

In the Rhythm of Another Relation

The sound of water, a slow slow moving shot. Light reflecting through the trees, dappled, the sky grey. Closer, now, the sound of walking. Now another quality of light, a shifting of the dapple. A banyan tree, bones on the ground, rusty metal, the camera moving in circles, dizzying.

Isidra has left her front door cracked. Down the hall the closet where she keeps her *prendas-ngangas-enquisos* is open. Beyond this, Isidra lies prone on the cold tile of her dining room. Her forehead is pinned to the ground in front of an urn. This urn is *Madre de Agua* (“Water Mother” or “Mother Water”). A candle burns inches from Isidra’s head covering. The candle is indispensable as a signal light and a fuse in the swirling, combustible flows of *Kalunga* and one would be foolish to visit with an agglomeration of the dead like “*Ma’re Agua*” without one. Without looking up Isidra has pulled me to her side and we are inches from *Ma’re Agua*. She is singing in a low tone, a song that by its melody and cadence might be from the countryside where she grew up. But she is muffling her voice, catching her words in her mouth, and I can’t make them out (Ochoa 2010: 391).

Dead carcasses. The back legs of an animal, a horse. The camera turning, clockwise. Vertigo. Leaves in the wind.

Two works here side by side. One a slow, visual iteration of a rhythm in the making. Elke Marhöfer’s *prendas – ngangas – enquisos – machines {each part welcomes the other without saying}* (2014), a 25 minute, 58 second 16mm film transferred to DV. The other an essay, written in the turbulence of an encounter with Isidra, Todd Ramon Ochoa’s *Prendas-Ngangas-Enquisos: Turbulence and the Influence of the Dead in Cuban-Kongo Material Culture* (2010). These two together not because of direct influence but because of a confluence of exposure, the two in alliance in my own encounter with the *prendas-ngangas-enquisos*, the force of form that mobilizes the dead, activating more-than human tendencies in the midst of a world reencountered.

In the praising of the dead, in the ritual field of activation that moves spirits to compose with their surrounds, the *prendas-ngangas-enquisos* act as intercessors. Intercessors are not simply mediators.¹ Their practice is not to enter into the middle, but to be the middle, the middling force that alters everything with which it comes into contact. The *prendas-ngangas-enquisos* activate the associated milieu, in Simondon’s words, the field of relation through which experience composes. Of African origin, these are not objects, as Ochoa emphasizes. Though they make take the form of cauldrons or urns, though they may seem object-like, their force is precisely their capacity to activate associated milieus through which new modes of life are made palpable. This is what makes them intercessors.

¹ In the 1990 translation of Deleuze’s text, *intercesseur* was translated as “mediator.” Had Deleuze meant mediator, he would have written “*médiateur*.”

An intercessor, as Deleuze suggests in his text by the same name, cuts the field of relation, reorienting its terms. Radically empirical, the intercessor sees relation as the active force it is, understand it not as the between of experience already-formed, but as the field through which all aspects of experience move. Unlike the mediator, who accepts the spatial configuration, entering into it as given, the intercessor activates a cut that reorients the terms of the encounter. “Intercessors are fundamental. Creation’s all about intercessors. Without them nothing happens. [...] I need my intercessors to express myself, and they’d never express themselves without me: you’re always working in a group, even when you seem to be on your own” (1995:125, *translation modified*). The intercessor is the force through which an encounter is capable of expressing the more-than of what actually comes to be.

When Ochoa suggests that “prendas-ngangas-enquisos propose a second ‘condition’ for themselves beyond the ‘object,’” what he is pointing toward is how the event of the ritual intercesses into the site of the everyday to alter its conditions of existence (2010: 406). These are not objects in any contained sense: what they do is mobilize the conditions for a turbulent reorientation of what existence can be.

5 minutes have elapsed. The trees have given way to the countryside. A horse quietly feeds, the expanse broad, the sky opening to light. The feel of a languishing camera, a rhythm calm with the awakening of day.

Marköfer’s film does not tell us about the intercessor, does not explain the quality of what the ritual site can do, does not educate us about African history, about sorcery, about “Palo,” the “Cuban-Kongo praise of the dead,” as it is known in Havana (Ochoa 2010: 387). Nor does the film tell us about its site, Yateras, a site of the violent conflicts of colonization. But it does ask the question, in its slow rhythmic exploration of the lively interstices in the landscape, a landscape alive with the intercessions of historical and contemporary practices intermixing, with the animal and the human in co-composition, it does ask “how [...] the colonial history of a place [can] be related to its present inhabitants, both human and nonhuman.” It does make felt that there is something important at stake that must be heard in the quiet interstices of the more-than human world where “one might have to approach the surrounding in a different way, [...] moving and being moved by invisible forces; so that mountains, valleys, stones and trees become active players for spiritual matters.”²

In his trek toward Isidra, after her call in the middle of the night, this is what preoccupies Todd Ramon Ochoa. He is worried about how best to problematize what the ritual site can do. He is concerned with the ethnographer’s tendency to situate experience in terms of subject-object. “Isidra and I will each grapple with this problem of turbulence and self-determination in our own way tonight, but our struggle will be a common one: to accomplish turns of the dead such that each of us arrives, by practical means, to new understandings and new problems” (2010: 391). Because Ochoa’s work is not one of translation, as much anthropological work ends up being. It is one of transduction, of making felt the stakes, in the event, of a turbulent transformation, and of making those

² <https://vimeo.com/76033304>

stakes come alive not as an explanation of an object, but as problematization activated by an ever-changing field of relation.

At the 9:08 marker everything changes. The film, which until then seemed quietly consumed with the making-felt of the environment beyond its lens, suddenly itself becomes the focus. The image: a grey sky, wind, trees blowing. And: a red stripe, covering the right edge of the screen. A reminder of time passing, red film stock, the sign of celluloid's aging. With time, human perception becomes palpable, but with it also comes a certain encounter with history, and with what cannot be properly archived. What is this intercessor of red? It feels important, vital even. And it keeps coming back – at 17 minutes, at 19:30, at 21:44.

Ochoa enters Isidra's abode. It's very early in the morning. The outside air is cold. We're not sure what he sees, but what seems certain: there are urns and iron cauldrons with healing and harming substances, and a candle (2010: 387). And there is blood, the blood of a duck Isidra had killed for [Ma're Agua, the prenda-nganga-enquiso]. [...] In the force of her baseness, in the blood and lush mass of feathers that covered her, in the soaking aspirations of cane rum I delivered as her supplicant, in the cloud of cigar smoke that enveloped her, and in the prone body of her keeper at her feet, she crossed into modes of feeling, and of matter, that are called 'Palo' (2010: 410).

The red stuns the image, undoing it of its distancing quality. A dissonance has entered, a dissonance that composes with the landscape. By now we have also seen sites of human intervention, we have heard the train and perceived the landscape from its window. We have moved at the speed of a different technology, and have seen the effects of this technology on the city, which has appeared as a reminder that the land is also a shape-shifter that composes between rhythms and times. The human hand is felt but rarely seen.

Marköfer asks:

how can the colonial history of a place be related to its present inhabitants, both human and nonhuman? If one attempts to evoke a perceptiveness that exceeds the human, stepping into the more-than-human world without privileging human life, one might have to approach the surrounding in a different way: not as a static nonspeaking reality, but as moving and being moved.³

Isidra brings Ochoa along. Soon, they are not two, but many, the rhythms of the ritual event moving them: “and she brought us along. Together, the three of us sank into the matter of force and receptive bodies, to tremble in what certainty there was, which was but the contingent uncertainty of open revaluation” (Ochoa: 410).

The red is not a symbolic cut. This must be emphasized. “The prenda cannot be reduced

³ <https://vimeo.com/76033304>

to a sign, however close to the world a sign might be conceived” (Ochoa 2010: 398). And yet it does signal. Markhöfer’s desire is similar to that of Ochoa, it seems to me, “to implicate prendas in the world around them by seeking their material rather than semiotic connections to the world and to people’s lives” (2010: 398). Perhaps what we have here are not semiotic conditions of the normative kind, a sign-system that would seek to normalize its account through what Ochoa calls the “will-to-explanation and its attendant philosophical demand for systemic coherence and closure,” but a different kind of non-local linkage that precisely signifies in ways that can only be felt through the affective force of the kinds of rhythms Markhöfer’s work activates and Ochoa’s story narrates. In this context, the prenda-nganga-enquiso are what James calls local signs (James 1950: 172, 173), active in their capacity to make felt what Brian Massumi calls “nonlocal linkages” (2011: 128). “The function of the local sign is catalytic” (2011: 128). The local signs host “the semblant event” (2011: 128).

The semblant event has its stakes in the conditions of its emergence, in the singularity of *this* ritual event, and yet it is also more-than this event, more than this iteration. The semblant event is more-than, beyond any account of signification or representation understood in the sense usually given these terms. The field of relation is here made up of a “qualitative-relational order,” a lived abstraction that is “more than objectively real” (2011: 129-130).

It can never be contained within a frame. It is never reducible to the sensuous content of any framing of experience. It is not reflective of the objective order. It is self-detaching from it. It is the immediately lived reality of the objective order’s spontaneity, in encounter and eventual transformation: its changeability. Its creativity. Its semblance as immediately lived abstraction, directly perceptually felt, unauthorized and without guarantee. Pure occurent (Massumi 2011: 130).

It’s not just the red that returns, haunting the edge of the screen. By the halfway mark, the film is continuously on the verge of interruption, static cutting in, a whiteness, sometimes even a yellow glare, troubling the landscape.

Without looking up Isidra has pulled me to her side and we are inches from Ma’re Agua. She is singing in a low tone, a song that by its melody and cadence might be from the countryside where she grew up. But she is muffling her voice, catching her words in her mouth, and I can’t make them out. My voice picks up the tune as I fall predictably into these flows of Isidra’s making. To make of a flow, to introduce a flow, to determine an inflowing of forces against other forces, this is what I am calling “influence” (Ochoa 2010: 391-392).

It’s not that there is always red. Or just red. It’s that the red has become intercessor to the image, its semblance now always there, even when we don’t actually see it. 19:30 – the red and the faint yellow now faded out, a horse in close-up. A long slow shot, its face toward the camera, almost looking at it, but not quite. The presence of a man. Unlike the horse, still not quite looking at us, we don’t quite see him, just those gestures of his that

suggest that the horse will soon be ready to be taken out, ready to ride.

Non-local linkages and the way they activate local signs are the reason theories of representation suffer the poverty they do. Representation does its work only on the surface, its siting an interpretation of time passed. Prendas-ngengas-enquisos inhabit another kind of time, a time that activates the schism of futurity alive in the present. They generate a cut in metric time, opening it to the influence of forces in excess of its time-signature. In so doing, Ochoa suggests, they deeply influence experience, not only in their capacity to generate, in the event of their activation, fields of emergence where the dead compose with the living, but also in their capacity “to stage new problems,” problems that are untimely and out of sync with representatioanal matrices and normative systems of signification (Ochoa 2010: 395). A problem, for Bergson, is operational: it creates the conditions for new modes of existence. Ochoa makes this clear: what is at stake is the creation of a new field of valuation. “[P]rendas-ngangas-enquisos spoke to those enslaved BaKongo who brought the minkisi spark to Cuba, their children, their clients, and very likely to slave owners, just as they do to people who keep them in Cuba today, as a people yet to come, on the precipice of new values and new valuation” (2010: 404).

Marköfer’s film ends with the prendas-ngangas-enquisos, a scene of ritual, the candle burning. We see a skull, perhaps, a plastic cup, a pumpkin, sticks (the palo). It’s hard to tell - the scene is dark and the film’s intertitles move over the image. There seems to be a desire to keep our gaze away of this site of influence. Or maybe it’s just that the slowness of the film’s rhythmic quality has troubled vision, causing us to day-dream, to perceive at those interstices of the local sign and the non-local linkages, a lulling that is rendered no less urgent by its engagement with times nonhuman, more-than human.

The intercessor activates the difference at the heart of a process. “Whether they're real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, you have to form your intercessors. It's a series. If you're not in some series, even a completely imaginary one, you're lost” (Deleuze 1995: 125).

At the confluence of different modes of intercession, non-local linkages proliferate. This happens not in the mode of interpretation, but in the felt experience of participating at the edgings of two distinct encounters with the force of form. In one of these encounters, words carry the narrative. In the other, the movement of images takes us on a similar journey. But these remain two distinct modes of existence, a coupling also alive with non-local linkages. I bring them together here not to suggest that what they do is the same, but to emphasize the way the prendas-ngengas-enquisas themselves do their work across divergent fields of relation. That they cannot be captured is deeply felt in both dramatizations of their force, and it is this that most emphatically produces the sense that it is a renewed sense of valuation that is at stake.

This is not without risk.

This is the grace of prendas-ngangas-enquisos: to destabilize, to dissipate, and make anew what is fixed and given, as each version of the dead that

enters their field, or passes through it, is at the same moment transformed. The living are drawn to this potential when the collection of forces that organize their lives becomes oppressive, and impossible to turn toward good fortune. But the transfers of force over which prendas preside are ambivalent and hold no easy formula for healing. Rather, they promise only disruptions of what has become inevitable. Such disruptions are neither painless, nor devoid of risk, but the people who come within the atmosphere of change a prenda-nganga-enquiso like Ma're Agua generates find themselves willing to try their fates with her coupling of visceral surrender and social destabilization, which is to say, with the sovereign coupling of healing-harming and outcomes unknown (Ochoa 2010: 410).

21:44, the screen almost entirely translucently yellow. It has been raining, the landscape alive with the sound of birds. Roosters crow. A new day calls, the ground wet, thick with mud and debris. A man washes a horse. Again, we don't quite see him. And a hand holds a chick, perhaps the same one we saw earlier fighting its way out of the egg.

Ochoa writes of “values yet to come” (2010: 410). These emergent valuations compose, always, with the force of violence the prendas-ngengas-enquisos call forth. How could they not, they who raise the dead, the dead slaves, the dead colonized? New forms of valuation cut the field. They are harder to compose with than the ubiquitous evaluations that normalize existence. This is a risk worth taking, Marköfer's gentle film suggests. It is worth the risk to reorient experience toward what it can do when the human is not its pivot. It is a risk worth taking to reorient toward the emergent collectivity activated in the associated milieu of experience. For it is here, where forces do their work in the interstices of non-local linkages, that new modes of existence are invented and lived.

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