

***Epidermal Cartographies:
Mapping Skin and the Feminine in the Southern Cone***

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In *On Exactitude in Science*, Jorge Luis Borges writes about a forlorn Empire with such passion for cartography that it produced a large detailed map whose dimensions equated that of the entire land. Following generations, however, found the map obsolete, neglected it and let it fade in with the landscape that it covered.³³⁰

Territories are full of these abandoned maps, scattered to the winds, fading under the desert suns or rotting away in rain forests. Reflections of older men's grand projects and tokens to their ambition to embrace in one gaze the worlds they "discovered," conquered and inhabited, these cartographic remnants grow old, wrinkle and tear, sticking like second skins to modern territories they no longer reflect. Looking at pictures taken by photographer Paula Allen and, more recently, at Patricio Guzman's film *La Nostalgia de la Luz*, both documenting the women of Calama's search for the grave-less corpses of their *desaparecido* relatives, the land they dig seems littered with such cartographic debris. But in the midst of official calls for post-dictatorship amnesty, the map drawn by the shovels of Pinochet's soldiers is fading and tearing fast, leaving the women of Calama to walk blindly, feeling their way through the immensity of the desert. And in these images, the bronzed and wrinkled skins of these women's faces also take on a cartographic quality. Faces echoing each other as many maps of urges and desires, cracking and fading maps, they stand to defy time and the changing landscape. They are epidermal

³³⁰ Borges, 1998.

cartographies, crippling the tyranny of vision of patriarchal maps and calling for a different order, an epidermal exploration of physical and cultural territories.

In this paper, I examine the motif of skin as a metaphor for geographical maps. Like borders on a map, skin plays an important role of containment and provides a surface of representation of the physical limits of the self upon which the Ego projects itself in the constructive process of identity.³³¹ Skin draws a contour, a defining border between the self and others. In the same way, the cartographic representation of a country encloses and contains a nation in colour-coded systems, defining through bold lines its limits and relations to contiguous provinces. Maps and skin therefore enclose and define; they set an inside and an outside. Both also function according to a metonymic logic. The map stands for the Nation just as the skin signifies the body. Skin, however, also represents an alternative type of cartography, be it geographical or corporal. At the same time as it draws contours, it also defies the closure of borders and the categorisation of physical zones into opaque, impermeable regions contained in traditional maps. Epidermal cartographies instead speak of open territories where borders do not stand as limiting entities but as zones of exchange and influences, allowing for a different kind of encounter with the outside and the other.

I propose a reading of these ambivalences of skin by focusing on the work of the Argentine sculptress Lydia Galego and the queer Chilean performance duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*. I attempt to show how their works reflect a different approach to territory, one that, far from the official claims for a pure, unadulterated and innate Nation-ness, draws maps as guiding aides to a conception of the territory as an embodied zone of action. I analyse these

³³¹ A process defined by Anzieu as the *Skin-Ego*.

works as interventions profoundly anchored within a gendered perception of bodies and territories, developing an alternative to the specular logic of traditional maps. For this reason, I borrow from Griselda Pollock's thinking "from the feminine" as a critical posture advocating for the articulation of "a haunting excess of a limiting phallogentrism," perturbing the expectations of the patriarchal *status quo*.³³²

Tightening skins, smothering maps

Lydia Galego's work *Embolsado* (1993) is a discomfoting work and its very display, perched upon a plinth, requires the audience to spin around it in concentric circles, growing increasingly uncomfortable. The sculpture represents a vaguely anthropomorphic form entirely contained in a large, sewn up sack of textile. As the top of the face barely peers out of this enclosure, the only trace of life emanating from the sculpture lies in the figure's staring eyes and in the sharp angles framing the head on both sides suggesting two hands and conveying to the structure a dynamic sense of resistance. This forced enclosing movement is contained in the manufacturing process itself as Galego wraps a sculpted Styrofoam block into layers of textile that adhere to the original support with glue, sewing and the application of a matte coat of varnish, providing to the outer layer the appearance of a solidified hide, a loose but tightening excess of derma capturing the human figure within, "bagging it up" as the work's title suggests. In this sculpture, the skin functions as hostile envelope crushing the persona and crippling its communicative property: what Didier Anzieu defines as "the filter of the exchanges and inscriptions of the first marks."³³³ While marks appear on the sculpture's outer layer, they are the

³³² Pollock, 2010: 802.

³³³ Anzieu 1989, 38.

pure product of exteriority and remain on the surface, denying the very possibility of reciprocity. Nothing enters, nothing comes out of this epidermal shield.

In *Facundo*, D.F. Sarmiento recalls a particularly sombre ordeal taking place in the pampas. According to him, the montonera “*waistcoated* its enemies; that is, sewed them up in an envelope of raw hide, and left them in the fields in this condition.”³³⁴ As it dried, the animal hide tightened around the enemy’s body, eventually smothering him to death. Bearing this in mind, one would be entitled to wonder whether Galego’s work figures a body being slowly suffocated by its own excess of flesh or perhaps the fossilisation of a punitive process performed by the land itself? I would argue that this work finds a particular resonance when read in the light of the problematic question of female embodiment and its relation to territory in Argentina. The 1976 *golpe* was justified as a preventive strike against the spread of leftist foreign ideologies and was accompanied by an effort to depict the country as a pure, sealed-off entity. As Ben Bollig argues, the 1977 Beagle diplomatic crisis with Chile and the Falklands conflict that framed the dictatorship illustrate this need to draw invasion-proof boundaries, enclosing Argentina into a cartographic representation of itself entirely submitted to the Generals’ rhetoric under the term of *Patria*.³³⁵ This political and military control of the territory found a gendered dimension in the Junta’s lexicon through its association of the terms Nation and Woman into a synonymous binding to refer to the country as a whole.³³⁶ In the military terminology, asserting the female body as a closed object came to signify control over the geographical borders of the country itself and women’s skin, irreducibly turned outwards, became walking allegories of this

³³⁴ Sarmiento 1998, 60.

³³⁵ Bollig 2008, 32.

³³⁶ Something conveyed by the gender ambiguity of the term *Patria*, a feminine substantive pinned down by the control of the Pater.

malleable *Patria*. This symbolic and physical violence is very present in *Embolsado* and is conveyed as a feeling of being stripped off one's skin and strait-jacketed into an outer layer, into "toda esa carga social que rodea al ser humano."³³⁷ Moreover, the sculpture's ochre hue, the sewn lines criss-crossing its surface as well as the use of coloured stencils creating zones of shade in the upper corners and in the lower curvature all contribute to grant to the work a cartographic quality allowing for a reading of this skin as the expression of a trapped embodiment.

In her essay "Love, Territories of Desire and a New Smoothness," Suely Rolnik defines

A treatment of desire that consists precisely in reducing the feeling of love to this kind of appropriation of the other, an appropriation of the body of the other, the becoming of the other, the feeling of the other. And through this mechanism of appropriation, there is the constitution of closed, opaque territories that are inaccessible precisely to the process of singularisation.³³⁸

Galego's sculpture echoes this kind of territories and reacts against the acquisitive tendency to stiffen the other. Borges' life-sized map here takes on nightmarish dimensions, a poisonous aegis covering women's skins and crippling their ability to function as part of a community.

Open skins, deterritorialised maps

For Rolnik, resisting the appropriative nature of these opaque cartographies consists in accepting openness and becoming as parts of the relation to the other. She defines this attitude as a "new smoothness" and the establishment of "new coefficients of transversality."³³⁹ This approach constitutes an important aspect of the performances developed by the queer Chilean duo *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis*. *Las Yeguas* undo the normative approach to bodies and

³³⁷ Galego 2010.

³³⁸ Rolnik 2008, 43.

³³⁹ Ibid, 417.

territories articulated by the military eye and, instead, place these notions in constant states of flux. In this effort, it is the skin as a bag to burst and a screen to shatter that becomes the prime target of their interventions. In their performance *La Conquista de America* (1989), they dance a *cueca* on a map of Latin America covered in broken glass. As the two men revolve bare-foot, performing the gestures of the Chilean national dance, their skin breaks and rivulets of blood run on the map. Fighting against the conception of the map as a fixed representation of the Nation, this cathartic dance also breaks through the skin and re-articulates it as an zone of performative action allowing for a queering of gendered roles; and the thick blood, the flux that cannot be contained by the outside layers of maps and epidermis, becomes a living fluidity overriding artificial borders and boundaries.

There lies a danger in opening physical and territorial boundaries though. As Rolnik notes, the resistance to closed down territories can lead to the opposite extreme where

We become pure intensity, pure emotion of the world [...] The fascination that deterritorialisation exercises on us may now be fatal; instead of experiencing it as an element in the creation of territories, without which we weaken to the point of sometimes definitive dissolution; we take it as an end in itself.³⁴⁰

In their effort to break the skin, *Las Yeguas* also risk the destruction of a necessary containing envelope and the absolute dissolution of the self with the outside in a mingling of substances that dilutes territory into an uprooted infographic mass of data, a disembodied, deterritorialised cartography.

La Conquista de America intertextually refers to Juan Downey's 1973 *Anaconda, Map of Chile*, itself a cartographic statement on the opening of national borders to North American interests. In Downey's work, the insertion of a live anaconda snake onto a glass-protected map of

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 417-418.

Chile criticises the North American Anaconda Copper Mining Company's financial contribution to Salvador Allende's overthrow. In their performance, *Las Yeguas* dance on shattered glass from broken Coca-Cola bottles and their mixing blood refers both to the liquefaction of Chilean identity in the face of a mass "Yankee culture" as to the spread of AIDS in Chile, an epidemic they saw as a colonising plague from the global-North.³⁴¹ In 1989's political context, the closing of territories performed on civilians' bodies and, as its counter-part, the complete opening of frontiers to foreign financial interests are both addressed in *Las Yeguas*' hemorrhagic performance and the opening of skin as both a protective and smothering interface reflects this posture.

Moreover, in their queering of the cueca, *Las Yeguas* also seek to reveal the extents of the wounds performed by the military dictatorship upon the Nation-Body.³⁴² The breaking of the skin in *Las Yeguas*' also seeks to re-activate the gaping wounds of a national trauma and cripple the calls for amnesty that were voiced at the time on both sides of the political spectrum. Blood announces the scar and in the breaking of their epidermis, it is to the mnemonic function of skin as a surface that marks and remembers that *Las Yeguas* appeal, turning the map of Chile under their feet into a territory stained by the blood of the *desaparecidos* and scarred by the circumvolutions of those who look for them, the very same territory explored by the women in Guzmán's film.³⁴³

³⁴¹ Palaversich, 2002.

³⁴² By 1989, dancing a cueca had become part of the critical arsenal of the political opposition to the dictatorship in Chile. Traditionally danced in couple, women who had lost a relative during the years of military repression started performing *la cueca sola*, dancing the part of the woman only as a way to highlight the absence of their partners, taken away by the military.

³⁴³ As Pedro Lemebel, one of the *Yeguas* puts it, 'esta performance fue una acción planificada. Diría que fue una de las acciones más políticas, porque ahí estaba nuestra huella; estaba la sangre y el baile. Ahí estaba todo, el contagio del SIDA, los desaparecidos, dos hombres y también estaba el doblaje de dos mujeres solas' (in Robles, 2008: 28).

In *Deconstructing the Map*, John Harley defines maps as “silent panopticons.”³⁴⁴ Latin American post-colonialist studies have contributed to unveil the discursive nature of maps as objects of conquest, domination and control. Maps are also, I would argue, phallogentric objects, satisfying the urge to visually control territories in one brush of the gaze. Infinity is a terrifying notion crippling the best attempts at representation. Maps instead set reassuring borders. But this fixation upon the visual control of territories misses out on other sensorial aspects of cartography. As Irigaray puts it, “more than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters [...] The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.”³⁴⁵ The epidermal maps drawn by Lydia Galego and *Las Yeguas* do just this, proposing a reading of territory via the embodied motif of the skin that sets touch and not vision as its core sensory perceptor.

As concluding remarks, I would like to linger a little bit more on this last aspect of skin. In all its limiting, smothering properties, skin also stands as the empire of tactility, allowing for a different *rapport* to the world than the one entailed by the specular control of maps: this “new smoothness” defined by Rolnik. As skin allows contact, it always does so in a reciprocal manner: one cannot touch without being touched. By its very existence, skin entails not only an embodied relation to the world but an *inter-embodied* one in which tactility presupposes the presence of another.³⁴⁶ While *Las Yeguas*’ performance initially stands as the perfect antithesis to Galego’s captured skin, both actually join and touch each other through this irreducible nature of skin as a gesture of mutuality. Bearing this in mind, it appears that what links Galego’s wrapping gesture, *Las Yeguas*’ dance and the walk of the Calama women are an understanding of the land through

³⁴⁴ Harley: 13.

³⁴⁵ Irigaray, 1978: 50.

³⁴⁶ Ahmed and Stacey 2001: 1.

an action presupposing radical mutuality. Indeed, what actually seems to matter is this very gesture of inter-embodied search. Through their walk, they mark the earth just as the dictatorship marked their skin, creating new trails of exploration visible in the maps of future generations. Like the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*'s weekly circumventions around the plaza, these works create circles of dissent that link skin and territory into an alternative science of maps: an epidermal cartography.

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