body. I believe this has been the direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb.

-Ana Mendieta, *Unseen Mendieta*

Mendieta's *Siluetas* series not only exemplifies Barthes's description of the photograph as the unseen seen—that which we do not see when we look at it—but as I have suggested also connects with Barthes's neutral. For Barthes states that to write the neutral is to substitute metaphor for concept. One may likewise see that Mendieta photographs the metaphor of exile—the feminine *Siluetas* in the earth—in substitution for, or moving to the side of, the concept of political exile. Mendieta's *Siluetas* series photographed in Mexico, established by the outline of a feminine body, are eroded progressively by the ocean's waves as she photographs the image [figures 1, 2, 3]. Of these *Siluetas* we know the images record the ocean's edge, the littoral zone, during the daytime. As well, they record the outline of a human, feminine body. Viewing the images, however, we have no idea of the social setting; the *Siluetas* are not unequivocally connected to any specific religious or philosophical system. If there was an audience for the performance, that audience is not recorded in *the photographs that are the series* as we now have it.

Moreover, metaphorically the series resonates with and looks towards notions of vanishing while yet leaving a trace, of moving into water in a dream of immersion and dispersal of the self, of rebirth through the feminine momentum of fluidity, not unlike the Kristevan *semiotike*.¹⁷ This momentum, Mendieta may have dreamed, would carry her fragmentarily back to Cuba, and to a time before Americans started calling her the "little whore" (Blocker 53). But none of these possible symbolic meanings is legible unambiguously in the work. In light of Barthes's neutral one may interpret the way the *Siluetas* work: by ambiguity, a refusal of fixed terms. For each *Siluetas* is conceived as "a signifier without a signified" insofar as the photographs are *traces of traces* of the dispersal of the feminine body (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 187). Without the knowledge of Mendieta's exile, the *Siluetas* are evacuated of obvious personal and symbolic content. The images convey loss without requiem, erosion of boundary without precursor, a feint of omission without telling what is elided. The "ancestral sap" that Mendieta argued runs through her *Siluetas* images of orphanage and exile is echoed in Barthes's renunciation of his ties to the universal after his mother's death (Blocker 34; *Camera Lucida* 72). This erosion of the universal self, that is, the self that ties to others, centers Barthes's *Camera Lucida* and Mendieta's *Siluetas* series.

Mendieta's photographs and films, of the *Siluetas* series, show the process of erasing images, often by capturing an outline as it is eroded. The *Siluetas* set beside water explicitly thematize erosion. In writing about her work, Mendieta describes her connections to earth, her use of earthworks, as a way to connect to the sap running through all living things (see Blocker 34). And yet she also paradoxically claims that her state of permanent and metaphysical orphanage is not eased or appeased by her art's connection with earth, only articulated emphatically by that act of shaping earth with a form like and unlike her form (Blocker 34). This paradoxical incapacity of working with earth to create home is illuminated, reflected, by the camera's role in Mendieta's work. To photograph form's erasure does not erase the act of taking the photograph; photographing form's erasure *is* the photographic act. Mendieta's camera, taking photos, shooting films,

accompanies most of the *Siluetas* of which we retain a record. And so the camera and the photographs it produces become the testimony of Mendieta's orphanhood; the photograph as uncanny object testifies to the impossibility of gaining home, gaining ground, through the very earthwork performances that Ana Mendieta's camera records. In the photograph inheres this impossibility of return; the photograph is the space that we can view but never enter. In light of Barthes' writing on photography and its applicability to Mendieta's photographs, I want next to analyze one instance of the critical reception of her work, to exemplify my analysis of the ambiguous effect of her photographs.

Between (White) Women

What sort of political speech is this that transgresses the very boundaries of the political?

Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*

In 2004 Eleanor Heartney published an article titled "Rediscovering Ana Mendieta," indicating that Mendieta's reputation was in ascendance some twenty years after her death. Posthumous fame for a performance body works artist is enigmatic to be sure. And yet, as I've noted, Mendieta's persistence as an artist would ultimately seem to reside in the power of the many photographic images that survived the artist's truncated life.¹⁸ Even so, Mendieta's *Siluetas* series photographs have been conscripted to perform feminine other-ness in a way that possibly goes against her intentions.

To be fair, Mendieta wrote about herself this way, as a woman who wanted to connect through earthworks to the feminine aspects of the earth (Blocker 34). And yet Mendieta functioned as an artist *within* and not outside the technological paradigm of the late twentieth century, making brilliant use of photography. And if we always read Mendieta as preternaturally connected to the earth, creating photographic images of great power without even knowing she was doing it, are we not reflecting something like a replication of her earlier consignment to the role of racial-other, a consignment that Blocker and Viso have worked so hard to undo? A double-sided question that I raise, then, is what is the uncanny position of the photograph within post-structuralist discourse, and how might Mendieta's situation exemplify this problematic fit? For the photograph, if we follow Barthes, represents a kind of wound; a punctum must hurt the viewer if the photograph is to have power, according to Barthes (he says he cannot show us the Winter Garden Photograph because, for us, there would be no "wound" from this image) (*Camera Lucida* 73). The photograph is a wound in the sense that, while textual, it is also always *graphic*, a marker of the body, and of the body's place in time. As Barthes argues, in the photograph's alliance to trauma inheres its power: its *eidos* is death (*Camera Lucida* 73). Does Mendieta, as a woman possibly killed by domestic violence, a woman viewed as non-white, Cuban, an exile, also represent a site of trauma, an indigestible meal for post-structuralist feminism?

Judith Butler chose images from Mendieta's *Siluetas* for the cover of *Antigone's Claim*, a striking choice given Mendieta's intense, Antigone-like, devotion to the country that imprisoned her father. *Antigone's Claim* is not about Cuba, but Butler's book does contend with questions of feminist change and political agency, topics in conversation with Ana Mendieta's work. However, in *Antigone's Claim*, Butler neglects to discuss her book's cover—Mendieta's art—signifying Butler's erasure of Mendieta's complex position of exile. Despite, and indeed also because of, Butler's unwillingness to discuss her book's cover photographs, these images surely provide what Barthes would call the punctum of Butler's book.¹⁹ Only a line in Butler's book's acknowledgements, a line thanking Anne Wagner for introducing Butler to Mendieta's work, and the fine print on the back of *Antigone's Claim*, allow us to learn that the cover images are photographs taken by Ana Mendieta. Mendieta is placed by Butler's acknowledgement of Wagner as a third term, a non-white woman used as an object of exchange between two powerful white women. The focus on feminism, sexual politics, and post-structuralist theory of Butler's *Antigone's Claim* makes this erasing of Mendieta especially problematic.



Figure 4. *Untitled (Silueta Series)*, 1976, *Earth/Body work Mexico*, 35 mm color slide, Copyright The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

Butler's decision to show Mendieta's art without discussing it may typify an erasure of the narrative of traumatic subjectivity, an erasure that may drift toward the erasure of historical trauma, in this case historical trauma inflicted on the body of the non-white woman. Implicitly trading on Mendieta's outsider status, casting her as the alien other, a term of exchange between white women, Butler frames her study with cover images, Mendieta's photographs, implying by her refusal to discuss Mendieta's work that these images remain bound to nature, not compatible with critical theory.²⁰

By contrast, Barthes's theorization of the photograph as that which disappears into itself allows for an interpretation of Mendieta's posthumous oeuvre as a photographic body of work—not the silenced alien other, but rather photographic images that should be interpreted as one interprets photography, in its inherent uncanniness. Mendieta's medium, photography, functions as a gap or a wound, as Barthes argues the power of the photograph is to wound. The missed opportunity in *Antigone's Claim*—where on her cover Butler has figures for Antigone, in the Mendieta photographs, and yet never discusses the photographs—is emblematic of deeper problems in Butler's feminist theory. Even as Mendieta, whose *Siluetas* enigmatically figure late twentieth century problematics of citizenship and kinship, should have been discussed in Butler's book, the decision to use Mendieta's photographs without discussing Mendieta amounts to an erasure, placing Mendieta as a silenced conduit between two white women.²¹ This missed opportunity signifies the way the non-white woman is figured in Butler's postmodern theory as a gap, a figure remaining resolutely feminine while the white woman is free to pursue resignifications of gender.

Universal Orphans

One of the strangest and most striking metaphors of *Camera Lucida* is Barthes' comparison of the light that encompasses a photograph to an umbilical cord (*Camera Lucida* 81). Here, the photograph's capacity to bind the viewing subject to lost maternal plenitude is given graphic template: light as umbilical cord. Yoked by the umbilical cord of light, Mendieta's earthworks and performance photographs are also orphaned, insofar as Mendieta's identity as a photographer merges, in effect, with that of the unread. Just as her camera is the non-present (critically unread) apparatus in her *Siluetas* earthworks and performances so also Mendieta's acts of photography are suppressed in interpretation of her oeuvre. Mendieta as photographer and the photographic object merge in mutual elision. If one follows Barthes in reading the photograph as a semiotic orphan—by dint of that aspect of the photograph that cannot be coded—this ulterior affinity between Mendieta and the photograph can be seen to resonate in the status of orphanhood (*Rhetoric of the Image* 37).²² The state of being orphaned, exiled from Cuba, is not eased in Mendieta's work but rather, because the camera is the arbiter of the scene, articulated in the work. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes extends this concept of the photograph as a kind of semiotic orphan, chained to a referent but also unmoored from its referent, for the photograph cannot escape what Barthes calls its *noeme*: “The noeme of the photograph is simple, banal, ‘that has been’” (*Camera Lucida* 115). The *noeme*, or the essence, of the photograph is the way that it marks the passing of time. As Barthes memorably puts it, every photograph is a “catastrophe” (*Camera Lucida* 96), showing the fragility of the material world.

The photograph's essence, then, is this capacity to show the “that-has-been”-ness of materiality. Mendieta's camera is used to record the that-has-been-ness or, the thus-gone-ness, of an outline present as trace. In this double ambiguity, Mendieta engages the “genius” of photography: the camera is not circumstantial but integral to her art (*Camera Lucida* 3). For the camera that produces the photograph carries the noeme of thus-gone-ness. The noeme is tied to the mortal and also exiled from the mortal, unmoored from the haptic by which it also stakes its claim as photo-graph, writing in light, a shared “skin” of light that Barthes rightly argues merges the viewer with the image (*Camera Lucida* 81). As Barthes argues the photograph coheres with the realm of trauma, the real, what Lacan called the “tuché” (*Camera Lucida* 4). Mendieta's *Siluetas* photographs' power in adumbrating the traumatic real has fed into the invisibility of the images as photographs.



Figure 5. *Árbol de la Vida (Tree of Life)*, 1976, *Earth/Body work Mexico*, 35 mm color slide, Copyright The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, L.L.C Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York

Useless Expenditure

Invisibility and the maternal merge in the conceptualization of the photograph that draws together Barthes's and Mendieta's work. At its core, Barthes's *Camera Lucida* enfolds the unseen image, the absent photograph whose presence in any case signifies absence: the Winter Garden Photograph. Even the way the photograph is described, *Winter Garden*, signifies sterility at the site of fecundity—the garden in winter. As Barthes states, this photograph for him is a “wound,” and he designates *Camera Lucida* as a text woven around a wound (73). The image that cannot be shown in an obvious sense comes to stand for the erasure of Barthes's mother, Henriette. The Winter Garden Photograph, like all photographs, contains the “noeme” of identical presence and therefore absence, the *that-has-been*. As Barthes tells us, the photograph's *eidos* is death, or vanishing: tracing the erosion of the body is the *eidos* of photographic technology, its genius. Like Barthes's book about the never-shown Winter Garden Photograph, Mendieta's *Siluetas* function to describe a lost maternal Eden: winter in Iowa juxtaposed with littoral zones in Mexico. Both Iowa and Mexico signify Mendieta's lost Cuba by not showing it, instead allowing Cuba to be supplanted by the invisibility that is the photographic frame, the stilled film.

Mendieta, like Barthes, connects the photograph's capacity to point to loss with actual orphanage—the removal of the child from the parent. For Mendieta this orphanage happens through exile, for Barthes it is effected by his mother's death. At the center of both *Camera Lucida* and the *Siluetas* series is the commonplace and the *nodus* of the orphan, the child from whom the mother, Henriette or Cuba, has been irrevocably taken. The return to the image to supplement this loss, for Barthes as for Mendieta, is a return to the wound. Not the image as plenitude, but rather the image as erosive, rough, jagged.

We can understand Mendieta's *Siluetas* as pensive (that is, transcendent beyond fixed codes) and expensive (that is, like the third meaning, useless expenditure). Her *Siluetas* images resist paradigm even as they play at the boundary of paradigm, outline. My suggestion in this paper has been to firstly point to the invisibility of the photograph in Mendieta's oeuvre and then to argue that her photographs—and also the existence of her camera at the site of the performances—in some ways create the stage for their own critical erasure, because they carry a quality that Barthes ascribes to the “neutral,” that is the “neutral...[that] outplays the paradigm...baffles paradigm” (The Neutral 6). The photographicity of Mendieta's *Siluetas* series is paramount, and should not be dismissed in interpreting her work. And yet is also clear that part of the reason the work has not been interpreted as photographic is because of its truck with the neutral, an ongoing bafflement of paradigm that typifies the *Siluetas* photographs. The pensive quality of Mendieta's work is both its power and its risk.

For Barthes, the third meaning “opens out into the infinity of language” it “belongs to the family of useless expenditure,” a description that evocatively opens up ways of interpreting Mendieta's work in the *Siluetas* series, a series that Mendieta claimed had no ending (Barthes, “The Third Meaning” 55; Viso, *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body*, 22). But how does Barthes's approach to photography change from his early to his late work? In this essay, I have suggested that the view of the still photograph as an enigmatic and singular transmitter or translator of meaning resonates from early to late Barthes. Such a reading is in line with Michael Fried's argument that Barthes's concept of the obtuse and of the punctum are similar (“Barthes's Punctum,” 144-145). And yet it is also true that *Camera Lucida* presents a deeply elegiac view of the photograph that pressures the third meaning. For if the third meaning inheres in an image's unresolved gnomic force, it is also a force of plenitude—through enigma/undecidability the third meaning produces plenitude. By contrast, however, one notes that *Camera Lucida* comes close to solving the photographic image's enigma. The solution to the puzzle is the opposite of plenitude, for the meaning of the photograph in *Camera Lucida* is death: death is the *eidos* of the photograph, the boundary that frames and gives constancy to the photograph's tarrying with flesh and light. In this sense, *Camera Lucida* presents a frame

of reading close to the spirit of Mendieta's auto-elegiac *Siluetas* series photographs. For her images enforce a pervading sense of loss and of absolute limit.

The creation of earthworks that will be destroyed by natural processes and indeed that Mendieta often recorded in the process of their destruction may be interpreted as "useless expenditure," created to vanish ("The Third Meaning" 55). Creating that which is intended to be erased is the essence of Mendieta's *Siluetas* series. And yet the camera's presence at these performances articulates their claims to permanence, even as the infinity of the images resides in their liminal state, "outplaying meaning" ("The Third Meaning" 53). Barthes's practice of reading signs as part of the signifying field regardless of medium is itself a kind of "luxury, an expenditure without exchange," insofar as it implies endless text ("The Third Meaning" 55). Barthes argues that "writing can tell the truth on language, but not the truth on the real," and to read a photograph that is not a photograph—that is only a document of a "real" work, an earthwork—one must apply this Barthesian understanding of the "real" that both eludes symbol and pulls symbol towards it ("Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers" 391). The real of which one might tell the truth poignantly exists for Barthes as erasure: as the photograph of Henriette in the Winter Garden, that which cannot be shown (*Camera Lucida* 73). Mendieta operates on a very similar notion of the dispossessed text of the pastoral and maternal real. Barthes's orphanhood, in writing *Camera Lucida*, uncannily matches Mendieta's visual assessment of orphanhood as the photographic truth whose contours one seeks to limn by a practice of useless and even extravagant expenditure, these spent images that are photographs never read as photographs ("The Third Meaning" 53). The very resisting of paradigm that perhaps pushes her *Siluetas* photographs into the space of the unseen-seen also makes the images cohere with that quality of the "Adamic" that Barthes ascribes to the neutral, a capacity to resist marking even as the images are original marks (*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* 132).

Erosion: The Subject of the Wound

The effect of what Barthes calls the punctum, that Barthes likens to an arrow that pierces the viewer, could be interpreted as trauma caused by looking. Trauma is contested territory for post-structuralist theory insofar as trauma theory complicates post-structuralism's shattering of the subject by using the term shattering to stealthily bring back into critical discourse the possibility of the (damaged) subject, the (harmed) self. And yet, Barthes's *Camera Lucida* hauntingly traces ways that the subject's trauma, if only the vulnerability of temporality, is found out by photographic images. That is, Barthes's strangely evocative claim, in *Camera Lucida*, that he writes about images because he has reached the end of language can be interpreted as a claim about the impossibility of inoculating the speaking/writing self against temporality, that is, trauma. In similar fashion, Mendieta's *Siluetas* series may serve as abject trace of traumatic subjectivity even as she strips away self from the *Siluetas* images she creates. It is Barthes, who proclaimed the death of the author, who gives us the tools to read Mendieta, because Barthes theorizes the visual as the resistant domain of vulnerable subjectivity in the space of modernity and post-modernity. As noted, Barthes draws from Kristevan theory of the *semiotike* when he deploys the term "signifiante." When I use the term "abject" in relation to Barthes's or Mendieta's work, I refer, then, to the term as Kristeva develops it in *l'Abjecte*, translated as *The Powers of Horror* (1-5).²³ The Winter Garden, like Mendieta's *Siluetas*, locates both the mother and the orphan in a kind of damaged bucolic space, an abject space vulnerable to the erosive force of time.

Mendieta challenges post-structuralist assumptions of the vacuity of trauma. If the *Siluetas* are expressive of some mode of loss, their connection to exile is no more patent and apparent than, say, the Winter Garden Photograph's connection to a mourning son. If Barthes mourns for the lost mother, he can only access her through an image of that which she no longer was at the instant of his birth, a girl unattached. The Winter Garden Photograph indexes not only death, as Barthes describes its *eidōs*, but also a boundary of virginity, the loss of girlish identity and its elusive connection to maternity. Similarly, Mendieta seems to produce the naturalized effect of the non-white woman preternaturally connected to earth, but in fact her work profoundly subverts these very assumptions.

The *Siluetas* in Mexico and Iowa index not simply Ana Mendieta's specific exile from Cuba, but rather, as Mendieta argued, the condition of exile as an encompassing human condition: "There is no original past to redeem; there is the void, the orphanhood" (Blocker 34; italics my own). The genre of the exile, like the genre of the mourning son, is located and also surpassed, transcended, by Mendieta and Barthes insofar as Barthes gives us ways to read Mendieta's work even as Mendieta's *Siluetas* exemplify just how haunted a landscape a garden from which the beloved—whether the mother or the self—has vanished can be. This wound, the photograph, destabilizes post-structuralist claims to the illusion of subjectivity not by returning us to a unified subject but, in photographs such as Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas*, by showing how violence and mortality haunt the arrogance of subjectivity, even (or especially?) subjectivity eschewed. A Barthesian notion of textuality is necessary to read this wound. The disfigurement implicit in the photograph is both "not it that we see" and also that which we, sometimes, cannot bear to see. Its premise is disfiguration, disfiguration as erasure, the present absence that Mendieta shows in her *Siluetas* photographs. Barthes, in what may be a lover's discourse on the photograph, shows how to read the erotics of erosion, an approach that is needed for interpreting Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* photographs. Mendieta's *Siluetas* series is, just as she once claimed, a series that has no ending, insofar as the images of which it is composed are texts that "suspend" their own meaning (Barthes, *The Neutral* 12).

Notes

- 1) The circumstances of Mendieta's death are discussed in Jane Blocker's monograph *Where is Ana Mendieta*. This description of the WAC protest is also drawn from Blocker's book. See, Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta*, 2.
- 2) [The Guggenheim Museum Arts Curriculum](#). Accessed February 24th, 2014.
- 3) Mendieta, Ana. "Ana Mendieta: A Selection of Statements and Notes" (1988), quoted in Blocker, *Where is Ana Mendieta*, 34.
- 4) Only when the images are of her actual body rather than an outline, might it be that someone other than Mendieta may have operated the recording camera in the *Siluetas*. We know that "Mendieta began her career using a 35mm camera for still photographs. The resulting 35mm slides projected on a large-scale, though not printed in a sufficiently large format. In 1980 she purchased a 2 ¼ inch medium format Mamiya camera to enable her to print photos on a larger scale. Mendieta photographed her *Siluetas* works herself, unless she was necessitated to do otherwise in the event that her own body was in the image" Joanna Harrison of Alison Jacques Gallery, personal communication, February 2014.
- 5) It is generally agreed that the *Siluetas* series ends in 1980; even so there is no definitive close to this series. Perhaps we should take Mendieta's claim seriously; there is no real end to the series other than that imposed by Mendieta's death. See, *Ana Mendieta, Earth Body*, 22.
- 6) Choosing five images to represent the massive *Siluetas Series* created by Mendieta may seem arbitrary. I do not mean to limit the scope of my discussion of Mendieta's *Siluetas* photographs to these images. However, they do provide striking examples of the photographic power of the works, and in that sense may stand as exemplary of my claims in this essay.
- 7) While in this paper I point out a gap or aporia in Mendieta studies, I hope it is also clear from my comments that Olga Viso and Jane Blocker have written brilliant, essential, and necessary work on Mendieta, and that no study of Mendieta could go forward without taking into account their works. It is important to note here as well that the Galerie Lelong has recently begun emphasizing Mendieta's films ("Ana Mendieta: Selected Works"). Nevertheless, it remains the case that Mendieta's most written-about and well-known works are photographs, slides, prints, films and film stills of the *Siluetas*, and yet the full implications of the *photographicity* of these works goes unvoiced in prominent discussions of the work.

8) In this paper, to follow my concern with the photographicity of Mendieta's work, I am writing only on the *Silueta Series*. While some images that may arguably be part of the *Silueta* were accomplished on natural materials, for example the beautiful late *Silueta* on a leaf, my argument in this paper is rather simply that most of the *Silueta Series* are kept as photographs and films. For a discussion of the leaf *Silueta*, see Blocker 131-135.

9) John Berger argues that a photograph is "both...man-made cultural" and also "a trace naturally left by something that has passed," yet even so this astute argument, emphasizing what Berger evocatively calls photography's essential materials, light and time, does not capture the chemical and mechanical apparatus necessary to create and preserve the photograph. See, *Understanding a Photograph*, 59.

10) On connections between the obtuse and punctum see Michael Fried, "Barthe's Punctum" in Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero* 144-145.

11) While Mendieta's art is surely not indifferent to ethics, it does forge new spaces linking ethics and aesthetics and in this way can be interpreted as "indifferent" as Barthes deploys the term, indifferent by dint of defusing the status quo.

12) Susan Buck Morss, in *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1989), limns connections between Barthes' theorization of the photograph and Walter Benjamin's much earlier work on theory of photography. Kathrin Yacavone, in *Benjamin, Barthes, and the Singularity of Photography* (2012), follows this thread.

13) At the end of her life, Mendieta was engaged in a project of photo-etchings (her Rupestrian Sculptures series.)

14) As quoted in Barthes, *The Neutral*, 6.

15) For an exploration of Saussure, please see Paul Thibault, *Re-reading Saussure: the Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. Print.

16) Carol Mavor makes an interesting argument connecting photography's capacity to reproduce the image with woman's capacity to reproduce the human being. "Black and Blue: The Shadows of *Camera Lucida*" in Batchen, ed., *Photography Degree Zero*, 214. See also, on Clementina Hawarden's photography, Mavor, *Becoming*.

17) As I've noted, Barthes develops his theory of *signifiante* drawing from Julia Kristeva's work with the term.

18) For example, the title of Viso's important book *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body* signifies unmistakably that when we look at the images contained in Viso's meticulously researched book we should interpret them as earthy and bodily, tied to the earth and almost mystically to Ana Mendieta's long since vanished body.

19) The concept of third meaning, punctum, and the neutral may be connected in Barthes's writing through their apparent connection to the function of *signifiante*—*signifiante* that Barthes explicitly connects to the third meaning earlier in his writing, as Kristeva develops the term in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. I mean here that Mendieta's photographs provide the punctum of Butler's book in the specific sense that, as Barthes stipulates that the punctum must not be planned or planted by the photographer, Butler surely did not intend for Mendieta's images to give the lie to the classist and even racist risks of post-structuralist feminism.

20) As Sherry Ortner pointed out long ago, the term nature is dense with ideology. See, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Women, Culture, and Society*. Stanford University Press, 1974: 67-87.

21) Of the *Silueta* image used on the cover of Butler's book one may say that it crystallizes Mendieta's themes of dispossession and longing with regards to her home country. Here, in this *Silueta*, Mexico is proxy for Cuba, the home where Mendieta could not re-enter for political reasons and to which Mendieta remained resolutely tied, stating "Pain of Cuba, body I am." See Kaira Cabañas, "Ana Mendieta: Pain of Cuba, Body I Am," *Woman's Art Journal* 20.1 (1990): 12-17.). Mendieta's faithfulness not to a government but to land and earth chimes with the mythological Antigone's faithfulness to a higher law — not human law, as Hegel points out (see *The Phenomenology of Spirit*)— and even Antigone's terrible fate of live burial is evoked in Mendieta's photographs of her earthworks. Mendieta's *Silueta* series, then, offers the ideal image for Butler's book cover.

22) The given of the entire book, *Camera Lucida*, is Barthes' orphaned status, his grappling with his mother's death. Barthes' father had been killed in battle when Barthes was an infant.

23) Please also see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*.

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