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## Past Conditional Subjectivities: Enacting Relationships with the Non-Human in the Work of Ana Mendieta

# ABSTRACT

Inspired by what literary scholar Lisa Lowe calls “the past conditional temporality”—or the “what could have been”—this paper examines how the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta challenges modernist ontologies that separate the human from the non-human, simultaneously calling on older ways of being and demonstrating that they never disappeared. Many argue that the ecological crises of the Anthropocene are in large part due to the proliferation of modernist worldviews that set humans apart from the non-human world. The rise of European rationalist philosophies in the early modern period played a central role in the proliferation of instrumentalist relationships between humans and the non-human world.

This paper explores how Mendieta’s *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series (from the 1970s and 1980s) resist the logic of European capitalism and colonialism, revealing that the relationships that rationalism sought to subdue have always existed, will continue to exist, and can proliferate. Symbolic communication is a key means of mediating and actualizing relationships between subjects, and so, if a non-instrumental relationship is possible between the human and non-human, visual art ought to be a possible means of enactment. Through Mendieta’s work, this paper considers the mechanisms by which this is possible. By considering meaning-making as a basis for life, the co-constitution of human/non-human subjectivities, and the inherent permeability of the category of the individual, this paper highlights counter-modernist visual art practices that are of special urgency in the age of the Anthropocene.

**Keywords:** visual art, animacy, ontology, modernism, non-human.

## INTRODUCTION: ECOLOGICAL CRISES AND PAST CONDITIONAL TEMPORALITY

For many ecologists, philosophers, and political scientists, at the root of the ecological crises of the Anthropocene is a pervasive ideology that views the non-human world as subordinate to the human world. The history of this ideology is long and complex, encompassing Biblical traditions, the philosophy of Aristotle, and more, but the mechanistic philosophies that developed during the early modern era in Europe represent a significant milestone. During this time, dualities between the human and non-human, nature and culture, and the body and land became more entrenched in philosophy, law, and art. These dualities support an ethic of instrumentalization, with which any entities outside of the human (and many humans themselves) become means for the accumulation of wealth and power, the pursuit of endless progress, and the satisfaction of material want, resulting in ravenous extraction, pollution, deforestation, desertification, and mass extinction. The ecologists Jean-Louis Martin, Virginie Maris, and Daniel S. Simberloff write that within the contemporary context “although humans are ascribed an intrinsic value, everything else is ascribed only an instrumental value relative to its contribution to the pursuit of human ends” (6107). This “human chauvinism,” they write, “has led to an exploitative attitude toward nature and the present ecological crisis” (6107). From an eco-feminist perspective, sociologist Marie Mies and ecologist Vandana Shiva write that “the capitalist patriarchal world system” is “built upon and maintains itself through the colonization of women, of ‘foreign’ peoples and their lands; and of nature, which it is gradually destroying” (2). Mies and Shiva link this exploitative system to “modernization,” “development,” “progress,” and “reductionist modern science” that emerged in the sixteenth century (2–3).

In this paper, and aided by theories of language, semiotics, and embodiment, I consider the ways in which the work of Cuban American artist Ana Mendieta (1948–85) enacts relationships with the non-human world that challenge the very nature of these dualisms of the Enlightenment project. Born in Cuba just a few years before the beginning of that country’s revolution, Mendieta and her sister were exiled to Iowa without their parents during their youth. Mendieta’s work engages with themes of belonging and place, and she has become a central figure in late-twentieth century body art and feminist art. Though her practice spans many themes and subject matters, her *Siluetas* (1973–80) and *Rupestrian Sculptures* (1981) series are of special interest in considering how the artist enacts non-dominating relationships with

the non-human world that counter the extractive ideology of endless progress.

This inquiry is inspired by what Lisa Lowe, a scholar of literature, race, and colonialism, calls “the *past conditional temporality* of the ‘what could have been’” (*Intimacies* 40). Such a temporality, Lowe argues in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, is “a space of productive attention to the scene of loss” (40–41). She elaborates elsewhere that by using this term, she intends

to suggest that it is possible to understand the historical past not as fixed or settled, not as inaugurating a single temporality into which our present falls, but as a set of multiple contingent possibilities, all present, yet none inevitable. These are connections that could have been, and are thus, not yet. A past conditional temporality suggests that there may be other possibilities that remain, still unvanquished, which we might bring forth and manifest. It suggests that we struggle for alternative means to realize what might be when we examine what might have been. (“Other Humanities” 99)

As a methodological approach for this paper, the goal is not to create a revisionist history or even a speculative history. Instead, my goal is to better understand the present condition, and its ideologies, norms, and relations, as historically conditioned rather than natural or inevitable. In turn, I will identify and analyze visual art practices that operate in antagonism with the historical junctures that led to the present condition, and I will provide insights not only into what might have been but also into what still might be.

In her book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, feminist scholar Silvia Federici provides a basis for thinking about some of these junctures within the modern European tradition. In an attempt to understand the development of capitalism, she connects the then-emerging philosophies that aided its expansion with the suppression of animist views and practices during the witch hunts of the early modern period. She explains that even during the Middle Ages, a magical view of the world still prevailed in Europe. “At the basis of magic,” she explains, “was an animistic conception of nature that did not admit to any separation between matter and spirit, and thus imagined the cosmos as a *living organism*, populated by occult forces, where every element was in ‘sympathetic’ relation with the rest” (141–42). Federici argues that, contrary to popular belief, the target of the witch hunts were not “socially recognized crimes, but previously accepted practices,” such as healing and carrying reproductive knowledge (170).

Magic and sympathetic cosmologies were in direct conflict with the emergence of capitalism, which necessitated disciplined workers and an alienation of land from the body. “Magic,” Federici explains, “is premised on the belief that the world is animated, unpredictable, and that there is a force in all things” (173), and “this anarchic, molecular conception of the diffusion of power in the world was anathema” to the new capitalist class (174). “The capitalist organization of work,” she continues, had to “refuse the unpredictability implicit in the practice of magic, and the possibility of establishing a privileged relation with the natural elements” and the world had to be ‘disenchanted’ in order to be dominated” (174). In the service of capitalist disciplining, rationalist and mechanical philosophy emerged, which Federici argues, “contributed to increasing ruling-class control over the natural world” (139–40). The results of the destruction of a worldview defined by sympathetic and organic relations are all around us, but as Federici shows, this is not a natural outcome but a historically conditioned one.

The legal, social, and economic forces responsible for the abstraction and instrumentalization of the non-human world are much broader and deeper than those analyzed here and by Federici, but the early modern era is not an arbitrary basis for this investigation. “The idea of dominion over the earth existed in Greek philosophy and Christian religion” (3), feminist philosopher and historian Carolyn Merchant reminds us in her book *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Nonetheless, she continues, during the so-called Scientific Revolution, “the dominion metaphor spread beyond the religious sphere and assumed ascendancy in the social and political spheres as well” (3). It is for this same reason that in their quote above Mies and Shiva identify the sixteenth century as a critical moment for this history.

In her book *The Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land and Racial Regimes of Ownership*, legal scholar Brenna Bhandar details how the modern British political philosophy of abstraction—abstraction of land and of bodies—has been used in settler colonial contexts to construct and perpetuate certain types of subjectivities and identities. She writes, for example, that “the ideology of use . . . casts both land and its native inhabitants as in need of improvement” and that “the logics of abstraction . . . underlie increasingly commodified visions of land and human life from the seventeenth century onward” (26). Importantly for my study, Bhandar concludes that “the commodity logic of abstraction obliterates preexisting relations to the land, and preexisting conceptualizations of land as something other than a commodity” (98). The form of property law that follows from these philosophies, she continues, “renders invisible (and severely constrains) the ways in

which people live, act, (re)produce the conditions of their existence, and relate to one another in ways not confined to commodity relations of ownership and exchange” (98–99).

Bhandar concludes her book by suggesting that a “radically different political imaginary of property” is needed to undo or dismantle “racial regimes of ownership” (193). For her, this requires three broad types of activities, movements, and transformations: understanding, studying, and reviving “the ontologies of property relations that have been suppressed by colonial techniques of dispossession and appropriation”; imagining “what radically alternate ways of holding and relating to land might look like”; and considering “the kinds of transformation of the self and our relations with one another that are a precondition for wider social and political transformations” (193). These distinct-yet-related calls for action offer a toolkit for thinking through liberatory practices. My present investigation of visual art is centered on Bhandar’s call to reimagine the relationship with land as a radical liberatory practice, extending this call, however, to a broader focus on the non-human world. For many, nurturing and reciprocal relations with the non-human have always been present and paramount. But for others, this is an opening to consider past conditional subjectivities: what could have been and what still can be.

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## TOWARD A VISUAL GRAMMAR OF ANIMACY

The connection between language and animacy is central to this project because it illuminates the ways in which language can shape one’s thinking about the external world: specifically, how relationships between human and non-human are mediated through linguistic means, including both alienating and reciprocal relations. Potawatomi ecologist and thinker Robin Wall Kimmerer provides insights on the role of language, and representations of the world more broadly, in upending the duality between human and non-human. Writing about the unhealthy relationship between many modern societies and the non-human world, Kimmerer argues that a “grammar of animacy” is a necessary remedy for our global predicament. In the English language, she says: “You are either human or a thing” (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 56). The noun-heavy English language encourages its speakers to conceptualize the non-human world as mere objects to be exploited for their own use. But in verb-heavy languages such as Potawatomi and Anishinaabemowin, she explains, “to be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive” (55). Kimmerer writes about the difficulty of trying to learn this aspect of Potawatomi

as an English speaker. The word *wikwegamaa*, for example, means “to be a bay”—that is, what is an object in English (“a bay”) is an ongoing action in Potawatomi. Exasperated and ready to give up, she eventually had the realization that “a bay is noun only if water is *dead*” (55). The language, she explains, is “a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world” (55). Kimmerer calls for the proliferation of language like this that acknowledges that the world is alive and that its constituent parts—not just humans—are subjects in their own right. Articulating the relationship between a grammar of animacy and liberatory practices, Kimmerer has argued that “the ecological compassion that resides in our indigenous languages is dangerous once again to the enterprise of domination” (“Speaking of Nature”).

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Also arguing for the relationship between language and land, in his book *Landmarks*, British writer Robert Macfarlane speaks about the danger posed by a loss of words about land in the Gaelic language in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, and in that nation more broadly. In particular, he claims that “younger generations are losing a literacy of the land” (23). Macfarlane notes, however, that this is not unique to Gaelic and is occurring in English and other languages and dialects. “The nuances observed by specialized vocabularies,” he writes, “are evaporating from common usage burnt off by capital, apathy and urbanization” (23). Instead, in English for example, “generic units” like *field*, *hill*, *valley*, and *wood* have replaced more nuanced and meaningful language, creating what he calls a “blandscape.” Macfarlane links this blanding of language to the rise of rationalism, expressing common concerns as Federici and Bhandar. In fact, he says that “as we have enhanced our power to determine nature,” “the things around us do not talk back to us in the ways that they might” (25). The world has been made instrumental, and in doing so, it has lost a certain sense of vitality, which is reflected in, and perhaps enacted by, language. Macfarlane argues that language doesn’t just “register experience” but it also “produces it” (25). And for this reason, he believes, “language is fundamental to the possibility of re-wonderment” (25). Macfarlane’s glossary of disappearing landscape words includes the Gaelic term *sgombair*, which he defines as “old grass found around the edges of lochs after storms and used as bedding for cattle” (42). The absence of such a word doesn’t just make it difficult to talk about this kind of grass, it makes it difficult to conceive of, it makes it difficult to distinguish from any other kind of grass. This absence, in essence, removes texture from the world. Language, then, can serve as a means of re-establishing, nurturing, or defending the bonds between the body and the world outside it.

Writing about the change from imagining the world as a living organism to imagining it as a machine in the early modern period in Europe, Merchant argues that “descriptive statements about the world can presuppose the normative; they are then ethic-laden” and therefore, “because language contains a culture within itself, when language changes, a culture is also changing in important ways” (4). While Merchant is looking at historical changes that have already occurred, reading her and Federici’s historical analyses alongside the methodological tools offered by Lowe and Bhandar and the linguistic arguments of Kimmerer and Macfarlane, provides a path for thinking about visual art practices that can help radically reimagine relationships with the land and the non-human world. While Kimmerer and Macfarlane write about spoken language, other forms of communication and symbolic meaning, such as visual art, shape our conceptions of the world. With this in mind, this investigation asks whether there is then a visual grammar of animacy. In considering this possibility, I ask what aesthetic and narrative techniques visual artists employ to demonstrate that the world is alive and full of non-human subjects. Ana Mendieta offers particularly strong examples of work that seek to establish bonds between herself and the non-human world. Of the power of her work, she has said that it is “the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe” (Mendieta and Clearwater 18) and “is a return to the maternal source through my earth/body sculptures, with which I become at one with the earth” (qtd. in Gambari 24). The relationships and dialogue between the human and non-human in these works suggest a more-than-human intersubjectivity and a world full of animacy.

## MENDIETA’S IDENTIFICATION WITH NATURE

In her *Siluetas* and *Rupestrian Sculptures* series, Mendieta created work in which the boundaries between human and non-human are blurred by integrating her own body in landscapes or depicting other human bodies as emerging from cave walls. This can be seen as an attempt to break down the artificially imposed barrier between the self and the non-human world, a direct if unstated attack against the rationalist logic that has cleaved the two. In these works, the body (female bodies and Mendieta’s in particular) are depicted as both at home with and originating from the non-human world. In a draft artist statement from 1978, Mendieta wrote that she had been exploring the relationship between herself, the earth, and art for the past five years and that by using her body as a reference, she was “able to transcend [herself] in a voluntary submersion and total identification with nature” (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 296).

By representing such an identification, this work counters the alienation of land from the body that is paramount to capitalist and colonial logic.

Mendieta's work has often been contrasted with much of the land art and earthworks that were being made around the time that she was working. Curator Olga M. Viso writes that Mendieta's art and writing "quietly subverted the monumental gestures of male land artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer" (Introduction 22). In fact, Mendieta herself accused Smithson of "brutalizing" nature with his work that poured tar and concrete on outdoor landscapes (qtd. in Viso, "The Memory of History" 68). Artists such as Smithson and Heizer can be seen as making work in the trajectory of rationalist and mechanical philosophy. They dig up, carve, and extract land in permanent or quasi-permanent ways that seem to shore up the boundaries between humans and land rather than tear them down. Their works seem to bask in the human domination of land. And Heizer in particular relies on hard lines and geometric shapes that make rationalism manifest, in contrast to the organic shapes of Mendieta. This work calls to mind the etchings by Georg Agricola used to illustrate his 1556 book *De re metallica*, which Merchant has called the first modern treatise on mining (34). In the book, Agricola makes several arguments against ancient moral restrictions towards mining, and these arguments are aided by etchings showing brawny European men making use of various landscapes by chopping wood, diverting water, and digging deep into the earth. The totality of Agricola's detailed etchings imply an ingenious and rational process of dominating land, not unlike a sixteenth-century companion to Heizer's *City*, a nearly 500-acre artwork in rural Nevada that was in-progress from 1970 until 2022. In contrast to these approaches, in a project proposal for Bard College, Mendieta wrote that the earthworks of the 1970s "used nature in its most literal sense" but that her "purpose and interest is rooted in nature's symbolical meaning," calling this work "preindustrial" (qtd. in Viso, "The Memory of History" 68).

Among Mendieta's most well-known works is the first of what would become the *Siluetas* series, created in the Zapotec archeological site Yagul while on a trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, in the summer of 1973. In the photograph, *Imagen de Yagul*, Mendieta lies stiffly in an ancient tomb with her arms outstretched by her side. The rocky walls of the tomb frame Mendieta who is obscured by white flowers that appear to grow out of her body or from between the crevices of her limbs. The site of the tomb and the still body evoke death, but this is disrupted by both the flowers and Mendieta herself. The height of the flowers suggest they have been growing for some time but Mendieta's body—which in actuality was of course living—is not desiccated, decaying, or corpse-like. The body and the flowers both emanate a sense of life.





Fig. 1. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973. Chromogenic print, 20 x 13 3/8 inches. Courtesy of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, purchase through a gift of Nancy and Steven Oliver. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC.

In this work, Mendieta represents what she would later call a “total identification with nature.” The land, the flowers, and herself have molded into one and this is a stark contrast, and antidote perhaps, to works like Agricola’s, Heizer’s, and Smithson’s. While all four artists represent

a relationship between the human and the non-human, only Mendieta's is actively life affirming, symbiotic, and sympathetic. She works with the landscape rather than against it; she does not dominate or desecrate it. Her presence lasts only through the photo documentation. But more importantly than her light impact on the land is the presence of a dialogue, a process of semiosis or meaning creation, with the land. Mining creates something out of the land that is then alienated from it. Heizer's *City* remains in the landscape, so to speak, but it stands apart from it; it is a "triumph" over the landscape, and it doesn't seem that the sagebrush and desert shrubs, for example, that populate this area of the Mojave Desert are meant to provide some of the work's meaning. Mendieta's "preindustrial" *Imagen de Yagul*, however, is coextensive with the land. The entirety of its meaning is bound up in Mendieta's body and labor *and* the land. This work is an expression of Mendieta being at home with this land, which may be central to challenging the alienation of rationalism and abstraction. For Kimmerer, being at home is also integral to the grammar of animacy. She clarifies that she is not suggesting that we all learn Indigenous languages that harbor such a grammar. Instead, she says: "If we are to survive here, and our neighbors too, our work is to learn to speak the grammar of animacy, so that we might truly be at home" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 58). Mendieta's work offers a path towards thinking about how to represent this at-homeness beyond the constraints of one's own spoken language.

## DIALOGUE, SEMIOSIS, AND ANIMACY

The role of communication and meaning-making in Mendieta's work is explicitly expressed in a 1982 grant application for her *Rupestrian Sculptures*, a series of photo etchings of female figures carved into cave walls near Havana. In that statement, Mendieta wrote that "art must have begun as nature itself, in dialectical relationship between humans and the natural world from which we cannot be separated" (Mendieta and Clearwater 11). Here Mendieta calls direct attention to the organic and sympathetic relationship with the world that has been attacked by the logic of capitalism and rationalism, as articulated by Federici. Mendieta even calls these works "earth/body sculptures," both acknowledging and trying to transcend the linguistic and philosophical binary that attempts to enforce a sense of otherness from the non-human world. The phrase "earth/body" itself gestures toward the past conditional subjectivities, pointing to a subjectivity that transcends rationalism's ontological separation of the human body from the Earth and its non-human constituents. One work, *Guanaroca & Iyaré* (1981), named after two Taíno goddesses, is situated

at the entrance to a small cliff-side cave, framed by ferns, foliage, and roots. Two female figures are carved on the cave wall, with the cave itself appearing as both a place of rest and birth for these figures. It is both a domicile and a primordial pool; the figures here are also at home in the cave and a part of it in an ontological sense. Mendieta did make seemingly more lasting marks in *Guanaroca & Iyaré*, but they are nonetheless very different from Heizer's. Whatever arguments may be made in favor of or against making such alterations for an artwork, Mendieta's piece is not a total disruption of the land—it is not a conquering of the land—instead it represents a different kind of relationship with the non-human: this relationship in which Mendieta sees herself as a part of the land rather than apart from it. Because there is no vast ontological separation, this is a relationship that allows for exchange between the two parties.

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Fig. 2. Ana Mendieta, *Guanaroca & Iyaré*, 1981. Gelatin silver print, 7 1/4 x 9 5/8 inches. Courtesy of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. © ARS, NY.

The idea of communication, exchange, or what some call semiosis runs throughout Mendieta's work. In fact, she has described her work as an ongoing "dialogue between the landscape and the female body" (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 109). This suggests that Mendieta didn't just see herself as working *in* the landscape but working *with* the landscape, perhaps

as equals. There is something anti-dualist about this perspective. Rather than treating the land as something separate from herself that she simply makes marks on, by viewing this relationship as a dialogue, she proposes that the boundaries between the human and non-human are not so strict, a nod to a past conditional subjectivity that retains its potentiality. When read alongside Mendieta, the subfield of biosemiotics provides insights on the significance of dialogue between the human and non-human in Mendieta's work. The linguist Thomas Sebeok argued that "semiosis is what distinguishes all that is animate from life-less" (qtd. in Kull et al. 2). Reflecting on this thesis, biologists Kalevi Kull, Claus Emmeche, and Jesper Hoffmeyer write that

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semiosis is the sign process—the fundamental process that carries meaning and in which meaning is created. It is the process—not at all simple—that mediates purpose and causality, living and dead aspects of nature, and makes it possible to see how to overcome a crude dualism of mind and matter. (2)

This connection between communication and life is seen in Mendieta's descriptions of her own work as well. She wrote about the dialogue in her work in a fellowship application, noting that "these obsessive acts of reasserting my ties with the earth are really a manifestation of my thirst for being. In essence my works are the reactivation of primeval beliefs at work within the human psyche" (qtd. in Viso, *Unseen Mendieta* 297). Mendieta, then, draws an intimate connection between dialogue and being, similar to the biosemioticians linking semiosis and life. Her works aren't just *representations* of a relationship between land and the human body; they are dialogues that enact this relationship. Through these dialogues, Mendieta makes meaning, which can be seen as a basis for life, a basis for animacy.

The philosopher and biologist Andreas Weber provides a framework for thinking about the performative nature of Mendieta's work. In his book *Enlivenment: Toward a Poetics for the Anthropocene*, Weber introduces the term "enlivenment," which he sees as an alternative to the rationalism that undergirds Enlightenment thinking, which he argues "is an ideology that focuses on dead matter" (12). He further writes that the primary assumptions of the Enlightenment are "that the world is understandable on rational grounds; that humans can change it (because we can understand it); and that we not only have the ability but also the right to change it in order to improve the human condition" (26). Because of the focus on inert matter, total knowing, and control, Weber concludes that "the Enlightenment project has no use for the notions of life, sentience, experience, subjectivity,

corporeal embodiment, creativity and agency, imagination and poesy” (28–29). Weber elaborates how this ideology has come to dictate the way some see reality, likening it to the BIOS (basic input/output system) of a computer, which “is inaccessible to the user interface but still determines how the operating system communicates with the hardware” (51). The implication of this is that if the ideology of the Enlightenment shapes the way people know the world, it will inevitably shape the way they interact with it. If dead matter is the foundation of Enlightenment thinking, then living processes become antithetical to it. “If our formal systems of thought about the biosphere describe it as nonliving,” Weber continues, “violence against aliveness will be the outcome” (57).

Against this ideology of inertness is enlivenment, a perspective that takes life and aliveness as “fundamental categories of thought and of practical action” (Weber 11–12). Weber’s project is relevant to understanding Mendieta’s work, not just because of his diagnosis of the problem of the Enlightenment, but because of his articulation of the ontological necessity of *doing* to *being* and because of the way in which he links symbolic meaning to intersubjectivity. Under Weber’s framework, counteracting the ideology of the Enlightenment requires establishing relations through participation and reciprocity. Weber is influenced by the field of biosemiotics, and because reality for him is not a “meaning-free or neutral real” but instead “a matrix of relations and their meanings,” we can begin to see that in his system art and poetics can play an important role in bringing about the relationships that define the experience of living (14, 43). Mendieta’s work very dramatically articulates the co-constitution of herself and the lands in which she works. Intersubjectivity is the core of this work; in *Imagen de Yagul*, the landscape and the artist’s body co-constitute one another. Dualism is an impossibility.

The linguist and queer theorist Mel Y. Chen provides another way of thinking about the affective dimension of symbolic representation, its political potency, and its significance for the relationship between humans and non-humans. Key to this line of thinking is the idea of an animacy hierarchy, which Chen explains is, for linguists, “the quality of liveness, sentience, or humanness of a noun or noun phrase that has grammatical, often syntactic, consequences” (24). The idea of an animacy hierarchy stems from the observation that in language, entities that are seen as more or less animate in that language are given different grammatical markings. One linguist, John Cherry, conducted a cross-language study and proposed the following as a general hierarchy of more to less animate entities (itself a reflection of cultural biases and prejudices): Humans > Animals > Inanimates > Incorporeals. But within each of these categories, there are sub-hierarchies, such that within Humans there are: adult >

nonadult; male/MASC gender > female/FEM gender; free > enslaved; and so on. Within Inanimates, for example, there are hierarchies such as motile/active > nonmotile/nonactive or natural > manmade (Chen 26–27). For Cherry, Chen explains, animacy “is a phenomenologically derived intuitive recognition of like kind on the basis of one’s own *embodiment*, *purposiveness*, and *activity*” (29). If this is the case, then an entity’s position on the hierarchy may influence one’s ability to relate to it. For example, the higher the entity is on the hierarchy (the closer it is to human), the more empathy and likeness it is afforded. “We can begin to see here,” Chen explains, “how racism, stereotyping, and a lack of empathy can conspire to construct deflated animacies for some humans (and, arguably, some nonhuman animals) in spite of biological equivalences” (26). By conceiving of or talking about humans as if they were lower on the hierarchy, one can deny them their animacy, humanness, and likeness.

However, Chen is not arguing for strict borders between locations on an animacy hierarchy. Some animacies, they write, are corrupt, but others are “particularly enlivened by a capacity to romp through, under, and over . . . hierarchical knowledges” (234). Ultimately, Chen calls for “an ethics of care and sensitivity that extends far from humans’ (or the Humans’) own borders” (237). “Thinking and feeling critically about animacy,” they continue, “encourages opening to the senses of the world, receptivity, vulnerability” (237). Such an ethic of care that crosses the animacy hierarchy is fundamentally oppositional to the rationalist philosophies that ushered in the age of humanism and the Anthropocene. It is in this way that we can see Mendieta’s work as blurring the lines between boundaries of the animacy hierarchy. In *Imagen de Yagul*, animacy would normally be granted to Mendieta’s body and in *Guanaroca & Iyaré* it would at least be symbolically granted to the goddess figures. In the European tradition, a lesser level of animacy would be granted to the flowers in *Imagen de Yagul*, while the cave walls and soil would likely be seen as inert (never mind the presence of bacteria, fungi, worms, and insects). Weber argues that embodiment is the common denominator of all life and that individuals creates themselves through relationships with the whole (35, 140). By disrupting the animacy hierarchy in these works, Mendieta enacts the reciprocal co-constitution that is essential to being and becoming and inherent to the past conditional subjectivity addressed here.

As if she were in direct conversation with Kimmerer, Macfarlane, Merchant, and Weber, Mendieta once wrote that “to establish his empire over nature it has been necessary for man to dominate other men and to treat part of humanity as objects. This has had a detrimental effect on both man and nature” (Mendieta 171). Mendieta’s works attempt to counter this domination through meaning-making across the dualistic

divide of rationalism. Boundaries between the human and non-human are essential to exploitative industrial progress—progress pursued often for the sake of progress alone—and thus Mendieta’s boundary crossing attempts to strike at this feature of domination. This is not a move toward a prehistoric, or even pre-industrial, past, but rather Mendieta offers an artistic contribution to a framework for a more collaborative and reciprocal organization of the world. This is an example of a visual grammar of animacy that is urgent in the age of the Anthropocene, when we must consider what subjectivities and relationships could have been and what they still may be. And indeed, there is no insurmountable divide between what could have been and what still can be. Though the present and the future are shaped by the past, they are not cut off from the past conditional. Mendieta’s visual grammar of animacy shows us a way of relating to the non-human world that might have been pervasive throughout the world—but at the same time, she enacts these very same subjectivities, demonstrating their continued possibility. It is work that doesn’t just tell us that the world is alive and that we live in sympathetic relationships with the non-human world; through its very expression it makes manifest this relationship.

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