

Mellorado: identity, heritage and transmission

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Publication Date:

2013

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/16527>

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Mellorado: identity, heritage and transmission



Paula Gabriela do Prado

Master of Fine Art by Research

School of Design Studies, Textiles

Fig 1: Paula do Prado, *Family Portrait*, 2011, Acrylic, appliqué, Posca pen and beading on red Ikea fabric, 115 x 200cm. See Appendix A for family tree and timeline.

PLEASE TYPE**THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES
Thesis/Dissertation Sheet**

Surname or Family name: do Prado

First name: Paula

Other name/s: Gabriela

Abbreviation for degree as given in the University calendar: MFA

School: School of Design Studies

Faculty: College of Fine Arts

Title: Mellorado: identity, heritage and transmission

Abstract 350 words maximum: (PLEASE TYPE)

Mellorado explores the interconnections between family, identity, culture and heritage, the impact of migration and travel; and cultural transmission. An exploration of my personal and family history, supported by two substantial periods of field study in Montevideo, Uruguay, provided the starting points for this research. The research represents my continuing interest in the experience (and inherent politics) of hybrid identity by engaging with my mixed African, Uruguayan and European ancestry. The basis for the ideas explored in this paper and accompanying new body of work draws on links made between family narratives and significant cultural and historical events such as the Uruguayan civic-military dictatorship (1973-1985), the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Australian and Uruguayan Bicentenaries 1788-1988 and 1811-2011 respectively.


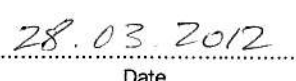
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Post-colonial theoretical perspectives on displacement and diaspora are explored in relation to the use of autobiographical references and ancestral histories. This serves to draw out the political undercurrents (deliberate or not) in work that both highlights the complexity of cultural identity and gives voice to marginal narratives. By its very nature, the creation and dissemination of art is a form of cultural transmission, a product of the specific conditions under which it is made. Mellorado translates my ancestral investigations and experience of migration into an exploratory visual language, simultaneously questioning and reaffirming a sense of belonging.

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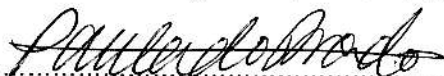
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Date

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*Dedicated to my paternal grandparents,
Elsa Britos Da Rosa and Fermin do Prado Canabarro*

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family who all collaborated with me in realising this body of work. The COFA staff who supported me throughout my Masters of Fine Art degree candidature or provided feedback and comments in particular Liz Williamson, Wendy Parker, Assoc. Prof Leong Chan, Dr Bonita Ely, Jacqueline Clayton and Assoc. Prof Anna Munster. Thank you also to Nicole Barakat, Patrick Snelling, Marita Smith and the Gallerysmith staff.

This research was supported through an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship (2010-2012) and a COFA Travel Grant (2011).

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All Paula do Prado artwork photographed by Andy Stevens.

Glossary

| | | | |
|----------------------|---|--------------------------|--|
| Abuela/Abuelo | Grandmother/ Grandfather | Mate | A herbal (yerba) drink similar to green tea, drunk from a gourd using a bombilla (metal straw) |
| Asado | Barbecue, usually comprising various cuts of beef, particularly beef spare ribs, sausages, black pudding and offal. | Mellorado | To improve upon |
| Barrio | Neighbourhood | Montevideo | Capital of Uruguay |
| Candombe | An Afro-Uruguayan musical genre | Padrino | Godfather/patron |
| Castellano | The type of Spanish spoken in Uruguay | Rambla | Beach/promenade |
| Conventillo | Tenement house | Tia/Tio | Aunt/Uncle |
| Cordón | A neighbourhood in Montevideo, Uruguay. Adjacent to the city centre is known for being the location of the University of the Republic and the Tristan Narvaja market. | Prima/ Primo: | Cousin (female)/cousin (male) |
| Estancia | A large working farm, usually a cattle farm | | |
| Galicia | An autonomous community in northwest Spain | | |

Abstract

Mellorado explores the interconnections between family, identity, culture and heritage, the impact of migration and travel; and cultural transmission. An exploration of my personal and family history, supported by two substantial periods of field study in Montevideo, Uruguay, provided the starting points for this research. The research represents my continuing interest in the experience (and inherent politics) of hybrid identity by engaging with my mixed African, Uruguayan and European ancestry. The basis for the ideas explored in this paper and accompanying new body of work draws on links made between family narratives and significant cultural and historical events such as the Uruguayan civic-military dictatorship (1973-1985), the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Australian and Uruguayan Bicentenaries 1788-1988 and 1811-2011 respectively.

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the complexity of cultural identity and gives voice to marginal narratives. By its very nature, the creation and dissemination of art is a form of cultural transmission, a product of the specific conditions under which it is made. *Mellorado* translates my ancestral investigations and experience of migration into an exploratory visual language, simultaneously questioning and reaffirming a sense of belonging.

Introduction: Interruptions and reconnections

‘The idea of being connected to a place because an ancestor was born and lived there is familiar, ordinary, unremarkable.’¹

Inspired by the personal and family archive, the basis for this research is the intersections between family narratives, cultural identity and historical events.

Mellorado (originating from the Latin *meliorate*) means to improve. It is also a term used in Galicia (Spain) to describe the main heir whose economic and social status had been improved through the inheritance of wealth or property (usually the family home)². The concept of inheritance has strong associations with the accumulation and redistribution of wealth and generational transmission. It is also traditionally linked to social and cultural ideas about class and value. My grandmother (Abuela), Elsa Britos da Rosa, often recites the colloquial Uruguayan expression *lo que se hereda no se roba*, meaning it is in the blood, true inheritance can't be stolen.

Based on my family experience, I have come to view the concept of inheritance as an innate spiritual sense of identity, of generational connectedness that transcends both time and place. I have inherited a collection of family and cultural narratives passed down through the stories my grandmother has told me, my father's music and his

¹ C Nash, ‘They’re Family!’: Cultural Geographies of Relatedness in Popular Genealogy’ in S Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/regroundings : questions of home and migration*, Berg Publishers, New York, 2003, p. 179

² I came across the term *Mellorado* when researching my ancestry. I had originally researched both sides of the family tree, my father's which led me to Africa and my mother's that led me to Spain. In Uruguay we call Spaniards *gallegos* meaning from Galicia which is where many of the initial Spanish migrants settling in colonial Uruguay came from. The use of the term *Mellorado* (also spelt *millorado*) to denote the main heir is documented in SR Roseman and H Kelly (eds.) ‘Ethnographic Explorations of Gender and Power in Rural Northwestern Iberia’, *Anthropologica* Vol XLI No.2 Canadian Anthropology Society, 1999, p. 94

songwriting as well as the memories triggered by family objects and photographs.

These are the narratives I have attempted to document in the artworks produced for the *Mellorado* exhibition. The *Mellorado Archive*, is a digital repository I created to display and organise collected family documents, photographs and objects. The archive was developed as a result of my ancestral investigations which became the starting points for this research (Appendix B). Family narratives that would ordinarily be unremarkable and of little import to those outside the exclusivity of the family group have formed the basis for the development of my artwork, taking them from the private to the public, from the hidden to the revealed. The family archive became a creative fine art source, integral to my artistic process of investigating objects and creating reflective material responses. I have been improved upon by my inheritance and in turn I have attempted to re-insert the stories of my ancestors whose existence may have otherwise not been documented or acknowledged.

My exploration of ancestral connections, heritage and cultural identity is underpinned by my experience of migration and living away from my native country. I explore the resurgence of interest in the archive as a symptom of displacement within contemporary artistic practice. In recent times there has been a general increased interest in tracing one's ancestors and family line. There are various websites such as www.ancestry.com and www.familysearch.org designed to assist individuals in accessing various digitised and online public records to find long lost relatives and build a family tree. The notion of tracing one's family line has also been popularised by the television series *Who Do You Think You Are?* produced in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. Being able to trace the family line for hundreds of years is traditionally associated with the aristocracy, reserved for those of royal connection to demonstrate an uninterrupted lineage of power and privilege.

I believe that is as a result of the familial interruptions caused by migration and displacement that tracing the family line and re-establishing ancestral connections takes on added significance.

The ongoing tension between home and origin, foreign and citizen, the choice to stay and the complexity of return has a profound impact on cultural identity. *Mellorado* is a continuation of my interest in exploring my Afro-Uruguayan heritage from my current viewpoint as an assimilated migrant living in contemporary Australian society. My previous body of work from 2010 titled *Where Yah From?*³ engaged with the relationship between identity, place and belonging. The exhibition paid homage to the Afro-Uruguayan carnival and celebrated having reached an important milestone: over 20 years of Australian citizenship. A common element between the development of the work for *Where Yah From?* and *Mellorado* has been the opportunity to travel to my birthplace of Montevideo, Uruguay to gather primary research material.

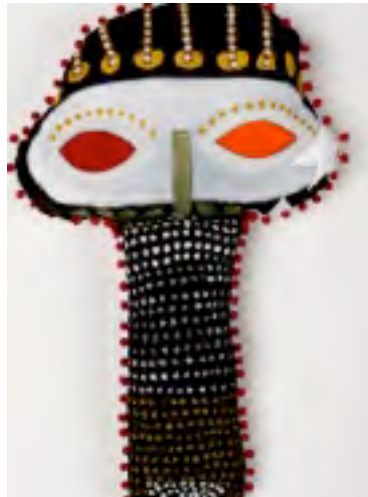


Fig 2: Paula do Prado, *Diosa*, 2009, appliqué and acrylic on cotton, 90 x 25 x 10cm, Private Collection. From the exhibition *Where Yah From?* exhibited Gallerysmith, February 2009

³ *Where Yah From?* was exhibited at Gallerysmith, North Melbourne, 26 February - 27 March 2010, see www.gallerysmith.com.au



Fig 3: Paula do Prado, *Castas/Castes*, 2009, appliqué, acrylic and embroidery on cotton, 68 x 67cm, Private Collection. From the exhibition *Where Yah From?* exhibited Gallerysmith, February 2009

Assuming the role of the (self) critical artist⁴, this practice-based research is guided by a political objective to position my own unique family narrative and cultural perspective to be heard within academic and wider communities. The first chapter of *Mellorado* establishes the context in which this research developed and recounts a significant family narrative which would later reveal multiple connections to important historical and cultural events. This leads to second chapter, for a more in depth analysis of the use of the personal and family archive as a creative fine art source, with particular reference to works by contemporary artists Aleks Danko, Vivan Sundaram and Tarryn Simon. The third chapter investigates the concepts of auto-ethnography, autobiography and allography, the latter being a term expounded by Greek Australian theorist Nikos

⁴ BH Milech, 'The Critical Artist' in E Martin and J Booth (eds.) *Art-based research: a proper thesis?* Altona, Vic : published by Common Ground in association with Office for Postgraduate Research, Victoria University, 2006, p. 18

Papastergiadis in his book *Dialogues with Diaspora*. This section also includes an examination of the autobiographical work of Afro-Cuban-American artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons. The performative aspects of memory are also analysed through the re-staging and re-insertion of lost or forgotten narratives. In the fourth chapter post colonial theory is discussed in relation to the experience of migration and displacement together with the enduring concept of double consciousness as originally articulated by African-American intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois.

Continuing to examine a post colonial reading, chapter five explores the concept of resistance in the visual arts as a strategy against suppression, silence and erasure particularly in relation to the work of Latin American artists including Luis Camnitzer's *Uruguayan Torture Series*, Eugenio Dittborn's Airmail Paintings and the weavings and poetry of Cecilia Vicuña. The sixth and final chapter deals with the concept of transmission, the passing on and diffusion of culture from generation to generation. Collaboration and exchange are considered as forms of transmission within the creative process to improve our understanding of cultural identity.

Mellorado is a celebration of inherited cultural and family history and represents a reclaiming of ancestral narratives. Through this research paper and accompanying body of work, I have attempted to reconcile these rediscovered ancestral and family narratives with my current position as an assimilated migrant living in contemporary Australian society. Family and cultural ties intersect with politics of the experience of migration. Rather than diminish over time, distance or as a result of the effects of displacement, in my case these ties have only been strengthened. I have thrown in my 'voice' with the other 'voices' of the exiles, migrants, hybrids and diasporas.

CHAPTER 1 - PERSONAL HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF RE-TELLING

Abuela's House

My paternal grandmother, Elsa Britos da Rosa and her house became my primary data source for this research, having completed a period of three months field study there, between November 2010 and February 2011. During this period I lived with Abuela Elsa at her home in Cordón, Montevideo, a barrio close to the city centre. Home to the well known Tristan Narvaja farmers and antiques market held every Sunday spanning several blocks. Cordón is also close to the area known as Barrio Sur, a ten minute walk to the rambla or beach. The general location is often referred to as “los barrios negros” or black neighbourhoods for their historical connection to Afro-Uruguayan culture through the music of Candombe⁵.

Abuela's house is an old colonial style house, typical of the barrio. The house itself is in a state of disrepair with one front room being completely derelict, but despite the crumbling walls, peeling paint, leaky roof and damp, Abuela's house came to represent a point of origin, both in a familial and cultural sense. Its location, significant for its symbolic connection to black history and identity for Afro-Uruguayans. Having left Uruguay at the age of seven, this was a history that I had partly suppressed and only

⁵ Candombe is a style of music (not be confused with Candomblé a religious tradition) with its origins in the African Bantu tradition. Candombe is also performed in Argentina and Brazil, however each country's style is different. Uruguayan Candombe is celebrated over the summer months between December and March each year. In 2006, the 3rd of December was established as the national day of Candombe, signifying the start of a regular schedule of various desfiles (parades) and llamadas (drum calls). The climax of the Candombe celebrations is a competition between the comparsas (drum groups) during a two day long parade usually held in early February. The best comparsa wins a significant cash prize with prizes also awarded for the best vedette (lead dancer), costumes, and other characters that are part of the comparsa. Candombe is recognised by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and continues to be a popular and significant part of Uruguayan cultural identity. See for example http://www.welcomeuruguay.com/carnavales/index_i.html

experienced as an outsider, a bystander to a culture, pushed to the periphery of my sense of identity and belonging.



Fig 4: Abuela's house, Personal photograph, 26 November 2010

He slept with his feet uncovered

On Sunday morning, 2 January 2011, I had come to sit on Abuela's bed still in my pyjamas as I did most days, to drink mate⁶ with her and to crochet whilst we watched the breakfast show on television. It was on this morning that Abuela told me about her father Pedro. A few days earlier she had allowed me to borrow her parent's original marriage license (which also included a record of Abuela and her eight siblings) to have it photocopied. The license confirmed Pedro Britos was born in Durazno (central

⁶ Mate is a popular herbal drink similar to green tea, it can be drunk amargo (bitter) or dulce (sweet), often considered to be the national drink of Uruguayans. Historically it is dated back to the Indigenous Guaraní who populated parts of Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay. The mate is an important cultural symbol, as it is a communal drink and reinforces familial and friendship circles. The mate or drinking vessel itself is made from a small hollowed out gourd, filled with yerba mate a dried herbal loose leaf and the steeped in hot water poured from a thermos. A bombilla (metal straw, usually silver plate) is used to drink the warm liquid. Abuela Elsa drinks mate everyday in the morning after breakfast and in the afternoon after a siesta. We would also have mate when family dropped round. One person generally serves the mate to others as well as drinking in turns. It becomes somewhat of a ritual, with some common etiquette rules. I purchased a mate in Montevideo and brought it back with me to Sydney and have since continued the tradition of drinking it almost daily.

Uruguay) on the 7th of June 1887 to Don Lucas Britos and Doña Luisa Gonzalez. As was common at the time, Pedro was ‘fostered’ out to a padrino (godfather) who he worked for in return for lodging and meals, and grew up within the wealthy white family of his padrino, Faustino Piriz. As a child Abuela recalls visiting an elderly and ill Faustino, who had given them hope that he would leave Pedro a plot of land in his will. When Faustino died it was his two daughters who split the inheritance between them.

Attempts to trace Pedro’s ancestry have proved difficult given his separation from his parents at a young age and a fire at the registry office in Durazno destroying many of the town records. Oral family history is that Pedro’s grandparents were slaves, African descendants of the Atlantic slave trade⁷. Prior to my conversation with Abuela about my great-grandfather, the only details I had known about Pedro, were anecdotes told to me by my father. I had been told various stories; that Pedro had survived a prank involving a hot metal wire by one of his grandchildren, that he had dark blue eyes, that he was a tall and gentle man who would eat a fried egg for lunch whenever he came to visit and that he often slept fully clothed, even in over forty degree heat during summer, with the blanket over his head but his feet were always uncovered.

By the time Pedro married my great-grandmother, Ana Corina Da Rosa in 1913 they were settled in Artigas located in the most northern part of Uruguay bordering Brazil, where they remained for over 30 years before relocating to the capital, Montevideo. Artigas is named after José Gervasio Artigas (1764-1850) a Uruguayan national hero due to his leadership of the orientals (Banda Oriental) during the wars of independence. Living in Artigas the family adapted to speaking *Portuñol* a mix of

⁷ The first African slaves were believed to have been brought to Uruguay in 1680 by the Portuguese. As the demand for slave labour increased, Montevideo’s port became a major strategic location for the Atlantic slave-trade. Slave cargo arrived in Montevideo for distribution to Brazil, Bolivia, Peru and Argentina. Slavery continued in Uruguay into the 1840’s and 1850’s, it was officially abolished in 1842. See IP Valdes, ‘Negroes in Uruguay’, *Phylon* (1940-1956), Vol 4, No.3 (3rd Qtr.1943), Clark Atlanta University, pp. 213-218 and 221

Spanish and Portuguese commonly spoken along the Uruguay-Brazil border. Abuela tells the story that Pedro, an often unemployed general labourer, delayed almost two weeks in registering her birth. When her birth was noted at the registry in Artigas, the registrar incorrectly noted both the date and year of her birth, they had also misspelled her first name. The knowledge Abuela has passed on to me through the stories about her father and the access I had in her home to family photographs and documents had a profound impact on my sense of identity and belonging.



Fig 5: Scanned family photograph of Pedro Britos (left) with my grandfather, Elsa's husband, Fermin do Prado (right)

c.1950. Found in the collection of my second cousin Ana Corina Britos, January 2011

Interconnected narratives

After having spent three months in Montevideo, gathering additional documents and pieces of information I felt a need to somehow consolidate my renewed sense of Afro-Uruguayan cultural identity with coming home to Australia. I wanted to somehow acknowledge the family past and re-insert these 'lost' narratives into more recent family history. *Veinte Negros* (Twenty Blacks, see Appendix C) brings together several references to (slave) labour, work, self and black identity. The narrative(s) arise from a

layering of these references and on a free association between the text and visual elements. The twenty-five painted black heads/busts in the work are of my own silhouetted head and shoulders, a recurrent motif in my practice. Each bust has been labelled with a profession that my family members have undertaken including; cook, nanny, porter, musician, seamstress, student, servant, psychologist, teacher, cleaner, shoe repairer and artisan. The repeated black bust alludes to the racist and derogatory term *Cabecitas Negras* (little black heads), commonly used in Latin America to describe the farm hands and day-labourers of Indigenous or African descent who migrated from Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay to work on the estancias.

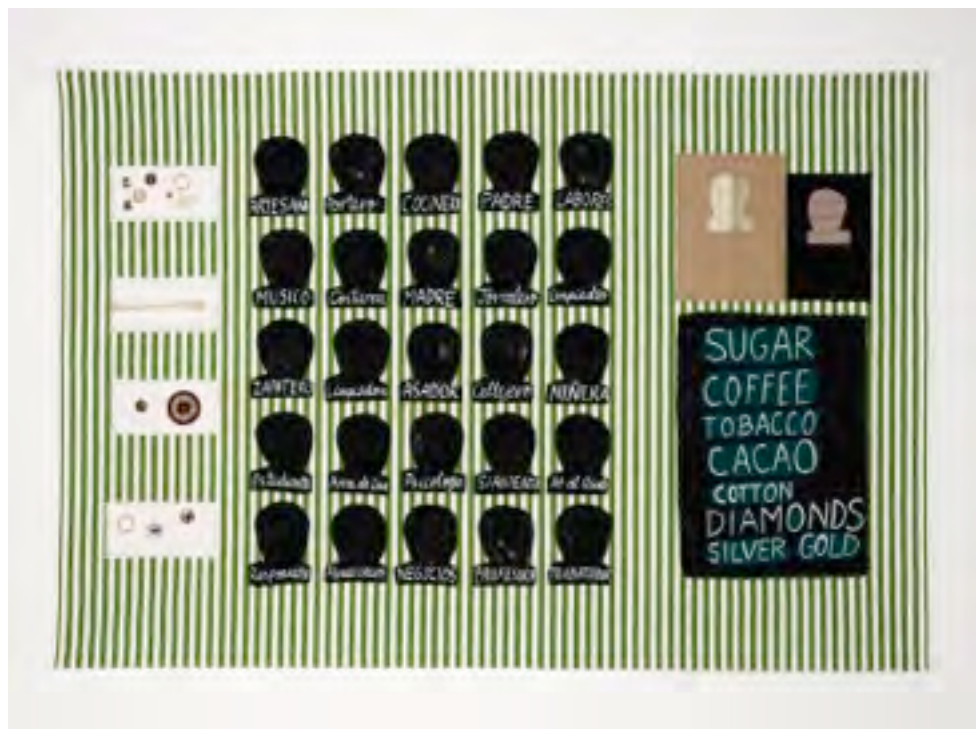


Fig 6: Paula do Prado, *Veinte Negros*, 2011, acrylic, Posca pen and appliqué on striped Ikea fabric, found and gifted objects, beads, cotton thread. 115 x 200cm

Veinte Negros is titled after a song of the same name that my father performs and co-wrote with Carlos Robello. The song was released as part of the *Interpretaciones*⁸ record in 1982 and directly references the socially and politically controversial destruction of *Medio Mundo*⁹. *Medio Mundo* was a well known conventillo, that housed a group of families, mostly African descendant Uruguayan, a culturally and historically significant and symbolic site for Afro-Uruguayans to meet and play candombe¹⁰. In what is now considered one of the many human rights abuses perpetrated as part of the civic-military dictatorship that took place in Uruguay between 1973 and 1985¹¹, the inhabitants of *Medio Mundo* were forcibly removed on the third of December 1978. Rather than preserve the site as part of Uruguayan cultural heritage, the local council had declared the rundown site unsafe and in danger of collapse, despite public outcry. Two days later the conventillo was demolished, its inhabitants were given no relocation or financial assistance and were essentially left homeless.

⁸ My father, Jorge do Prado, is a singer/songwriter and was part of the group *Pareceres* active during the mid 70s to early 80s. *Interpretaciones* was the groups fourth studio record. They had by that time achieved recognition in the music industry and popular success with their previous albums going gold and platinum. In 1982, it was still a relatively sensitive time both politically and socially, with many of the Afro-Uruguayan and general community still raw from the injustices of the dictatorship and a difficult transition to democracy. The lyrics to many of the songs are not explicitly political and deal with sensitive issues whilst being careful not to openly criticise government. The lyrics to *Veinte Negros* are reproduced in Appendix C.

⁹ My initial interest in *Medio Mundo* was sparked by Abuela, who had told me the story that one of Faustino Piris' daughters had married a man named Rachetti. Oscar Rachetti became mayor of Montevideo, and was responsible for giving the order to demolish *Medio Mundo* and other similar tenement houses in predominantly black neighbourhoods. See Lima, ME, 'Vuelven desalojados en la dictadura', *El Pais Digital*, 9 July 2006, retrieved 4 January 2011 http://www.elpais.com.uy/06/07/09/pciuda_225835.asp

¹⁰ See for example A Trigo, 'Candombe and the Reterritorialization of Culture' *Callaloo*, Vol 16, No. 3 (Summer, 1993), pp.716-728 for a discussion of the importance of Candombe in Uruguayan culture, particularly for the black minority and its socio-political implications

¹¹ RA Hudson and SW Meditz (eds.) *Uruguay: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990, retrieved 17 August 2011 <http://countrystudies.us/uruguay/22.htm>



Fig 7: Pareceres, *Interpretaciones* 1982, front and back album cover artwork depicting before and after images of Medio Mundo. Veinte negros is listed as the first track on Side 2. Source: scan from original, collection of Jorge do Prado

Veinte Negros (artwork) serves as a reminder of past injustices but also as a celebration of survival. The work alludes to the textile tradition of ‘story cloths’ and ‘memory cloths’ that document collective narratives, family and personal stories, legends and everyday life occurrences. Traditional story cloths are closely associated with folk art from Southeast Asia (particularly among the Hmong people from southern China, Burma and Laos) and also from parts of Africa. Made from a range of different appliquéd and sewn fabrics, story cloths have provided a form of expression for different cultures and an alternative historical document for marginalized narratives. One example are the memory cloths created by South African Zulu women in response to the traumatic events of apartheid, which provide an important record for collective social memory. Arts writer, Carol Becker considers the Zulu memory cloths to be “...a bit of archival information. The act of telling brings another story filled with important historical and cultural data into the public arena...”¹² For Becker, the act of documenting social and cultural history through art represents an “...equation between creativity, the

¹² Becker, Carol, *Thinking in Place: Art, Action and Cultural Production*, Paradigm Publishers, p. 122

reclamation of the past, and the development of consciousness while providing a form within which to give shape to the narration of tragedy - an important function of art”¹³

The concept of the archive presented a useful framework within which to consider and connect the different parts of my research: field study, studio/practice and reflective writing. In the following chapter I investigate the nature of the archive and in particular its use in contemporary art as a tool to shed light on family and cultural narratives.

¹³ *ibid*, p. 127

CHAPTER 2

MEDITATING ON THE ARCHIVE

Guarding the archive

“I am perhaps misled by old age and fear, but I suspect that the human species - the only species - teeters at the verge of extinction, yet that the Library - enlightened, solitary, infinite, perfectly unmoving, armed with precious volumes, pointless, incorruptible, and secret - will endure”¹⁴

For this research, the archive became a creative tool for gathering, arranging, ordering and thinking-through personal and family collections of documents, objects and narratives. Viewed as an open repository, the archive allowed for both the old and the new, the connected and the unrelated to be stored side by side. For French philosopher Jaques Derrida, the very word ‘archive’ with its linguistic root in the Greek ‘arkhe’ meaning beginning or origin, presupposes not only a point of commencement but a particular place, “...at once the commencement and the commandment”¹⁵. Without a beginning and a place in which it can be located, the archive cannot exist. Place implies residence, where the archive resides and is protected by what Derrida refers to as the archons. The politically powerful guardians of the document, the archons are those who commanded the archive into existence¹⁶, who also have the power of “unification, of

¹⁴ JL Borges, ‘The Library of Babel’ in *Jorge Luis Borges, Collected Fictions*, trans A Hurley and M Kodama, Penguin Books Ltd, London 1998. p. 118

¹⁵ J Derrida, *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*, Chicago : University of Chicago Press 1996, p. 1

¹⁶ Derrida, p. 2

identification, of classification [and] the power of consignment....through the gathering together of signs”¹⁷

The exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* held in 2008 at the International Center of Photography, New York, was primarily concerned with photography and film as a form of visual ethnography. Curated by African scholar Okwui Enwezor, the artists included Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Lorna Simpson and Vivan Sundaram amongst others. The artworks represented a broad range of approaches to the archive, for example Boltanski deliberately disrupts the authority and authenticity of the archive by using found photographs of strangers to represent some of his own autobiographical narratives. Others like Lorna Simpson use the interplay between photographic image and text so that labels, lists and titles, the classification and identification tools of the archive are harnessed to convey her particular messages on race, ethnicity and gender. Enwezor affirms the usefulness of the archive as a framework or presentation device when he says that “The archive achieves its authority and quality of veracity, its evidentiary function, and interpretive power in short, its reality - through a series of designs that unite structure and function”¹⁸

The archive in contemporary art places the artist in the role of archon, as guardians, authors and curators of their chosen collection. The framework of the archive provides the necessary structure and element of authenticity, suspending for a moment concerns over real or fake, original or copy. In this next section I look at three contemporary artworks that engage with the archive in relation to family that produce alternative interpretations of personal memories and cultural histories.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁸ Enwezor, Okwui, *Archive fever : uses of the document in contemporary art*, ed. International Center of Photography New York, 2008, p.16

Retake of Amrita

Vivan Sundaram, an Indian contemporary artist has used his own extensive family archive as part of his art practice for over thirty years. Sundaram re-tells the story of his family through the archive and its intersection with the history of India and Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly the period between 1894 and 1947 when his grandfather consistently documented the family through photographs. One of his best known works the *Sher-Gil Archive* from 1995 comprises collated family portraits, letters and objects which have all been organised into wooden boxes. One of his most interesting uses of the archive however was his work from 2001, *Retake of Amrita* tracing the life of Amrita Sher-Gil, his aunt. *Retake of Amrita* is a series of photomontages constructed from existing photographs from the family archive.



Fig 8. Vivan Sundaram, Father-Daughter from the series Retake of Amrita 2001

The action of ‘re-taking’ or re-working existing documents opens up the possibility of re-seeing the past in a way that viewing the original separate images cannot. Key events in Amrita’s life together with her relationships with other family members are re-investigated against the social and cultural context at that time. A successful artist in her own right, Amrita was born in Hungary, later living and studying

in both India and Paris. The re-worked photomontages reveal insights into the life of an 'exotic' young woman living a bourgeois lifestyle in the 1930s and how she negotiated her multiple identities, intersecting different times and locations.

Some Cultural Meditations

Similary, Australian artist, Aleks Danko uses family photographs, folk songs and a special beaded cushion as his starting points for an installation, *Some Cultural Meditations 1949-2010*. The family photographs are reproduced blown up and shown together with a series of gouache and ink drawings. An original beaded and embroidered cushion is a central element of the installation, displayed behind perspex like a museum piece. This was embroidered by the artist's mother Mary and her friends from the Army Camp and Migrant Hostel in South Australia in 1949, their initial home on arrival to Australia. Mary who was pregnant with the artist at the time had recently migrated with her husband from the Ukraine. The cushion becomes symbolic of the transition from one country to another (and disconnection from their homeland). Although Danko did not directly experience the physical shift from one place to another, he is nonetheless impacted by the repercussions of migration and living between cultures.

Here too, the contents of the family archive are 're-worked'. Danko chooses to present different versions of the cushion in the form of a series of meticulous drawings. Just as the original cushion would have been laboured over by hand, so has Danko spent countless hours re-drawing the design in several variants. The drawings have each been given titles drawn from Ukrainian and Russian folk songs that the artist's father used to play at home, adding to the metaphorical layers within the work.



Fig 9: Aleks Danko, Some Cultural Meditations 1949-2010 (2010), installation view, Sydney Biennale.

Source: www.media.biennaleofsydney.com.au



Fig 10: Aleks Danko, You are always beautiful, 2006, gouache and pencil on paper. 78.5 x 108.5cm framed

Source: www.bos17.com/biennale/artist/27

A Living Man Declared Dead

In contrast, the work of American photographer Taryn Simon, documents the genealogical, cultural and historical trajectories of seemingly forgotten individuals. *A Living Man Declared Dead and other chapters* was developed by Simon over a period of four years between 2008 and 2011. She travelled extensively to collect and research bloodlines along with their social, cultural and political context. Containing a total of eighteen chapters, the work traces the lives of victims of genocide in Bosnia, the body double of Saddam Hussein's son Uday, and a man very much alive in India but declared dead by authorities. Family groups are presented in neat photographic grids alongside framed texts, documents and photographs providing relevant information on their social or cultural context. Chapter III for example tells the story of Kenyan Joseph Nyamwanda Jura Ondijo and his nine wives, thirty-two children, and sixty-three grandchildren against the backdrop of the practice of polygamy and the spread of HIV/AIDS.



Fig 11: Taryn Simon, Chapter III, *A Living Man Declared Dead and other Chapters* 2008-11.

Source: tarynsimon.com/works_livingmanindex.php

The visually clean and organised appearance of Simon's archive of family groups provides order for the otherwise messy, entangled, complex and unintelligible complexity of bloodlines and serves to affirm the idea that "...despite the madly extendable nature of the genealogical charts and databases, these maps of ancestry are themselves already limited by choices about what sorts of ancestral connection matter".

¹⁹ Some of the squares in the grid are left blank to represent those that for whatever reason could not be photographed. Unlike Vivan Sundaram and Aleks Danko, Simon is engaging with the intersections between family and culture of unrelated strangers in disparate locations, in which she herself is not personally implicated. Simon's work seems to provide insight into the lives of everyday people in different parts of the world, with no other obvious connections between them except that they have all been chosen by her to be represented in a systematic order of her own engineering.

Through considering the different individual artistic approaches in *Retake on Amrita*, *Some Cultural Meditations* and *A Living Man Declared Dead* I have identified three phases of the archive that are common to these artworks. The first is the process of putting the archive together, the act of compiling and gathering. The second is the crucial process of refining the archive, selecting and ordering (including re-working and manipulating) its contents. And finally, there are the questions of how, why, where and in what way the archive is presented, if it is presented at all. In the three contemporary art examples considered previously, the archive was in fact inseparable from the work, in the sense that the works both drew from the archive and created new information to be stored within it or that the artwork itself represented the creation of a new archive.

¹⁹ C Nash, 'They're Family!': Cultural Geographies of Relatedness in Popular Genealogy' in S Ahmed (ed.), *Uprootings/regroundings : questions of home and migration*, Berg Publishers, New York, 2003, p. 199

The Mellorado archive

“the ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the ‘self’, the articulation of the collector’s own ‘identity’”²⁰.

My own practice is concerned with the complex interplay between identity and culture, the impact of migration and navigating multi-layered experience and hybridity. As an artist, the family archive for me represents an inexhaustible repository of starting points whereby choosing to explore any one object or narrative could lead into any number of broader investigations. The phases of the archive I described earlier, the collecting, ordering and presentation become a reflection of the research process itself. Academic Joanne Morra considers that although the elements of collating and investigation are crucial to research, more important is the presence of “...a form of critical interrogation that produces new conclusions, or better yet, what I would call alternative interpretations”²¹

Underpinning this paper and exhibition of new artwork is a large collection of objects, documents and photographs that informed the initial ideas for this research. This collection has become *The Mellorado Archive*²², a digital repository of personal, family and culturally expressive references that inform my practice. It is in part an attempt to reveal the working process or as Joanne Morra suggests the “...psychoanalytic process of working-through”²³ that is, the process of critically

²⁰ S Stewart, *On longing : narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 162

²¹ J Morra, ‘The Work of Research: Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through’ in MA Holly and M Smith (eds.) *What is Research in the Visual Arts? Obsession Archive, Encounter*, p.48 (pp.47-64)

²² The Mellorado Archive can be located at www.mellorado.com (from 1 March 2012) and is part of an ongoing project to digitize my personal collection of family and cultural documents and objects. For an example of an archive entry see Appendix B

²³ Morra, p. 61

engaging with and questioning the discoveries of our research. Morra is particularly interested in the subjective process of “looking, writing and thinking”²⁴ within research practices. According to Morra, the process of working-through when applied to research, reveals:

“...the time of analysis and research is allegorical; that we are always in between the past, present, and future; and we are always working in between two interpretative registers: the conscious and unconscious. Because of this, the work of research is always a practice that connects us to our personal history and memory, that elicits anxieties and pleasures in the present, and that offers us the promise of future knowledge and understanding that is yet unknown”²⁵

In the next chapter, I move on to explore how interrogating the family archive ultimately leads us back to ourselves.

²⁴ Morra, loc.cit., p. 48

²⁵ Morra, loc.cit., p. 61

CHAPTER 3

CRITICAL EYE/I

Writing oneself: Auto-biography and the personal archive

“It is often said that writers of color, including anglophone and francophone Third World writers of the diaspora, are condemned to write only autobiographical works. Living in a double exile - far from the native land and far from their mother tongue - they are thought to write by memory and to depend on a large extent on hearsay”

- Trinh T.Minh-Ha²⁶

There is an inherent mistrust and skepticism that surrounds the use of the personal within any form of research, especially when that research relies on oral history and anecdote²⁷. Within scientific research there are methods and protocols in place that clearly delineate between the researcher and the thing being researched to ensure research is objective, impartial and any potential for bias is reduced. Although the scientific method is reserved for specific types of knowledge gathering, its acceptance and promotion within academia has been such that it is often viewed as the method against which all research must be compared and measured. Even within the quantitative/qualitative framework of social research, the use of the personal is often relegated to what are considered the most complex or contested forms of research, particularly the field of ethnography. One of the key difficulties in inserting (or

²⁶ TT Minh-Ha, ‘Other than myself/my other self’ in G Robertson (ed.) *Travellers' tales : narratives of home and displacement*, Routledge London & New York, 1994, p. 10

²⁷ Here I am alluding to the ongoing debate between unstandardized research methods and the tendency toward more objective and ‘scientifically’ rigorous forms of research particularly within anthropological and ethnographic studies. See for example J.J Honigmann ‘Personal Approach in Cultural Anthropological Research’ in *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Jun., 1976), pp. 243-261, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2741535>

acknowledging) the self within research is how the researcher's perspective can shape and influence perception of discoveries and results.

This written document adopts a context model approach whereby the written component "rehearses the historical, social and/or disciplinary context(s) within which she or he developed the creative/production component"²⁸. Taking from the idea of the auto-ethnographic narrative, the researcher is also the primary data source opening up a space "...for researchers to create methods and methodologies that not only account for a researchers subjectivity but can also refashion the researcher as the primary subject of investigation (or one or more several overlapping sources of data)"²⁹ Here I am equating the family archive with an autobiographical archive. Autobiography is generally defined as the account of a person's life as given by that person³⁰. Barbara Steiner and Jun Yang's exhibition in book form is entirely dedicated to the subject of autobiography and its function in contemporary art. Steiner and Yang suggest autobiography has so far been dealt primarily from a literary perspective resulting in a lack of theoretical research on autobiography within art history³¹.

The archive, like the autobiographical is open to criticism and mistrust, since it simultaneously functions to reveal as well as conceal and "...typically displays a good deal of omission and interpretation, situating it somewhere between real events and the embellishments or supplements of memory"³² Furthermore, the use of the personal in the public realm, particularly in connection to the experience of displacement and

²⁸ BH Milech, 'The Critical Artist' in E Martin and J Booth (eds.) *Art-based research: a proper thesis?* Altona, Vic : Common Ground in association with Office for Postgraduate Research, Victoria University, 2006, p. 7

²⁹ P Leavy, *Method meets art: arts-based research practice*, Guilford Press, New York, 2008, p. 38

³⁰ Oxford English Dictionary

³¹ B Steiner and J Yang, *Autobiography*, Thames &Hudson, 2004, p. 12

³² *ibid.*, p. 11

diaspora potentially risks being devalued as nostalgic, a rehearsal of the trauma of loss and longing.

Even worse than nostalgia is the association between the diasporic narrative and the “humanist rhetoric on victimage”³³. This only serves to further entrench any expression of origins or cultural heritage within the margins in opposition to the dominant culture, whatever it may be. How then can the autobiographical archive with its mix of inherited, collected and displaced objects be seen as a valid method for examining the interstices of cultural identity, self-hood and nation-hood?

Greek-Australian academic Nikos Papastergiadis suggests that rather than autobiography, we should be considering the process of writing oneself: allography or other-writing. Papastergiadis sees the process of allography as specifically writing oneself into cultural discourse, a political act to counter eurocentred and americanised discourse. The gaps, omissions and fragmented nature of the family archive reflects that for many immigrants the knowledge they have of their family’s cultural background is necessarily precarious, anecdotal and second-hand. And so the ability to reconstitute self within a historical, social and cultural framework somewhere in-between fact and imagination is “... the entrance to the space of cultural representation [that] is preceded by a questioning of the jagged line between the formations and deformation of identity”³⁴

If as Papastergiadis suggests “ All autobiography confronts the task of excavating from the remains of history: a search for the fragments that signify the

³³ N Papastergiadis, *Dialogues in the diasporas : essays and conversations on cultural identity*, Rivers Oram Press, London & New York, Distributed in the USA by New York University Press, 1998, p.34

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 187

qualities of lived experience”³⁵ then autobiography like the archive is concerned with the collection as evidence. The power of autobiography is that it “...allows one to see oneself as someone else..”³⁶ so that it is not only concerned with representing the self but past, possible and other selves to challenge, disrupt and offer alternative interpretations of cultural, social and historical narratives.

Strategic re-insertions: performing memory

The Mellorado Archive provided the necessary starting points to begin to unpack and also gather those aspects of my personal memories and cultural history that I wanted to explore further as part of the studio research. Reflecting back on field study conducted in Uruguay, I found that the process of responding to the archive and the memories it conjured began the moment I came in contact with the objects. By taking photographs of objects in Abuela’s house, by taking photographs of myself within her home and making what at the time felt like unrelated exploratory samples and experiments with crochet³⁷, I was in fact beginning to consider and question my personal connection to these objects. By re-engaging with these objects. they became re-activated, a performative process of remembering. On the relationship between memory and the archive, historian and author Richard Cándida Smith comments:

“Memory exists in an ongoing process of performance and response. Traces of the past otherwise slip into the archive, an ever-present but usually ignored repository filled with the random survivals of antecedent social relationships stored in buildings, landscapes, libraries, museums, store windows, the

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 182

³⁶ B Steiner and J Yang, *Autobiography*, Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 16

³⁷ See Mellorado archive for samples and experiments made during field study in Uruguay

electronic media, as well as the everyday lives of countless unknown people whose path cross ours. One person's memory is another person's archive"³⁸



Fig 12: Self portrait with my father in the family mirror, Montevideo, Uruguay, 2011

There were particular objects in Abuela's house that I felt compelled to engage and connect with on a deeper level. One was an old mirror that had always hung in the corridor, it also happened to reflect a mounted photograph hanging on the opposite wall of my father performing at Medio Mundo in the mid 70s (Fig 12). Since childhood I had also been fascinated by the large framed photographs of my grandparent's wedding day hanging in Abuela's bedroom (Fig 13). Perhaps it was the large ornate frames and the kitsch convex acrylic in which they were housed that so drew my attention. There are two photographs, both are hand painted black and white photographs taken in 1947. I

³⁸ R Cándida Smith, *Art and the performance of memory: sounds and gestures of recollection*, Routledge, London, 2002, p. 3

have often wondered how they were able to afford such photographs, had they always been framed; were they a gift; was this the only record of their wedding day or were there other photos? The framed photographs have hung in the same spot for over 35 years. They represented a marriage that lasted over 50 years, a relationship broken only by one of them passing away.

On previous trips to Uruguay, I had found it hard to document the photographs as their convex surface was highly reflective and moving the framed pictures was not an option due to the risk of damage or not being able to rehang them on the precarious vermiculite walls. It was unavoidable, every photograph I took of the pictures included my own reflection on the surface of the acrylic covering.



Fig 13: My grandparents wedding portrait, Elsa and Fermin, 1947. Personal photograph

Seeing myself repeatedly reflected in my grandparent's wedding portrait led me to re-stage the event in the work *Casada*. The practical challenge of taking an image of the wedding portrait seemed like a metaphor for all that I had been trying to achieve in my research. I had been trying to document parts of my family's history but my

persistent gazing, had only ended in reflecting back an image of myself. Re-staging the wedding portrait became an act of performing memory. *Casada* means married in Spanish, I have presented here a marriage between self and self, a mirror reflection trapped in a dual existence.



Fig 14: Paula do Prado, *Casada* 2011, digital inkjet print

Desperately seeking...?

Throughout the process of conducting my research I have frequently had to ask myself: What is it that am I desperately seeking? What benefits can there be in research that is openly subjective, self-reflective, self-conscious and identity obsessed? If as the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter from Trinh.T. Minh-Ha suggests, I am condemned by race and my experience of living away from my native culture and native tongue to only write autobiographical works, then all I have done here is confirmed that.

As a woman and an artist of colour, it is impossible for my art practice not to be informed by my gendered and racialised existence.

In the process of collating information for this research, the information on her father Abuela Elsa passed down to me had a profound impact on my sense of ancestral belonging and identity. I had to confront my connection to black history, which for me had previously been reserved for those with more ‘solid’ connections to Africa and the Atlantic slave trade. I grew up in Australia never learning about Uruguayan history in school, I studied visual art learning about the work of other black women artists the majority of whom narrated their experience from an African-American or Afro-Cuban-American perspective, artists such as Lorna Simpson, Adrian Piper, Kara Walker, Betye and Alison Saar, Maria Brito, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons. Although these artists have been important to my studies and the development of my ideas, the African-American perspective on black cultural experience has gained such dominance that it has taken on a universalized aspect so that all black female narratives are read with reference to its specific conditions.



Fig 15: Fiona Foley *Badtjala woman 2* 1994, Type C colour photographs Edition: 10/15, 45.0 h x 35.0 w cm.

Source: www.artsearch.nga.gov.au

In many respects I found a much closer connection to the work of contemporary Australian Aboriginal female artists such as Fiona Foley³⁹ (see Fig 10⁴⁰), Tracey Moffatt, Jenny Watson, Bindi Cole and Destiny Deacon. Their work provides critically important perspectives on living black in contemporary Australian society, and the experience of exile in your own land. I would have liked to discuss and give an example here of the work of an Afro-Uruguayan woman artist but I cannot. For various

³⁹ I met Fiona Foley towards the end of my honours year in 2009. She had been asked to provide honours candidates with feedback on their work. Apart from being an amazing opportunity to meet and talk to an artist of Foley's calibre, I valued her honesty and critical feedback. To this day, her advice still rings in my head which was along the lines of: if you've got something to say then say it, be explicit, talk about race from your experience, your specific viewpoint. I feel as if I am still not pushing myself enough in my practice to say what I can't quite yet articulate. Some of the deeper emotions and ideas tangled up with race and belonging, remain at the edges, scared I think to venture forward for fear of eliciting offense, ironically perhaps from the very institutions I wish to speak out against.

⁴⁰ *Badtjala woman* was part of a series of photographs created by Fiona Foley to explore her Badtjala heritage. It was exhibited at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne. An excerpt from the catalogue by Stuart Koop, comments: "The process of reclaiming (or regenerating) Badtjala aboriginal culture in Foley's work begins with a series of archival photographs. This process is first of all a critical exercise in relation to the Western archive since the archive contains most of the sorrowful remains of aboriginal material culture. But the process is also largely speculative due to the scarcity of material. So to begin, Foley adds a number of notes directly in the margins of the archive. Working with acknowledged photographers, she has restaged the historical images of the Badtjala woman using herself as the subject, in each successive series recovering the Badtjala peoples' independence, strength, and humour" http://www.ccp.org.au/exhibitions.php?f=19970927_Gallery_1

social, historical and political reasons, there isn't an equal amount of critical and theoretical literature analysing the work of African descendant South American female artists, much less Afro-Uruguayans⁴¹.

⁴¹ Some of the most iconic visual representations of Afro-Uruguayan identity and culture were actually authored by white Uruguayan artists such as Pedro Figari and Carlos Páez Vilaró, for an insightful discussion of some of the reasons why the contributions of Afro-Uruguayans have been largely ignored and poorly documented see V Sztainbok, 'National Pleasures: The Fetishization of Blackness and Uruguayan Autobiographical Narratives', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, Vol 3, No. 1, March 2008, pp. 61-84. For a broader overview of the social inequalities affecting Afro-Uruguayans see Minority Rights Group International, World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Uruguay : Overview, 2007, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4954ce5723.html> [accessed 7 February 2012]

CHAPTER 4

SEEING DOUBLE

Diaspora, exile or displacement or all of the above?

Throughout the process of compiling this research I have been looking for ways to articulate my experience, hoping that perhaps by ‘naming’ my position and identifying with a particular group or community that I can find the sort of comfort that I imagine comes from a sense of belonging. The search for self identity is inherently an infinite search, because identity is always in the process of becoming. What I’m looking for is a way to resolve the feeling of existing in-between, here and there, then and now, black and white, centre and margin.

There are several terms available to ‘name’ my experience: exile, migrant, hybrid, diaspora. Each of these terms is inextricably linked to some form of suffering, displacement and loss that comes as a result of living away from one’s native culture or home, whether voluntarily or forced. Exile, for example is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the state of being barred from one's native country, typically for political or punitive reasons” My parents and I migrated to Australia in September 1986 from Uruguay. I was seven years old and was obviously not in a position to choose to leave or to stay. Although my parents bear the personal scars of living through a oppressive military dictatorship, the primary reason to leave was an economic one. I wouldn’t describe our current situation as living in exile, nor is it a case of genuine displacement. We have been able to maintain a strong link to Uruguay, returning every few years when possible and visiting our family, the majority who still live there. We have been able to integrate relatively well within Australian society and culture, despite having to negotiate third to first world dynamics, we essentially transferred from one

western culture to another⁴². It could be argued that my family's move to Australia in search of a better economic situation was in fact a forced migration and that as long as the inequalities between the third and first world exist we cannot realistically consider returning permanently and are thus placed in the involuntary state of in-betweenness, of shuffling backwards and forwards.



Fig 16: Paula do Prado, *Claim(s)*, 2011, Acrylic and appliqué on striped Ikea fabric

⁴² R Araeen, 'A New Beginning: Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics', *Third Text*, Vol 14, No. 50, Spring 2000, Routledge, London, p.10, retrieved 14 September 2011

Rather than articulating the experience of postcolonial migration on the basis of exile or from a position of displacement and loss, I wish to critically engaging with my experience of living away from my native culture by choice and from a position of privilege, not disadvantage. The work *Claims* (Fig.16) explores the complexities in what I feel is the problematic position of living as a migrant (albeit well assimilated) on contested land. It combines various elements such as the saying “you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth” together with a list of family members who migrated to Australia “The Pionneers” and a list of my parents siblings, most of whom remain in South America.

The problem as writer Rasheed Araeen observes is that “...the idea of exile has become a fundamental pillar of postcolonial cultural theory”⁴³. Araeen is a founding member of the scholarly journal *Third Text*, specifically aimed at engaging with the theory and practice of art as it relates to artists marginalised by race, gender religion or culture. In an essay highly critical of the shortcomings of post colonial theory *A New Beginning*, Araeen states:

“The crisis of western culture was caused, in our view, by the inability of the system to come to terms with its colonial past and recognize the reality of the postcolonial world and its aspiration and struggle for human equality, creating intellectual paralysis in its discourse; this paralysis was particularly evident in art history scholarship which was still riddled with eurocentred and racist assumptions”⁴⁴

⁴³ Araeen, p. 9

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4

The challenge however remains to breakdown eurocentric (and americanised) narratives and generate new discourse, as writer Pal Ahluwalia believes “It is the task of post-colonialism to confront the existence of difference, to bring together theory from both sides of the imperial divide and to make it relevant to the conditions that exist for all those who endure the post-colonial condition, regardless of their geographical location.”⁴⁵

Double Consciousness

Within my own practice, the amalgam of the Australian and Uruguayan flag becomes an important space within which to critically engage with the experience of migration and what it means to be Australian. It is essentially a strategy to express dual citizenship, and the crossing between two countries and what impact that has on cultural identity. The majority of my work approaches my experience of migration, not as a recent migrant but as someone who has essentially moved past being a migrant, post-assimilation. In 2012 my parents and I will celebrate twenty-five years of Australian citizenship.

My practice reflects someone who essentially inhabits two cultures. Australian post-colonial theorist Bill Ashcroft describes inhabitation as “...dense fabric of interwoven acts in which the issues of inheritance, ethnic identity, belonging, history, race, land are all intertwined”⁴⁶ The cultural adjustment that follows migration is a process of suppressing, replacing and modifying behaviour, values and ideas from one culture with elements from another, whereby one tries to combine the best from both worlds. Ashcroft argues that

⁴⁵ P Ahluwalia, ‘Politics & Post-Colonial Theory’ in *Politics & Post-colonial Theory : African Inflections*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 8

⁴⁶ B Ashcroft, *Post-colonial transformation*, Routledge, London, 2001, p. 158

“Habitation is critical to the ability of a colonized or dislocated people to transform that external cultural pressure which constricts them because it extends through the widening horizons of the experience of place, from the intensely personal (often regarded as the province of poetics) to the global”⁴⁷

At the time of writing, the Australian Government’s proposed changes to migration policy in relation to offshore processing of asylum seekers is being vigorously debated. Earlier in the year, violent riots broke out at the Villawood detention centre and the media was swamped by images of detainees who had climbed out onto the centre roof holding up what resembled a large white bed sheet emblazoned with blue hand painted text stating ‘We are not criminal, we are human’. The combination of social, economic and political crises, continue to raise awareness of the social impact of our positioning on issues of migration, race, citizenship and cultural difference.

The term double consciousness was originally coined by W.E.B Du Bois an African-American civil rights activist and author who sought to explore the complex social issues faced by African-Americans to build a viable cultural and political identity. Double consciousness referred to being in the constant position of seeing and understanding oneself through the eyes of others, as scholar Okwui Enwezor observes:

“double consciousness is not solely a mode of existence but also an active process of translation, transmission, enactment, and performance. Whether through language or image, a metonymic sign or an aesthetic form, this process is both a way of crossing and double-crossing space. It is about undoing and remaking, disassembling and reassembling, and acquiring and redistributing cultural material, imagery, authority and power. It is a work of bridging cultures, using whatever is at hand to build new and original meaning. Double consciousness is a

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p.159

practice of joining: taking syntactical incongruity and rendering it legible, understandable”⁴⁸

The concept of the two way gaze becomes a strategy to critically engage with my own position as an Afro-Uruguayan woman living in a (post?)colonial Australian society and informs the studio research so that ‘...the creative task is to create forms of representation that have the capacity to reveal, critique, and transform what we know’⁴⁹

Uneasy Mixtures

Layering various references to race, gender and culture can often make for uneasy mixtures. Within the Australian exhibition and academic context, I assume a predominantly well educated anglo English speaking audience. My work has previously been questioned for what are perceived as references to Australian Aboriginal and other indigenous art that is not of my native Uruguayan culture. My intention has never been to copy or strategically borrow from any indigenous art practice, nor is it directly influenced by a particular style⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ O Enwezor, ‘The Diasporic Imagination: The Memory works of Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons’ in LD Freiman et al (eds.), *Magdalena Campos-Pons : everything is separated by water*, eds Lisa D. Freiman, Indianapolis Museum of Art New Haven In association with Yale University Press, 2007, p. 69

⁴⁹ G Sullivan, *Art practice as research : inquiry in the visual arts*, Sage Publications, California USA, 2004, p. 168

⁵⁰ I do have an interest and deep respect for both contemporary and traditional Australian Aboriginal art. During the course of my Master’s candidature I have participated in various workshops such as the Weaving Yarns master weaving workshop run by Boolarng Nangamai Aboriginal Art & Culture Studio led by master weavers Steven Russell & Suzanne Stewart on Thursday 1 September 2011. I also attended curator Julie Gough’s exhibition talk at the Maritime Museum, Sydney on 13 April 2011 and met some of the women weavers as part of the major exhibition of Tasmanian Aboriginal weavers, Tayenebe (which means exchange).



Fig 17: Paula do Prado, *Shakere*, 2010-11, acrylic, beading and wire on gourd. Image: Andy Stevens

I feel this is an important issue to discuss here because it has a lot to do with questions of political correctness, privilege, authenticity (as it relates also to notions of value) and the diverse range of cross-cultural borrowing that occurs in art. One recent example that comes to mind in current Australian contemporary art practice is the work of Lucas Grogan who has been criticised for his use of Aboriginal Australian motifs in his work. Grogan is a young white Australian male making bark style paintings in the *rarrk* technique, drawing criticism from mostly (non Aboriginal) arts professionals⁵¹. His practice brings into question the use of spiritually laden and sacred motifs by outsiders within a contemporary art context, who owns particular cultural practices and can or should transgressions be checked and by whom?

⁵¹ I Walton, 'Lucas Grogan - Embroidering Up a Storm', *Textile Fibre Forum*, Volume Thirty, Issue 4 No.104, 2011, p.62 (pp.62-64)



Fig 18: Lucas Grogan, True Blue Babe, 2010 needlepoint, upholstery and satin 165 x 174cm

Source: www.lucasgrogan.com

Author of *Chicana Art : The politics of spiritual and aesthetic altarities*, Laura E. Pérez, sees the use of appropriation and cross cultural borrowing in American-Mexican art practice as stemming from “the effect of a kind of “minority”/third world, post-nationalist environment from which kindred forms are recycled from (neo)colonization’s ‘waste’ to give expression to what is perceived at heart to be a common pre-Christian worldview: the spiritual nature of all being, and thus its unity”⁵² For the *Mellorado* exhibition I make reference to the spiritual in a series of eleven cloth figures. Following on from the initial series collectively titled *Common Ancestors* which I made for my solo exhibition *Where Yah From?* in 2009, these new figures represent Orixas, African deities from the Yoruba religion which is popular in parts of Brazil and Uruguay. Whilst on field study in Uruguay, Abuela, who is not particularly religious

⁵² LE Pérez, *Chicana Art: the politics of spiritual and aesthetic altarities*, Duke University Press, 2007 p. 24

(she doesn't go to church, although a large wooden crucifix hangs over her bed), lit a blue candle in honour of Yemanjá. It was the first time I had seen Abuela make this sort of gesture and apart from Candombe it was the only other obvious reference to an African ancestry.

Yemanjá is one of the main Yoruba deities, the goddess of the sea represented usually by the colours blue and silver. Every 2 February a celebration is held at various beaches along the Uruguayan coast, where locals and tourists gather around makeshift alters complete with plaster statues of Yemanjá, candles and offerings of watermelon and flowers. I found myself intrigued by the Orixas and the various areas of power they represented tied to nature and the human life cycle.



Fig 19: Paula do Prado, *Exu (The Messenger)*, 2011, Mixed media

The figures evoke various associations with the ceremonial and tribal. Many have referred to them as dolls, but I do not see them as such and have deliberately

manipulated their scale and form to distance them from being doll like. The combination of textile materials and techniques such as appliqué, machine and hand stitch already positions the figures within a tradition of the handmade, craft and folk art. The association with 'low art' is further compounded by the idea that "Beliefs and practices consciously making reference to the s/Spirit(s) as the common life force within and between all beings are today largely ignored in the serious intellectual discourse as superstition, folk belief, or New Age delusion, or when they are not, they are studied directly as exemplars of "primitive animism" or previous ages of gullibility"⁵³

To trace and acknowledge these complex roots brings to light the politics of memory and the deliberate re-insertion of the past into the present. Laura E Perez suggests we view the tactic of recall and remembering not as "politically paralyzing nostalgia for the irretrievable past but as a re-imagining and, thus, as a reformulating of beliefs and practices particularly in response to the fragmented circulating due to colonialisation"⁵⁴

It is in this contested and ambiguous space that I want to situate my work, to create debate, to generate dialogue and to raise questions through the uneasy mixtures of culture, race, gender, authenticity and power. Beyond their decorative and totemic countenance, the cloth figures attempt to give expression to those ideas and emotions tied to my experience that I cannot yet put into words. As Perez asserts, "The linkages within imperialist and racist thinking between the spiritual, the female, and peoples of color are what make the conditions for talking about women, particularly women of color, and the spiritual, especially difficult"⁵⁵

⁵³ Pérez, p. 18

⁵⁴ Pérez, p. 23

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 19

CHAPTER 5

RESISTANCE

Against oblivion: remembering forwards

The past and its ties to tradition and history become fertile ground for the artistic process which combined with a broader social intent provide new ways of thinking, as academic Paul Carter pointedly asks “What would it be like, not to remember backwards, towards the recovery of a lost object, but forwards toward its transformation and re-invention?”⁵⁶ Carter describes practice-based research as material thinking, whereby “the language of creative research is related to the goal of material thinking, and both look beyond the making process to the local reinvention of social relations”⁵⁷ The collection conceived as an archive provides a way of preserving or at the very least prolonging the survival of familial narratives that may have otherwise only remained as oral history. As the basis for creative work, the collection can be seen as “a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context”⁵⁸ essentially having a dual purpose, bring the past into the present by directly engaging with it and creating a new set of ‘documents’ which say a lot more about the present and possible future.

⁵⁶ P Carter, *Material thinking : the theory and practice of creative research*, University Publishing, Carlton Victoria, 2004. p. 126

⁵⁷ Carter, p. 10

⁵⁸ S Stewart, *On longing : narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1993, p. 151

Writing from the margin

I thought that all this was perhaps nothing more than a way of

remembering

To remember (recordar) in the sense of playing the strings

(cuerdas) of emotion

Re-member, re-cordar, from cor, corazón, heart

- Cecilia Vicuña⁵⁹

In March 2011, I presented a paper *Writing from the margin: letters of resistance* at the *Picture This: Postcards and Letters beyond text* conference at the University of Sussex just outside Brighton, UK. The paper explored the work of two Latin American artists, Eugenio Dittborn and his Airmail paintings and the weavings and poetry of Cecilia Vicuña. I sought to explore these artists's use of the letter against my own experience of exchanging letters with family in first year after migrating to Australia. As a result of migration the generational link in our family and active process of cultural knowledge transfer although not completely severed has been significantly disrupted. Much of the excavation work completed for this research, the collecting, the sourcing and documenting served to reinforce my sense of identity and confront "a sense of rootlessness as an internalised condition"⁶⁰

⁵⁹ C Vicuña, excerpt from the poem *Entering*, New York 1983-1991 in MC de Zegher (ed.) and trans. Ether Allen, *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña/Quipoem*, Kanaal Art Foundation, University Press of New England, Hanover & London, 1997, p. q.131

⁶⁰ J Barnitz, *Twentieth-century art of Latin America*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2001, p. 298



Fig 20: Eugenio Dittborn 'Airmail painting no.91 The 11th History of the Human Face (500 years)', 1990
 Paint, stitching, charcoal and photosilkscreen on two sections of non-woven fabric. 210cmx280cm.
 Source: www.iniva.org

Since the early 1980s Dittborn has created Airmail Paintings. These works are large format 'paintings' which include collage, photo transfer, silkscreen and stitching on a variety of materials including paper and felt. The artwork once complete is literally folded as you would a letter and mailed to its destination in a purpose made Airmail envelope. One particular ongoing series of Airmail Paintings is titled *The History of the Human Face*. For this series Dittborn used mug shots of Chilean men and women classified as thieves in a found criminology magazine, newspaper and magazine clippings and drawings of faces made by his young seven year old daughter Margarita.

The Airmail Paintings were conceived of as a way for Dittborn to disguise his work during the period of military dictatorship in Chile. Dittborn sees the Airmail paintings as "a way of salvaging my previous work, which was threatened, like every

other cultural production in Chile in these last years, with oblivion. Power in our country constructs a social, political and cultural space which is characterized by a monstrous capacity to empty and exclude any possibility of memory. My artistic work puts itself forward, in its travels, as a little model of a possible memory."⁶¹ The deceptively simple act of circumventing, eluding and co-opting the international mail system to escape censure is a strong yet simple political act of resistance against the established order.

Resistance is also present in the work of another Chilean artist, Cecilia Vicuña. Vicuña was born in Santiago, Chile and has been living in exile since the 1970s following the military coup in September 1973 against then president Salvador Allende. Following the coup, Chile was under a military dictatorship under the leadership of Augusto Pinochet which lasted until 1990. Vicuña's practice is as much about language as it is about making. She has lived and worked in London, Colombia and is now based out of New York. Many of her artworks are staged in public places, on a bus, on streets and in front of symbolic government buildings. Her various weaving or net works, using string and thread, the actions of knotting, weaving, looping, coiling and binding become metaphors for language and the spiritual.

⁶¹ E Dittborn, quoted in Artist's Biography, *Eugenio Dittborn: The III History of the Human Face* (Sydney Camino), 1989, Vancouver Art Gallery electronic catalogue, retrieved 2 February 2011 http://projects.vanartgallery.bc.ca/publications/75years/pdf/Dittborn_Eugenio_71.pdf

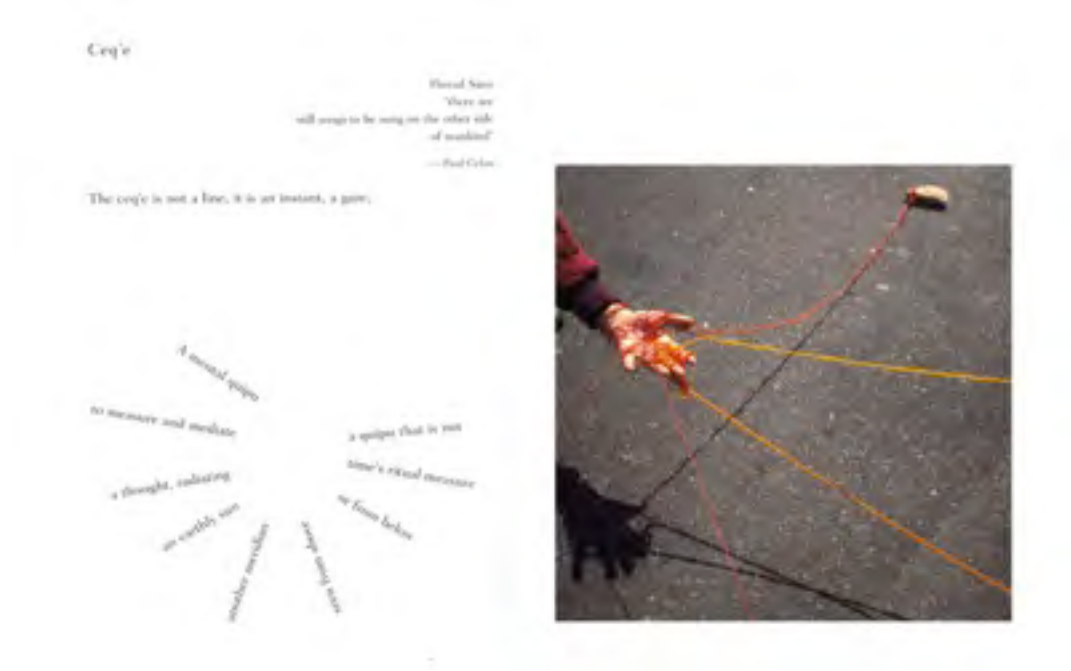


Fig 21: Cecilia Vicuña, Ceq'e, New York, 1994, Color print, 19 3/4 x 30 inches

Source: www.ceciliavicuna.org

In particular, Vicuña makes reference to Inca beliefs and practices such as the Quipu⁶², a system of knotted and tied strings used by the Inca as a form of communication and to record information and the idea that “textile has communicative, but also poetic, economic, ritual and political power”⁶³

The work of Eugenio Dittborn and Cecilia Vicuña have in common a shared experience of political instability. I myself was too young to directly experience the Uruguayan dictatorship but its memory has been passed on to me through my parents. Like many of the memories and information that have informed *Mellorado*, they are second hand, passed on, echoes of a time past. The work of Dittborn and Vicuña admits

⁶² See for example the Harvard University Quipu project <http://khipukamayuk.fas.harvard.edu/WhatIsAKhipu.html>

⁶³ MC de Zegher, 'Ouvrage: Knot a Not, Notes as Knots' in MC de Zegher (ed.) and trans. Ether Allen, *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña/Quipoem*, Kanaal Art Foundation, University Press of New England, Hanover & London, 1997, p. 26 (pp. 17- 45)

the possibility (however small) for art to have a profound social impact, not just in the remembering and acknowledgement of events past but in their transformation through the performance of process. However, as Latinamerican writer Gerardo Mosquera suggests, “All these strategies of connecting art with political action and social activism, education, sociology, psychology, technology, research or shamanism are very valid, although they have often not been able to go beyond representation”⁶⁴

Upside-down

“...the centrality of resistance does not entail a return to a past essentialised identity. For, there is no possibility of such a return. Rather, it is the continual reconstitution of identity under different circumstances which becomes important”

- Pal Ahluwalia⁶⁵

My own work attempts to interrogate the personal and the political by creating a space where connections are made between seemingly disparate cultural, familial and historical references. The work *200 years* (Fig 23) attempts to bring into question the idea that migration or uprooting is for the better and how this shifts affect family relationships and connections. The artwork makes reference to the Uruguayan (1811-2011) and Australian Bicentenaries (1788-1988). Both countries have a colonial history, Uruguay under the Portuguese and the Spanish and Australia with the British. The work builds on an interest in the flag as a symbol of national identity. A symbol I attempt to disrupt through creating a hybrid Uruguayan Australian flag.

⁶⁴ G Mosquera, ‘Art and Politics: Contradictions, disjunctives, possibilities’ in D Corbeira (ed.) *Arte y Revolucion: Art and Revolution*, Brumaria for Documenta 12 Magazines, p. 217 (pp. 215-219)

⁶⁵ P Ahluwalia, ‘Politics & Post-Colonial Theory’ in *Politics & Post-colonial Theory : African Inflections*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 109

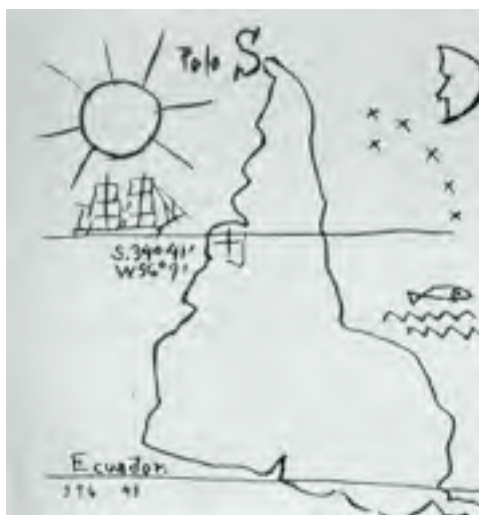


Fig 22: Joaquin Torres Garcia, *Mapa Invertido/Inverted Map*, 1943

Source: www.en.wikipedia.org

The Uruguayan map is shown inverted as a reference to the inverted map created in 1943 by Uruguayan artist Joaquin Torres-Garcia. Joaquin Torres Garcia was a Uruguayan writer and painter who produced a manifesto titled *La Escuela de Sur* (The School of the South) that argued for an independent Uruguayan artistic style. The inverted map attempted to show what writer Andrea Giunta sees as both a “a decontextualizing and resemanticizing operation”⁶⁶ that “implies a fundamentally ideological replacing: it marks a new stage, aiming for independence...”⁶⁷ The Australian map has also been inverted, signaling the possibility of a shared solidarity through the countries common positioning in the Southern hemisphere.

⁶⁶ A Giunta, ‘Strategies of Modernity in Latin America’ in G Mosquera (ed.) *Beyond the Fantastic, Strategies of Modernity in Latin America*, The MIT Press, London, 1996, p. 59 (pp.52-67)

⁶⁷ Giunta, p. 60



Fig 23: Paula do Prado, *200 years*, 2011

The southern cross (la cruz del sur) is a culturally significant symbol, it is referenced both in the Australian National Anthem, Advance Australia Fair and the Australian national flag. For South Americans too, the Southern Cross is a potent symbol of national identity, forming part of the Brazilian national flag and referenced in song and writing in various other South American countries. The star motif has become a recurring visual reference in my work, it allows me to refer to both Australia and Uruguay simultaneously as a way of constantly comparing and analysing the two side by side.

200 years has a particular personal meaning, the names of fifteen of the my cousins (the children of my father's 4 siblings) are listed in the work. None of my paternal family emigrated to Australia, they are 'the chosen few' who have remained in Uruguay or moved to another country. The phrase itself "the chosen few" suggests privilege, being singled out and elevated above others. At times I feel a sense of guilt,

that I am one who must make the best out of having left Uruguay and emigrated to a country like Australia. Other times, I feel that I am the one weighed down, who must bear the responsibility of striving to be a success, taking advantage of all opportunities but having to sacrifice a sense of belonging and connection to family in a different culture. It reflects some of the conflicting feelings of being a migrant in Australia, at once feeling grateful and resentful.

As much as my work relies on the personal and the autographic narrative, it can only reveal as much as it conceals, for essentially “Resistance becomes a question of the very line between visibility and invisibility”⁶⁸. The process of remembering, re-inscribing and translating my experience into art making necessarily transforms and recreates memory.

⁶⁸ M Hirsch (ed.) *The Familial Gaze*, Dartmouth College, University of New England, Hanover and London 1999, p. xv

CHAPTER 6

TRANSMISSION

Material dialogue

“Thinking by doing opens up a space for thinking about textile practice as a way of knowing and a way of thinking, a form of knowledge production. A range of spaces are opened up - conceptual, emotional, textured - so that material knowledge makes the invisible visible” ⁶⁹

Last but not least, I want to focus on the making process as a response to what I encountered in collating my research. The making itself is a form of research within the research, what I would like to refer to as a material dialogue. The process of looking, gathering, ordering and compiling is an important part of the research process, but it is only really cemented in the process of writing about it, the process of linking action to thought. Although the process of writing is of critical importance as a mode of thinking, a disciplined exercise to tease out, unpack and investigate, the process of making of feeling, sensing, creating and constructing too reflects this process, albeit a way of “thinking by doing”. It would be remiss to discuss the contextual framework and theoretical underpinning of a body of artwork without also discussing the process of its making. Some would suggest that “In an increasingly mediated world, one of the most radical things artists can do is to use their hands...” ⁷⁰ and that specifically in relation to textiles, materials “[carry] not only sensory pleasure but also a political charge and a weight of critical language” ⁷¹

⁶⁹ J Jeffries and G Were, ‘Introduction’ in *Textile*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2010, p. 7 (pp.4-9)

⁷⁰ D Levi Strauss, *From head to hand : art and the manual*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010, p. 1

⁷¹ Jeffries and Were, loc. cit.

I have deliberately steered clear of talking about specific materials or techniques, because I work across a range of media and do not preference one over another. Nor did I want to get bogged down in age old debates about the battle lines between art, craft and design. I am much more interested in engaging with the process of translating ideas and concepts into a visual language that relies on an acute sensitivity to the existence of a material language or dialogue. My choice of materials for the work in Mellorado has been carefully considered, nothing has been included without it being essential to the reading of the work or its intention.

Many of the fabrics and found objects used as part of the works were collected by family members. My parents who are office cleaners bring me back designer fabric swatch books and fabric remnants that would otherwise go to land fill, other fabrics have been given to me by my aunts or grandmother on trips back to Uruguay. Its in the process of being gifted these materials that I have in fact been collaborating with my family for a long time to create work. This collaboration of sorts inevitably leads to curious enquiries about how the material will be used such as what will you do with that? or I'm sure *you* can do something with it. It creates an interesting dynamic in the work, because my family is also part of the audience for my work and I'd like to think they feel represented on many levels.

Our hands connected

During my time spent in Uruguay, I didn't make art the way I normally do. I didn't have my range of usual tools available or a studio to work from. I was accustomed to 'making do' with what was available but I found it quite challenging to make the kind of work I wanted to make. I had found the easiest material to source and work with was string and yarn, which I crocheted sitting on my grandmother's bed for hours on end to

keep my hands busy, whilst we talked, had mate and watched television. I distinctly remember her one day wanting to show me finger knitting, which she herself had actually learned not too long ago from my nine year old twin cousins, Aitor and Eneko. Looking back at this seemingly unremarkable memory, I understood that the generational transmission I had been exploring wasn't just a process of passing down knowledge but a much more dynamic process of knowledge sharing.



Fig 24: Finger knitting with Abuela Elsa, Montevideo, Uruguay, 8 January 2011. Photographs by Laura do Prado

In the work *Replenishing* from 2001, Afro-Cuban-American artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons poses alongside her mother, with a gap between them, joined only by a series of colourful knotted and beaded strings. The strings could be read as a metaphor for the umbilical cord, the life giving link between mother and child, a link that often survives in a spiritual sense unbroken by time or distance. The beaded strings may have once been necklaces worn as adornments, red, yellow and black for Campos-Pons and blue and white for her mother. Campos-Pons wears a long antique shift dress reminiscent of the late 1800s cotton clothing worn on plantations. The title of the work together with the images suggests an ongoing link between the past and the present,

home and origin - a self-replenishing connection where memories and stories feed into each other, flowing both backwards and forwards.



Fig 25: Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Replenishing*, 2001, Composition of 7, Polaroid Polacolor Pro 20 x 24

Phrased approx. 182.9 x 152.4cm overall. Source: www.brooklynmuseum.org

Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons was born in Cuba in 1959, migrating to Boston, USA in the early 1990s. Her work is often described as autobiographical and identity based. Her work makes repeated reference to her Afro-Cuban heritage as a way to explore personal and national identity, race, culture and displacement. Her recent mid-career retrospective held at the Indianapolis Museum of Art titled *Everything is Separated by Water* showcased her broad art practice including photography, video,

installation, sculpture and performance. Text is a predominant feature of Campos-Pons' oeuvre including recurring references to hair, umbilical cords, beads, water, ritual, ceremony, self-portraiture and African Yoruba religious deities.

A form of generational transmission and exchange is suggested in *Replenishing* that transcends time and distance as well as mirroring the separation between self and native home. Campos-Pons and her mother stand behind the same dark grey backdrop, they could be in the same studio or the photographs could have been taken separately and then brought together, further adding to the ambiguity of locating both figures in a geographical place. They are essentially caught in a moment in time, not just in the literal sense of the photographic medium, but in a nowhere place, a grey limbo. Despite its loaded content and emotional import, Campos-Pons work not overly sentimental or nostalgic. The larger image made from smaller are laid out, in a grid pattern with gaping white pauses and voids, the figures are fragmented, present yet detached.

The Gifts of Exchange

“Art comes from not knowing, from allowing a deeper truth to come forth.

Touching, sensing, playing with what arises as a relationship unfolds. Art is the witness, the testimony of this exchange”

-Cecilia Vicuña⁷²

Adiafa/Diyafa (ضيافة): *Gifts of Exchange* was a joint exhibition mounted by fellow artist Nicole Barakat and myself. The exhibition was held at the Cross Art Projects, in

⁷² Cecilia Vicuña, Artist Statement, in exhibition catalogue for Cecilia Vicuña, *Water Writing: Anthological Exhibition 1966-2009*, 1 September -4 December 2009, p. 13. There is also a great interview by Tatiana Flores with Vicuña included 'In Conversation with Cecilia Vicuña' pp. 4-12

Kings Cross between 15 October to 10 November 2011. The exhibition explored exchange as a making process as well as a broader theme within social and cultural customs of gifts of welcome and hospitality. Both Nicole and I had been inspired by our recent travels and reconnections with family and the notions of home and return, place and belonging, absence and presence. *Adiafa* is a Spanish word originating from the Arabic *Diyafa* (ضيافة) meaning hospitality. The works in the exhibition developed out of a collaborative process of exchanging stories and experiences, materials and textile processes. I was particularly inspired by the experience of working with my grandmother and what impact that had on my art practice. Nicole and I met regularly at each other's studio or homes allowing the work to grow organically.

The concept of exchange became a multilayered experience, it represented both the exchange of ideas and sharing of travel experiences but also by making together in the same place it also became a process for exchanging skills and materials. Exchange became a mode of transmission not just for the artists as a catalyst for (self) transformation but as a strategy to engage with the exhibition audience through collective narrative and shared knowledge. On 5 November 2011, we held a workshop within the gallery space to extend the material and exchange dialogue to those that wanted to connect to the ideas explored. Exchange and collaboration as process within the studio research gave us a way to “[think] bout what we are doing and reshaping action while we are doing it”⁷³

As part of the Gifts of Exchange exhibition I showed a work titled *Repasador* (Fig 26) . This was a tea towel that my mother had original taken to Uruguay as a gift to Abuela Elsa on our first trip back to Uruguay in 1988 after emigrating to Australia in

⁷³ C Gray and J Malins (eds.) *Visualizing research : a guide to the research process in art and design*, Burlington : Ashgate, 2004, p. 22

1986. The tea towel was gifted back to me by Abuela on a return trip to Uruguay just over 20 years later in 2009. *Repasador* is Spanish for tea towel but the word originates from *Repasar* meaning to ‘go over’ or ‘retrace’. Anthropologist Annette B Weiner observes that “Old cloths carry the histories of past relationships, making the cloth itself into a material archive that brings the authority of the past into the present”⁷⁴



Fig 26: Paula do Prado, *Repasador*, 2011, Repaired domestic cloth, appliqué and beading, 72 x 50cm

Repasador retains its accumulated stains, tears and frayed edges. I can imagine how it would have hung with pride of place in Abuela’s tiny kitchen, that it would have dried countless dishes and covered freshly cooked food to keep it warm on the table. It is a unique textile, triggering multiple memories, emotions and thoughts. Even after washing it I think I can still smell Abuela’s cooking in the fibres. I have repaired only one corner and appliquéd closed a large improvised hole which helped it hang from a

⁷⁴ AB Weiner and J Schneider (eds.) *Why Cloth? Wealth, Gender and Power in Oceania in Cloth and Human Experience*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, p. 52 (pp.33-72)

hook. The motif of the self-silhouette re-appears, indicating both an absence and a presence, remnants in gold foil and black fabric left over from other works. White and turquoise beading has been added, remind me of Abuela's beaded necklaces. This old stained tea towel is very much for me a material archive, a multi-sensory trigger, "the connections of its threads and weaving patterns with ancestral or mythical knowledge ultimately make it a vehicle for transmitting legitimacy, authority, and obligation"⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Weiner and Schneider, p. 25

Conclusion : Making a place for oneself

Mellorado is an exploration of my ancestral heritage and the family narratives that intersect with significant social, historical and cultural events. It has given me the opportunity to more fully explore the significance of my personal history and how this has come to impact on my art practice. This research has also resulted in my making connections between what had previously been unconnected, disparate or seemingly insignificant events, ideas, images and stories. One of the most significant links to my practice came through learning more about my own cultural background through my grandmother Elsa and beginning to question what identifying as Afro-Uruguayan might mean for how my work is contextualised and read.

The concept of allography as espoused by Nikos Papastergiadis has been an important one throughout this research and in fact I see this independent, self driven and quite personal investigation as a piece of allography itself. This begs the question however if such a personal exploration can make a contribution to the broader context of artistic research practice? My research has led me to various artists like Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Vivan Sundaram and Aleks Danko who all make distinct reference to their personal histories and cultural identity in their work. Specifically I found the personal and family archive to be a common creative source for many of the artists I explored. Through a process of collecting, documenting, organising, analysing and reflecting my work too became allied with the archive and its relationship to the processes of rehearsal and reworking.

A strong connection developed between my studio research and writing, whereby one informed the other, opening up new and unconsidered lines of enquiry as well as a deeper awareness of the choices I was making in the studio about materials

and techniques. I saw my own artistic desires and motivations reflected in the different artists I was researching as well as seeing elements of my Afro-Uruguayan culture embedded within the artwork I was creating. The act of practice, is to be actively engaged in critical thinking, and specifically for an artist this critical thinking occurs through making, through practice. In my work, being engaged in practice is also to be engaged in a process of rehearsal and re-working through a deliberate and open ended merging of past, present and future. Names of ancestors long past are interwoven with memories my migratory experience to Australia, figures from the Yoruba religion are re-interpreted in embellished and cloth forms and large cloth banners reminiscent of Latin American mural traditions become a repository for nationally and historically important dates, family names, colloquialisms and lists of collected information.

On reflection an unforeseen common thread has emerged both within the context of this text and the work comprising the Mellorado exhibition. Not only has my work in Mellorado being an attempt to write myself into the current cultural and social discourse, but it has repeatedly strived to affirm and elucidate a specific cultural identity that provides a rationale or justification for the kind of work I make in terms of its style, the choice of materials and its intention. There are already within this paper a few possible explanations for this, firstly as discussed in Chapter 4, there is a palpable anxiety in the Australian context related to race and cultural production, indigenous and non-indigenous and the complexity of politicised debates on immigration and asylum seeker policy. This creates a certain tension when it comes to publicly exhibiting work or presenting yourself as an Australian artist when your artwork could be seen to be political in nature and your motivations are more open to question. Secondly as an immigrant, my practice has become a way for me to express a sense of duality and hybridity that I feel words (whether in Spanish or English) cannot articulate. Living

away from my 'native' culture creates a situation where I must actively seek to engage with my memories of 'home' so that these are not eroded by time and distance. These elements are very much indicative of the time and place in which I making my work and ultimately highlights a desire for recognition, acknowledgement and acceptance.

My role as researcher here has been that of the critical artist, to engage with autobiographical narratives as well as the concept of the archive and its connection to research. It is essentially research about research. The autobiographical narrative becomes a strategy of resistance, which through the structure and discipline of the research process forms a means of establishing my presence. I began this research by wanting to explore the interaction between identity, culture and heritage through the idea of inheritance, being 'mellorado' or improved upon. Coming away from this research with a deeper understanding of my Afro-Uruguayan heritage has been of great significance to me as an individual but Mellorado has been more than just a personal journey. Mellorado is a process of research, it is the concept of improving upon what has come before you, to question, analyse and build on existing knowledge and to make a place for oneself. Mellorado represents a beginning rather than a point of completion. It is through practice, the act of rehearsal and continual re-working that rather than repeat or re-create the past, new modes for the transmission of history, social and cultural memory open up as well as alternative avenues for critically engaging with the complexity of identity, culture and heritage.

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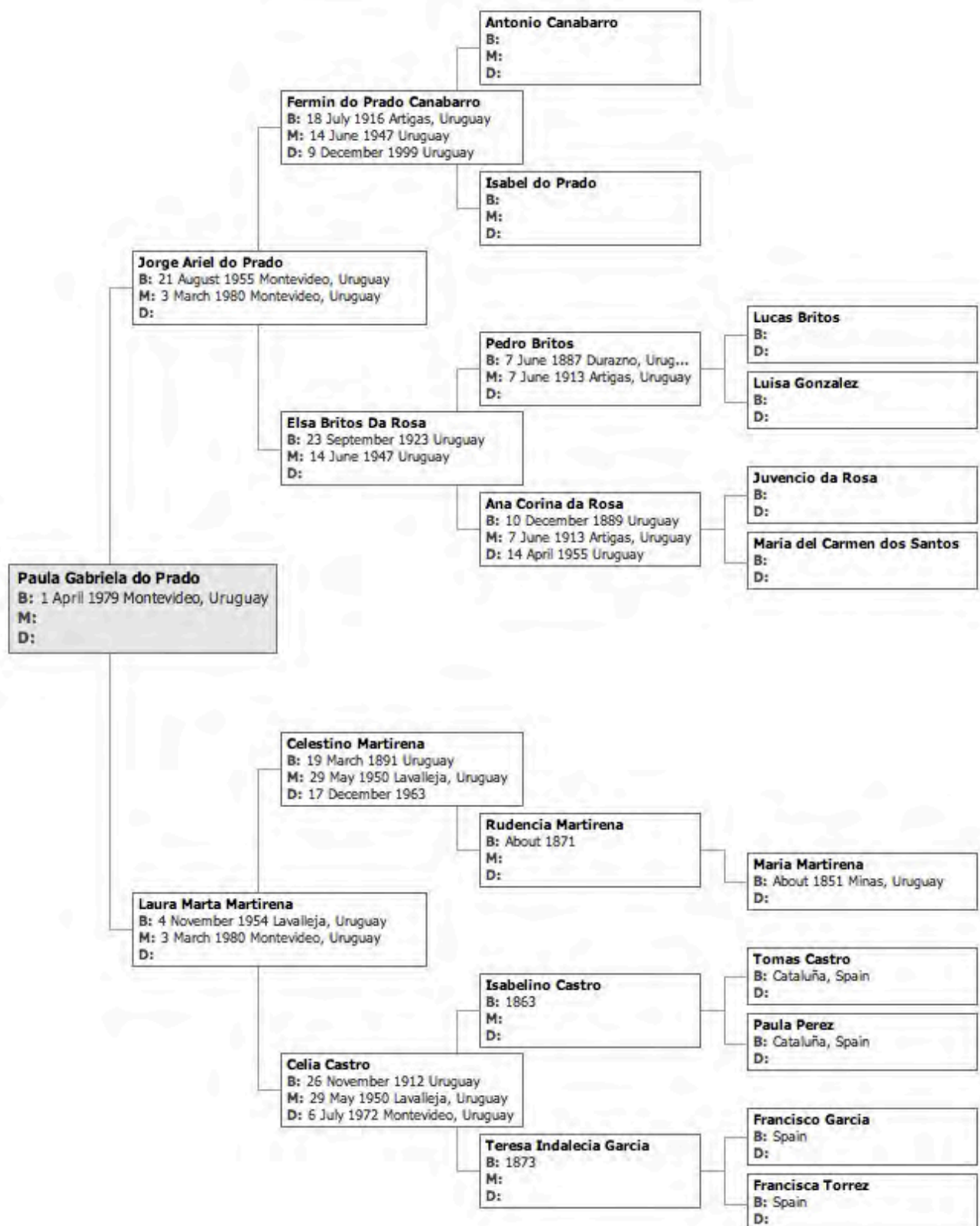
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Family Tree - Paula do Prado



Timeline

1680 First African slaves arrive in Uruguay to the port of Montevideo

1811 Uruguay gains Independence

1842 Slavery officially abolished in Uruguay

1955 My great-grandmother Ana Corina passes away and the same year my father, Jorge is born

1981 - 1984 My father Jorge and his band Pareceres are at their musical peak, one of their LP's goes Platinum and two other Gold records awarded

1999 My grandfather, Fermin do Prado passes away

2009 Uruguay is the first country in the world to provide one laptop per child for primary school children

2011 Uruguayan Bicentennary

1788 European settlement begins in Australia

1973 Abolition of White Australia Policy

1984 My father Jorge visits Australia for the first time on his own to perform at the Sydney Town Hall, Nicaragua Concert

1986 My parents and I migrate to Australia as permanent residents thanks to the Family Reunion stream

1988 First trip back to Uruguay. Family reunion scheme is wound up with a focus on skilled migrants

1989 We gain Australian citizenship

1990 & 1993 Return trips to Uruguay

2007 Return trip to Uruguay after 15 year absence

2009 I spend 2 months conducting field study Uruguay

2010 I return for another 3 months field study in Uruguay

2011 I make my first trip to the UK to exhibit in a group show and present at a conference

Appendix B

To view online please go to: www.mellorado.weebly.com/



Appendix C

Veinte Negros

Written by Carlos Robello/Jorge do Prado

Veinte negros de Palermo, cantaban sus tristecias
entre botellas de vino que iban quedando vacias

Veinte negras de Palermo, candombe triste cantaban
mientras lavaban la ropa, sus senos se les mojaban

Veinte negritos Palermo, zapatos que cepillaban
y sus pies golpeando el piso, un canto negro tocaban

Y mientras aquellos negros, amor de barrio evocaban
veinte blancos, por monedas, Medio Mundo derrumbaban

— — —

Twenty blacks

Twenty black men from Palermo, singing their melancholy
between bottles of wine, the contents slowly emptying

Twenty black women from Palermo, singing a sad candombe tune
their breasts soaked from washing clothes

Twenty black children, shoes they shine
their feet tapping the ground, playing a black beat

And whilst those black people, the heart of a town they evoked
twenty white people, for pennies, demolished half a world

Translated from the Spanish by Paula do Prado

Mellorado: identity, heritage and transmission

Exhibition images

Mellorado

Gallerysmith, North Melbourne

March 15 - April 14, 2012

Paula Gabriela do Prado

Master of Fine Art by Research

School of Design Studies, Textiles

All installation images by Armelle Habib



