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Silent Voices: Dwelling with our Specters through *Palimpsesto* (2017), by Doris Salcedo

Abstract

A palimpsest is a writing erased and replaced by another. Sometimes, perhaps all too often, our lives become incarnated palimpsests thanks to the prevailing biopolitics, which refers not only to the government of the living, but also to the multiple practices of dying and disappearing. Can art teach us to create new spaces of co-habitation with our essential ghosts, with those who refuse to abandon us despite everything? In this article we address the work entitled *Palimpsesto*, in which the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo (Bogotá, 1958), makes visible one of the most ignominious events in our recent history: the deaths of thousands of people in the Mediterranean due to indifference and, on occasions, the complicity—conscious or unconscious—of a desensitized European society, closed in on itself. In *Palimpsesto*, the artist creates a space where those absences are permanently present *in absentia*. However, Salcedo's art goes beyond testimony and representation: the tears that flow from the earth itself, outlining on the ground the names of women and men who drowned while fleeing war, reveal not only the need to name those who are no longer with us, but could lay the foundations to erect a kind of divinology (Meillassoux, "Deuil à venir" 105) through which new ties and forms of dwelling would be built, beyond interested political use, between human beings and those harassing absences.

Keywords: absence, dwelling, memory, palimpsest, presence, specters.

INTRODUCTION

Through the window, they look at you, they scrutinize you. Just a shadow, a soft breeze of wind that takes on a somber tone. Sometimes it is simply a sinister whisper, barely audible, that is impossible to capture:

> The day was gray enough, but the afternoon light still lingered, and it enabled me, on crossing the threshold, not only to recognize, on a chair near the wide window, then closed, the articles I wanted, but to become aware of a person on the other side of the window and looking straight in. One step into the room had sufficed; my vision was instantaneous; it was all there. The person looking straight in was the person who had already appeared to me. (James 141)

It is no coincidence that one of the great masters of horror stories, H. P. Lovecraft, mentioned these spectral presences—much as they appear in the writings of the aforementioned Henry James, and Ambrose Bierce, Edgar Allan Poe, or Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name but a few—as one of the fundamental elements to embody the terror of human beings facing the other, that is to say, the unknown (49). That these volatile apparitions not only appear but observe us from the outside of our own intimate space adds more fire to the ardor of our anguish: our house is no longer ours, it no longer belongs to us entirely, it does not protect or shelter us anymore. For this reason, our most private places constitute the spaces par excellence of ghosts. These spectral manifestations decenter us, deterritorialize us. In fact, there are many occasions in which one becomes truly aware of those specters that haunt us in the shadows when one is outside one's own home and can contemplate it from the outside. What if those presences have always been there? Disturbing thought that can only unfold its true force when one has gone outside of what is most appropriate to oneself and has felt it, therefore, beyond one's own subjectivity. At that precise moment one cannot deny them, one cannot reject their presence.

Not only must we take them into account, but, as Derrida asserted in his *Specters of Marx*, we cannot but take them into account (7). However, we sense that the French philosopher, in that profoundly ethical project, begins his reflections *in medias res*: the specter already moves among us, perhaps precisely because it is always present, because it cannot be absent. In other words, Derrida's reflections commence when the specter has already attained effective reality, for it already torments us.[1] This is akin to

[1] Perhaps the French philosopher would not concur with us regarding the effective reality of the ghost. What the specter reveals, as Derrida discusses in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign*, is that we must inquire into the relationship between the real, reality, and language: "In order to think (but what does one call thinking? The question is

the specter of Hamlet's father, whose emergence effortlessly draws his son's attention and acts as an imperative upon his soul and thus his actions. But can we entertain the comparison between the agency of a king's ghost over his own son and that which the "clandestine immigrant" (Derrida, *Specters* 219) possesses? We believe it is necessary to acknowledge that many voices have been silenced, many subjects and events have been consigned (often meticulously) to a condition of invisibility and inaudibility, depriving them, even, of the ability to haunt the present like a ghost. Or, if they were to be a ghost, it would be one utterly devoid of vitality, left without the initiative to appear and reappear time and again. While Derrida directs his hauntology towards the ethical responses of the living to specters that are already at work, our perspective, akin to that of Esther Peeren (2014), is interested in exploring what and how the work of the specters can be made possible, in this case, through the names invoked by the artwork of Doris Salcedo.

TO BE A WITNESS OF THE WITNESS

To qualify as Derrida's specter, two conditions must be met: an existence in a liminal space between materiality and immateriality, life and death, and possessing sufficient agency to impose its presence. How can those lacking the ability to manifest, manifest themselves? How can we dwell with those essential specters—as Quentin Meillassoux defines them ("Deuil à venir" 105)—that harass us, refusing to cross permanently to the other side? Can these ghosts change our way of perceiving some realities? These appear to be the questions that Colombian artist Doris Salcedo asks in her work *Palimpsesto* (2017). As Mary Schneider has stated (49), political violence, expressed and denounced working with a materiality that is always fragile, suspended between presence and absence, is the artist's great concern throughout her work. She tries to become, in this way, a kind of medium between the living and the dead by exacerbating a shared passion, as she herself explains:

> I try to be a witness of the witness. I look for an intimate proximity with the victims of violence that allows me to stand in for them. One must feel close to another in order to stand in for him or her and create an

here more acute and more urgent than ever since the point was to think the *logos* beyond the *logos*, to think the phantasm, the *phantasmata*, the phantoms and the revenants beyond the *logos*), well, in order to think the phantasm is what one believes one can oppose *to*, or rigorously distinguish *from*, the effective reality of what happens, and therefore from the undeniable effectivity of the event, it is necessary to think something like a *phantasm of the event* . . . it is necessary, then, to think this thingless thing that a phantasm of the event would be, but also by the same token, an event of the phantasm, a phantom of the event and an event, a coming or supervening of the phantom" (185–86).

> artwork out of another's experience. As a result, the work is made using his or her testimony as its foundation. It is not my rational intent but rather the experience of the victim that tells us about trauma, pain, loss. As a sculptor, I am aware of every detail that informs the life of the victim: the corporeality, the feelings, the vulnerability, the failings, the space, his or her life's trajectory and language. I don't formulate the experience of the victim, rather, I assemble it so that it remains forever a presence in the present moment . . . Sculpture for me is the giving of a material gift to that being who makes his presence felt in my work. (Merewether 19)

For Salcedo, therefore, the primary fundamental issue in her work is to render present what is absent. In this way, those specters that move within the liminal space we discussed earlier, but are deprived of a voice, can be heard. What Salcedo does is to make manifest, to testify through fostering an intimate proximity with the victims of violence, to make their ineffable sentiment somehow mutual, communal. It is precisely this deep-rooted sense of compassion, the capacity to step into another's shoes, to share in the suffering of another being, and to appreciate the worth and vulnerability of memory encapsulated within a fleeting materiality that Salcedo pushes to the brink of obliteration. It is imperative that the wounds endured by survivors and victims of political violence remain unhealed, serving as conduits through which the apparitions capable of awakening collective moral sensibilities are free to manifest.

NAMING THE ABSENT

Under these overarching premises, let us delve into the work titled *Palimpsesto*. Firstly, why did Salcedo choose such a title? As is well known, a palimpsest is a writing that has been erased or altered, overlaid with another script, but which still retains visible traces that can come to light. It is, in essence, a form of absent presence or a presence *in absentia*. The installation, first displayed in the Palacio de Cristal of Madrid, comprises an immense rectangular floor upon which the spectator may tread. It is a greyish surface with a sandy texture, resembling a succession of tombstones. Suddenly, small droplets of water emerge from the floor; the very earth seems to weep. Gradually, these tears coalesce to spell out the names of those who had no voice, those who could not be mourned: names of migrants and refugees who lost their lives in the Mediterranean while fleeing conflicts in the homelands, in the face of the tragic indifference—sometimes outright complicity—of a European society seemingly drifting toward an alarming self-imposed identity closure. Yet, almost in the same breath as these names surface, the earth absorbs its tears, causing them to fade away slowly.

As one strolled amid the tears, amid the names, one was initially compelled by a sort of imperative of silence. Those names reverberated in hushed tones, engendering a private moment for each unsuspecting visitor, a face-to-face encounter, as the artist herself notes, that transcends the beautiful metaphor through which the earth weeps—that is to say: it goes beyond mere representation—but instead harnesses the full metonymic potency of the names. For it is not solely the name that becomes manifest, but the life behind that name, which permeates the spectator precisely through resonance, through sympathy. The power of the work lies, among other considerations, in affording us the opportunity to contemplate the philosophical habit perpetuated by prevailing biopower and necropolitics—as Achille Mbembe has called it (2003)—one that centers discussions on life around its mortality or finitude. The self-aware ego wandering amidst the tears finds itself inevitably fractured, dislocated from its own core, following the diverse rhythms imposed by the appearance and disappearance of names, treading upon a ground that has suddenly morphed into quicksand, rending apart the reality that it once deemed controlled and secure. The individual comes to the realization that, as Theodor W. Adorno contended (92), they may be nothing more than the sum of their scars, the enduring traces left by experiences of alienation: these specters emerging from the earth are in fact our open wounds, seeking a dignity they were denied through a voiceless existence, a voice that Salcedo magnifies into deafening resonance for the living.

But what is the uncanny—following Sigmund Freud (140)—potency of the name of a stranger that is capable of uniting, much like lightning bridges the chasms between heaven and earth, the deceased and the living? First and foremost, the artwork displaces the primacy of the biological aspect inherent in conventional definitions of life and death: the life of the name surpasses the life of the body. There is "a certain kind of surviving," Judith Butler writes, that "takes place in language" (4). Naming is:

> an act that precedes my will, an act that brings me into a linguistic world in which I might then begin to exercise agency at all . . . This is what I have been called. Because I have been called something, I have been entered into linguistic life, refer to myself as through language given by the Other. (38)

Perhaps the true potency of a name lies, therefore, in its ability to summon the departed among the living, transcending even the intentionality of the survivors. This is the impression that lingers as you traverse Doris Salcedo's work: it is an act of invocation. Beyond the bureaucratic constructs of biopolitics and its propensity to adhere to stark

polarities (a person is either alive or not, a person is familiar or not, and so forth), the piece engenders a call to another being who is no longer present, asserting their direct presence within us, their vitality in us. An unfathomable other, who awaits us and surpasses us, who beckons us, finding their voice within us.

This entire process is magnified when the possibility exists that this Other may be alive or biologically dead: that is to say, disappeared. How many parents incessantly assert that, even though their children may be deceased, even though their bodies have not been found, they are still alive? As Salcedo's work demonstrates, prevailing necropolitics reduces the disappeared to nullities, strips them of their names, deprives them of their dignity and life. In the face of these political actions, *Palimpsesto* instills the palpable sense that the disappeared can endure, sustained by anyone who utters their names, by anyone who resonates with them: they think of me, therefore I am. Here, in our estimation, another pivotal facet of Salcedo's work comes to the fore, intimately entwined with the profound metonymic power of names and, consequently, with the displacement of biological primacy. Within the expanse of the Palacio de Cristal, inverting Wagner's verse from *Parsifal*,[2] space metamorphoses into time. Life itself is not conceived as a linear trajectory definitively desiccated by death; instead, it is death that is perpetually nullified by the resurgence of life in unexpected, extraordinary forms. Circularity, the eternal return, is but life ensconced within its boundless potentiality. The names that well up like tears from the depths of the earth encapsulate and unfurl this immense potency time and time again. Speaking of the present, therefore, does not merely entail discussing a flattened here and now that withers before our very eyes; rather, the present is full of past and future. It embodies both the recollection of what we are ceasing to be and the seeds of what we will become: both the no longer and the not yet.

In this regard, within *Palimpsesto*, a form of remembrance of the unremembered takes place, of that which, as Eelco Runia suggests, we carry with us more than we realize, more than we are consciously aware of (92). The intervention by the Colombian artist in the Palacio de Cristal engenders an almost inevitable association between the artwork and the origins of the very edifice, linked to Spain's colonial past. The Palacio was built for the General Exhibition of the Philippines in 1887, an event situated within the context of the universal and local exhibitions that had been unfolding in many European cities since the mid-19th century. Therefore, the work embodies a highly intricate interplay of spaces and times: from the names that encapsulate the ongoing Mediterranean

[2] We are referring, of course, to the verse intoned by Gurnemanz, "Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit" (47).

massacre in the face of the passive gaze of the West, other moments of atrocious biopolitical dominance are revived and come to dwell with us in the present.[3] Dwelling with these names beckons us to peer into a space-time abyss that induces a certain vertigo, even despair.

Immersed in this vertigo, the observer becomes aware of the profound paradox inherent in Salcedo's work. *Palimpsesto*, on the one hand, conveys very specific critical and ethical values, a rebellion against a system that dictates who lives and who dies, who matters and who does not. However, does it not also risk being assimilated by that very system? Could the force of the artwork be neutralized when it takes place within and for an institution of this kind? Considering the expressive capacity of intentional silence—which the artist herself claims in her work—and the fact that a name allows you to enter a preformed linguistic world, preceding your own will, does it not inherently entail the possibility of a politically motivated use of a name that, one could say, you have inhabited but do not fully own? By choosing some names and excluding others, is the artist not reproducing something akin to the system itself: that is, deciding who is revived and who remains voiceless? This vulnerability of the life of a name is expressed exceptionally in Salcedo's work: the specific enclosed setting and the deliberate interplay of lights emphasize the brilliance of the names when fully outlined, but that achieved beauty quickly dissipates. The work recalls, but also easily forgets. And within those crevices of memory lies the potential for distortion and sordid, calculated manipulation as well.

Perhaps, precisely because it confronts the dilemma openly and lays bare certain mechanisms of the system even as it mimics them, *Palimpsesto* is a work capable of challenging the very logic in which it participates. Being mindful of these paradoxes is undoubtedly what leads Salcedo to emphasize the face-to-face encounter, as we have previously mentioned. We believe that this process of becoming-other, of bearing witness, is also a profound affirmation of the interconnectedness of names, individual lives, and the community. When one wanders through the unique and animated cemetery that is *Palimpsesto*, the pervading emotion does not speak of an "I." It is not a projection of a self-contained ego outward; it does not reside within the realm of subjectivity. Instead, the spectator's emotion speaks "he/she"

[3] In the opening pages of *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida advances a similar stance: "One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonymy. In its past as well as in its present. By diverse paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience" (xv).

because it absorbs the pain of the other through an act of sympathy. It speaks "you" as it directly engages with the other, eliminating the distance. But it also speaks "we" as it turns its gaze towards fellow spectators.[4] In essence, the work becomes a social, collective, and communal experience between the living and the dead, shared even with those with whom we may have little in common, to borrow the expression from Alphonso Lingis (13). Ultimately, each person's tears and cries transform into a kind of collective song. This, for us, is a fundamental question, and Salcedo's work addresses it with remarkable vigor: the manifest presence of the unfamiliar within the familiar, with an emotion than transcends our individual ego, no longer confined to the constant exclamation of the "I." We find ourselves in a realm where pathos and ethos are inseparable. In other words, the aesthetic contemplation of our dwelling with these names and the imaginations they evoke merges with the ethical imperative to take action.

The objective of dwelling with our specters that Doris Salcedo proposes not only has a clear aesthetic intention, but also addresses the deepest aspiration of ethics: the achievement of a kind of justice. It is about profoundly transforming the subjectivity of today's human beings, about renovating the intimate lives of individuals through this face to face with those who shout at us in silence. The work, though rooted in the present, looks as much to the past as it does, above all, to the future. It is not, therefore, a negative proposal, but rather a fully affirmative one: it does not intend for us to fall into despair, to sink into the vertigo that it itself shows. This would mean leaving the subject devoid of all agency, paralyzed. As Meillassoux states, overcoming this despair means releasing the subject's power of action: not turning him into an idealist, but rather pointing out the option of justice as a possible but unmanageable reality ("L'Immanence" 59).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, *Palimpsesto* prompts us to contemplate how the relationship between the self and the other undergoes a profound transformation by shifting the conventional axes of difference away from binary opposition of life and death to a more intricate and less polarized mode of interaction.

[4] This passage constitutes an elaboration on a comment by Gilles Deleuze in *Two Regimes of Madness*, in which, following the ideas of Maurice Blanchot, he asserts that emotion does not belong to the realm of the subject but rather belongs to the event: "Emotion does not say 'I.' You said it yourself: you are beside yourself. Emotion is not of the order of the ego but of the event. It is very difficult to grasp an event, but I do not believe that this grasp implies the first person. It would be better to use the third person like Maurice Blanchot when he says that there is more intensity in the sentence 'he suffers' than 'I suffer'" (187).

Paradoxically, reducing representation to its barest essentials, in this instance, possesses an inexorable vitality and generative power. This leads us to reflect not only on what is being represented—those whose deaths while fleeing war went unmourned—but also on how art, as a means of knowledge and action, could contribute to constructing a future emancipated from the social and political practices that reduce the departed or disappeared individual to a mere void, an absolute nullity.

Let us recall the two vital constants of Derridean ghosts: liminality and the power of manifestation. Considering all that has been said before, how does Salcedo make manifest the voice of those who lack it? What is it that she invokes? Precisely by declaring their powerlessness, their invisibility. She does not seek to invoke figures that, afterward, remain carved in marble for the posterity of history. On the contrary, what Salcedo sublimates is precisely the fragility of certain lives—of those who perished in the Mediterranean, dead and disappeared, but also of the families and friends they left behind, dead while alive. At the heart of Salcedo's aesthetics lies a desire to honor vulnerability and fragility while actively forging social horizons of hope. It is an act of sympathy, of compassion, from which all springs. In *Palimpsesto*, Salcedo makes visible the cracks, the spaces, the moments in which, by acknowledging their powerlessness, people assert both their needs and desires. This implies that we, as spectators, suddenly become attuned to something within the lives of those who had no voice and were never properly mourned. There is something in the lives of these names that had previously eluded our understanding but now gazes into our eyes and resonates in our ears with renewed force. The work moves us in threefold ways: it engenders an emotion, facilitates the expression of thought, and constitutes an ethical action that reclaims the dignity and presence of those who were dehumanized into insignificance. In doing so, it redefines the relationship between life, death, and aesthetics, revealing that the key to both personal and collective transformation lies in reimagining ourselves. And if the aim is to reshape our collective imagination to craft fairer abodes, any action worthy of that name should be inherently poetic.

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