



***Piedra* by Regina José Galindo**

Lilian Mengesha | Brown University

Piedra. Regina José Galindo. Performed by artist. Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil. 17 January 2013.

The misleadingly petite frame of a woman covered in black coal strolled out onto a shaded patio and curled into a lump on the hard ground. As she crouched down and rounded out her back, her knees and elbows hugging against her ribs, an assistant finished covering the last bit of visible skin on the soles of her feet. Now entirely covered in coal, the body of performance artist Regina José Galindo froze with her face buried in the palm of her hands.

EMISFÉRICA



Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio



Photo: Frances Pollitt

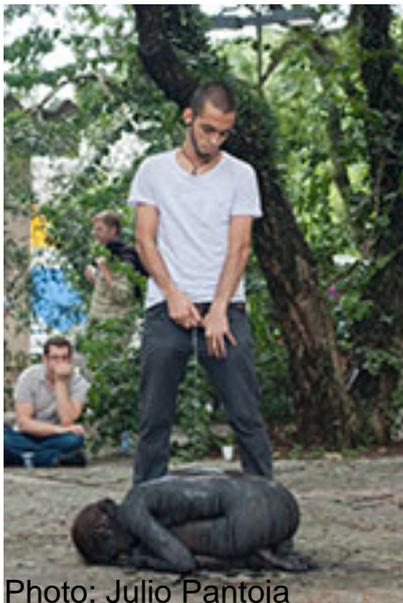


Photo: Julio Pantoja

EMISFÉRICA



Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio



Photo: Marlène Ramírez-Cancio

EMISFÉRICA



Photo: Julio Pantoja



Photo: Julio Pantoja

Piedra (2013) began on a cool afternoon this past January at the Hemispheric Institute's 8th Annual Encuentro in São Paulo, Brazil. Audience members broke out their cameras and recording devices and eagerly awaited Galindo's next action or gesture. The unmoving body fused with the lush natural landscape while we continued waiting and documenting. At the ten minute mark, a male-bodied member of this amorphous throng that encircled the artist stepped into the center and strutted towards the body. Then, he unzipped his pants, pulled out his penis, and began to urinate on the stone-like lump of a woman.

The body did not flinch.

The stream of urine carved rivulets through the coal caked on her skin, the waste snaking down towards her buried face, dripping off her fingertips as it reached the ends of its corporeal path. Much like her wider oeuvre performances, Galindo's *Piedra* binds the audience member into a voyeuristic relationship to the event. We bear witness to the artist in painful

EMISFÉRICA

circumstances as the temporal demands of performance make us acutely aware of the choice to stay with the piece: to leave would be insulting; but to stay means we must endure, somehow, “with” the artist.

After another ten minutes pass without any movement from the artist, a second male-bodied member of the audience steps towards her body and urinates on her. The clear nonchalance displayed by these “actors,” if they can be called that, points to a wide-spread apathy about the safety and care of women’s bodies that is a running concern in much of Galindo’s work. *Piedra* stages a woman’s body and a stone as objects conditioned to endure violent enactments. The ease with which a male bodied actor, both in and outside of the performance, can defile the female body with the perfunctory act of relieving his bladder parallels the unconscious daily violence against a woman’s body. This violence, that is particularly prevalent in Galindo’s home country of Guatemala, further underscores the myopic nature of everyday actions that propel repetitive structural violence. The stone-like lump of woman is at once ancient and seemingly natural, but also is presented as inherently exploitable and disposable. Her body becomes an emblem of disposability, as meaningless as a roadside stone, an availability equated with *disposability*. Such disposable bodies include the female workers of Brazil’s colossal coal mining industry, the country’s largest non-renewable energy resource and a leading cause of water and terrestrial contamination. *Piedra*’s simple yet poignant actions capture both a local and global crisis: the detrimental effects of coal mining on the environment, the predicament of exploited female laborers, and the pervasive structural violence against women that economic exploitation perpetuates.

Though the concern for women is consistent, *Piedra* can be viewed in stark contrast to Galindo’s performance *Alud* (2011) at the Thessaloniki Performance Festival in Greece. In this action, she covered her body in dirt and lay out on a metal dissection gurney in a public art gallery. Participants were given the choice to leave her body covered in dirt or to clean her off. Unlike *Piedra*, the participants in *Alud* take up the responsibility of taking care as opposed to causing harm. When audience members decided to remove the dirt, perhaps they were moved by “*some empathy for the unknown individual, hidden behind the mud*” (Galindo, *Artist Website*). Coal, unlike dirt, is not only difficult to remove from the skin, but it is toxic to the body. As the urine washes over her coal-covered body, the mineral does not wash off but rather creates a veneer. The urine seals the deadly carbon over her body while the coal acts as a protective shell against absorption of the human waste. Writ large, coal mining’s implications parallel the performance: the extraction of this mineral resource provides national revenue and employment (economic protection), while also severely threatening the health of the bodies that extract it (carbon exposure).

In literature, stone often figures as the material out of which mythic beings are made. In Galindo’s own words, she claims that the history of violence has been indexed upon women’s

EMISFÉRICA

bodies, and in two figures of Greek mythology, we can see her statement to be true. Niobe and Medusa are fated to a life in stone because of violations inherent to their sex. Niobe, the mother of twelve sons and daughters, is accused of hubris after she is seen gloating about her fertility and subsequently, the gods murder all of her children. In her grief, she incessantly weeps over the death of her children and eventually turns to stone as tears continuously stream from her solid eyes. Medusa, after being raped and exiled, is punished with the curse of transforming onlookers into stone. She suffers in isolation with her garden of frozen figurines. Thus “piedra” becomes a liminal state between life and death where these mythical women suffer over time.

These two mythologies are uncannily parallel to the precarious livelihood that many poor, indigenous women in Central and Latin America withstand. Eco-feminist thought illustrates this precarity in highlighting how the same threats to the health and well-being of the environment, such as abandoned coal mines that cause water contamination or black-lung disease in laborers, similarly effect women’s bodies in various socio-economic landscapes (Gaard, 27). Undertaking an eco-feminist perspective complicates the final scene of urination in Galindo’s piece. While the two men were urinating on her body, the action appeared to align women’s bodies with natural resources and men’s bodies with processes of extraction and exploitation. But ten minutes after the second man urinated, a third figure steps forward from the audience. This time it is a female bodied participant who approaches the artist, plants her legs on either side of the stone-body and squats down to urinate. Her participation revises the argument that fair-skinned male bodied actors perpetrate an unconscious violence and instead implies that women, too, are complicit in an intra-sex and ecological violence. With the inclusion of the urinating female bodied actor, Galindo’s critique folds in on itself to ask how women, elite or otherwise, enact violence on other women’s bodies.

After some pause, Galindo slowly unbends her body and walks past the audience surrounding her. Most onlookers remain still, staring at the urine left in her wake. In her artist statement on *Piedra*, Galindo writes: “Cuerpos frágiles solamente en apariencia,” or “bodies are fragile only in appearance.” Both women and stone possess a shared ability to take on the abuses of their environment and still survive repeated wear. After all, the more a stone weathers, the more its shape is defined. Galindo’s *Piedra* carefully engages with arresting tableaux of women under abject abuse in order to re-arrange the vectors of power between the victim and victimizer, and suggest a durability of the female body and spirit. Yet the durability, paradoxically, runs both ways between artist and audience, unless we, as an audience, find a way to stop our stone-still silence.

Lilian Mengesha is a second-year PhD student in Theater Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. She received her B.A. from Bryn Mawr College in 2010 and her M.A. in teaching at Hunter College in 2012. Her research seeks to politicize theories of abjection through examining the artistic practices of Guatemalan artist Regina Jose Galindo and Anishnaabe/Canadian artist

EMISFÉRICA

Rebecca Belmore. More widely, her project examines political performance actions that intersect with colonial legacies in indigenous communities throughout North America. She can be reached at lilian_mengesha@brown.edu or on her blog www.lilymengesha.com.

Works Cited

Galindo, Regina Jose. 2013. *Piedra Artist Statement and Personal Interview*, June 5.

Gaard, Greta. 2011. "Eco-feminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism" in *Feminist Formations* 23.2: 26-53. Print.

Silva, Luis, Marcus Wollenschlager, and Marcos L. S. Oliveira. 2011. "A Preliminary Study of Coal Mining Drainage and Environmental Health in the Santa Catarina Region, Brazil." *Environmental Geochemistry and Health* 33.1: 55-65. Print.