

*Peut-être que, depuis la fragilité, nous pouvons penser d'autres manières de construire des abris féministes. Nous pourrions penser la fragilité non pas tant comme la perte potentielle de quelque chose, la fragilité comme perte, mais comme une qualité des relations que nous acquérons, ou une qualité de ce que nous construisons. Un abri fragile a des murs plus lâches, faits de matériaux plus légers : voyez comme ils bougent. Un mouvement, c'est ce qu'on construit pour survivre à ce qui a été construit. Lorsque nous relâchons les conditions nécessaires pour être au monde, nous créons de l'espace pour que les autres puissent être. (Sara Ahmed)*

Bien à toi,

Virginie

Dear,

I am taking the liberty to write to you directly. We don't know each other, yet I<sup>(1)</sup> would like to confide in you about a few intimate thoughts that arose while preparing the final chapter of *Bestiario de Lengüitas* at CAC Brétigny — under its exhibition form, at least. My conversation with Mercedes began in April 2017 in Paris, during the initial phase of her two-part residency at Villa Vassilieff.<sup>(2)</sup> I was on maternity leave at the time, but I met her in her studio with my 3-month-old daughter Nour. This marked the beginning of a relationship in which the professional<sup>(3)</sup> and the personal-as-political are deeply entangled. As I attempt to retrace the multiple steps and encounters that led you to hold this booklet, I feel the urge to bring together stories, companions and feelings that usually remain backstage. After all, backstage has been an important location for *Bestiario* from the start. A place of metamorphosis; dressing, undressing and cross-dressing; infused with the smells of make-up, sweat, fatigue and desire.

Indeed, *Bestiario de Lengüitas* developed alongside the writing of a script for a theater play, an ongoing process which aggregated heterogeneous voices and

(1) My letter is woven with quotes by other women, in the hope of exposing the I from which I write as porous and co-dependent. As Sara Ahmed recalls, "Citation is feminist memory. It is how we leave a trail of where we have been and who helped us along the way." All bibliographical

references can be found at the end of this text.  
(2) Supported by the Pernod Ricard Fellowship.  
(3) By "the professional", I mean transformative, reciprocal gestures of care and attention to each other's work; and joint efforts to build ethical and material conditions for it to thrive.

“friends from the past”<sup>(4)</sup> and the present. Fueled by workshops, collaborations and rehearsals with artists, researchers, designers, dancers and singers, the works on view invite a choir of grotesque characters to loudly inhabit the stage of a future performance. Using obsolete knowledge systems, *neobarroso* poems, failed translations and ambiguous ingredients, they try to maintain chaos and excess in a world calling for order, efficiency and transparency. Drawings, costumes, embroideries, videos, sound pieces and sculptures can be approached as scores, prototypes, décors, encoded knowledge systems or even characters responding to each other, rather than as autonomous artworks. They are windows into a work-in-progress that proliferates through multiple encounters, friendships and affections. *Bestiario de Lengüitas* finds inspiration in proto-scientific knowledge devices, blending European medieval imaginaries with Latin American cosmogonies; and bringing together witches, goddesses and muses from both sides of the Atlantic. The protagonists (be they living or dead; existing or fictive; humans, prostheses, animals, demons or plants) converse in a polyphony of languages and voices that obfuscate straight narratives. *Bestiario de Lengüitas* invites you into a “New World Baroque”<sup>(5)</sup> kind of movement that favors instability and proliferation over the quest for a single truth.

In her preliminary notes to the script, Mercedes roots her writing in the necessity to rethink our relationship to *place, home, or dwelling*, by detaching it from a geographical location and anchoring it in the body as a porous site of desire. Situating herself as a Latina immigrant in the Old World (with, nonetheless, her “own little reign of privileges”), she ponders on the effects of migration and displacement

— be it forced or voluntary — as determining features of humans and other living forms; and how this planetary condition could become a generative tool to navigate a spinning world and undo *the master’s house* (Audre Lorde).

*The idea of home rather refers to a sense of community. My body is formed by memories, people and places that are not necessarily present by my side. They nevertheless form together a constellation of affections and care that becomes my community or, to put it better, our community. Could we create a sense of belonging detached from a specific location, a home characterized by ambivalence, fluidity, multiplicity, the mixture of values, dispersion, contradictions as well as absences? Could we foment such bodies-homes, sensitive, multiple and fragmented, capable of thinking themselves as and in communities? ” (Mercedes Azpilicueta, my translation)*

Re-reading these notes in October 2020 takes a new, dramatical resonance, amidst the restrictions and distances imposed upon our bodies by *la Covid-19*<sup>(6)</sup> and its State (mis)management. As I begin typing this letter at home, I feel shattered by the unbearable

(4) I am grateful to Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz for this generative notion.

(5) The “New World Baroque” refers to rebel, mixed and decolonial ramifications of the European Baroque in the colonies of the Americas (Note from the editors).

(6) On May 7 2020, the

Académie Française published an article championing the use of the feminine pronoun *la*, as the only “proper grammatical gender” of Covid-19 against the “faulty” masculine *le* that was widely employed until then. Indeed, in French, “disease” is female.

disparities that the notion of home carries today. Home is where many of *us* — the art working class — had the privilege to confine ourselves during the recent lockdown; while for others, home — meaning a place to cohabit with our loved ones — became desperately out of reach. Home is where I work and interact with dematerialized bodies while other bodies outside fall sick and die; fall at the hands of the police and die; fall under a knife driven by exclusion and hatred and die. Home is where, last Spring, an increased percentage of women and children suffered from domestic violence while locked inside for their safety. Home is where we fear and mourn alone for bodies that we are forbidden to touch or to bury, while other bodies provide care work at the detriment of their own health. Home is what is not available to those who are forced to stay on the streets by hostile policies. Home is what separates *bodies that matter* from those that don't, *grievable lives* from those that aren't, expanding *zones of uninhabitability* (Judith Butler).

*Now months later, I'm still trying to move through my depression and into another state of mind. I'm still trying to escape my shadow beasts (desconocimientos): numbness, anger, and disillusionment. Besides dealing with my own personal shadow, I must contend with the collective shadow in the psyches of my culture and nation—we always inherit the past problems of family, community, and nation. I stare up at the moon, Coyolxauhqui, and its light in the darkness. I seek a healing image, one that re-connects me to others. I seek the positive shadow that I've also inherited.*  
(Gloria Anzaldúa)

Mercedes' script is populated by dead and sick bodies. A founding inspiration is Néstor Perlongher's poem *Cadáveres* (see pp. 55-6), a litany mourning the accumulation of corpses left by the Argentinian dictatorship (1976-83). The poem was written on his way to exile in Brazil in 1981, after he had been detained for his active participation in the Argentinian Homosexual Liberation Front. Online, you can listen to Perlongher's voice reciting the poem in 1989, three years before he died from AIDS. It resonates into the *Coro del inframundo* [Choir of the underworld], which keeps interrupting Mercedes' script: exuberant corpses, vagabonds and fallen angels who speak in *mestiza*<sup>(7)</sup> tongues and embody excess and the loss of meaning. For Mercedes, they personify (as did Perlongher) the literary style of "Neobarroso Rioplatense", a parodic carnivalization of the Baroque by 20th century Latinx<sup>(8)</sup> writers and artists, which intended to disrupt the lasting colonial order through unruly, messy poetics.

*The indigenous world does not conceive of history as linear; the past-future is contained in the present. The regression or progression,*

(7) Under the Spanish Empire, the term referred to people of mixed, European and indigenous lineage. Here, we are rather inspired by the text by chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa, "La conciencia de la mestiza. Towards a New Consciousness" (from: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987), who introduces

the figure of the mestiza as "a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, (...) and in a state of perpetual transition (...)." (8) The "x" is used in Spanish as an alternative to the masculine "o" and the feminine "a".

*the repetition or overcoming of the past is at play in each conjuncture and is dependent more on our acts than on our words. The project of indigenous modernity can emerge from the present in a spiral whose movement is a continuous feedback from the past to the future—a “principle of hope” or “anticipatory consciousness”—that both discerns and realizes decolonization at the same time.*

(Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui)

In her own poem *nos sentimos intoxicadas* (see pp. 42-3), which appears on the exhibition walls, Mercedes inscribes her body into a community of close others, bound by their vulnerability to a patriarchal neo-liberal order that poisons and destroys lives for profit. However, *Bestiario de Lengüitas* gives a prominent place to ambivalent elements (minerals, plants and characters) who combine the powers to intoxicate and to heal. As historian Samir Boumediene points out in his study of the circulation of medicinal plants between the “New World” and Europe in the 15th-18th centuries, and how it reconfigured orders of knowledge and power on both sides of the Atlantic, this subversive ambiguity reminds us that *learning is a bit like falling sick* (what a beautiful sentence!): opening oneself to affection, loss and transformation. *Ruda* leaves, which infuse Mercedes’ script, drawings and embroideries, are used in domestic rituals of protection as well as for abortion, which just became legal in Argentina, after years of struggle. *We are the granddaughters of the witches you could not burn*, chanted women marching for abortive rights; chants a choir of amateur singers in Madrid, who performed extracts from Mercedes’ script. Witches — *brujas*, *meigas*, *Donne Selvatiche*, whose legends and stories were collected by Mercedes in Buenos Aires, Madrid

and Bolzano — provide us with ambiguous figures of resistance against various biopowers (such as the pharmaceutical industry).<sup>(18)</sup> As in the last verse of Mercedes’ poem, assembled across forced distances, *we start to vibrate*.

*My bloodstream has been emptied of one its viral others, yet this porous relationality of being multiple in the world remains. Our vulnerable bodies are reliant upon each other at the planetary scale, requiring both the intimate care of mutual aid and the cures of biomedical science. To live among viruses and survive our interactions with them, think like a virus: xenophilic, opportunistic, multiplied and many. Our resistance to neoliberal isolation must become so expansive as to saturate the atmosphere.* (Caitlin Berrigan)

Mercedes once described herself as a “dishonest researcher”, a misfit, an imposter. She has a pirate way of *cruising* through disciplinary categories and methods, as well as cultural, geographical or historical boundaries. Such a non-authoritarian position echoes that of Barbara Cassin calling herself a “trembling philosopher” — she who describes translation, a central process in the script and the exhibition, as a *savoir-faire with differences*, a contingent, situated gesture of love. A never-ending activity. Yes, you’ll see, *Bestiario de Lengüitas* remains a rather classical exhibition — a form, or rather an ecosystem, currently undermined by the temporary or permanent closure of art institutions, justified by the Covid-19 crisis. As such, we hope that you will enjoy your encounter with the artworks and stories on display. And that you will see, shining underneath the surface, the discrete weaving of relations, voices and

shared struggles that constituted its fabric over four dense years. Our extended *Bestiario* kinship, who invites you to come in.

*lenguas vivas*  
*lenguas lamiendo muertos*  
*lenguas*  
*lenguas*  
*lenguas menguantes*  
*lenguas como calcetines*  
*lenguas*  
*lenguas muertas,*  
*lenguas con hongos*  
*lenguas lamiendo muertos*  
*lenguas*  
(Mercedes Azpilicueta)

Before I leave you, please accept this modest gift in the shape of an untranslated poem, so that it rings to your eyes, mouth and ears as a disconcerting, spell-binding mystery (unless you read Spanish, of course). Mercedes' script is populated by *lenguas mestizas* and *dirty translations* that favor opacity and failure. Languages and tongues are inseparable from the body. They are desiring organs bridging our mouths and ears, among others. Living-dead tongues, organs that may fail, voices that may tremble. A trembling way of inhabiting the world: could that open a way to *reparative fiction* (Emilie Notéris) with performative effects? Trembling: not with fear, not with fever, not in shock over the physical or psychic consequences of violence. But instead, as a way of being affected, being attuned to others, vibrant, vulnerable together.

*Perhaps from fragility we can think of other ways of building feminist shelters. We might think of fragility not so much as the potential*

*to lose something, fragility as loss, but as a quality of relations we acquire, or a quality of what is we build. A fragile shelter has looser walls, made out of lighter materials; see how they move. A movement is what is built to survive what has been built. When we loosen the requirements to be in a world, we create room for others to be. (Sara Ahmed)*

Yours,  
Virginie



## Citations / Quotes

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Merci à Elena Lespes Muñoz de nous avoir recommandé de lire Cusicanqui / I am grateful to Elena Lespes Muñoz for bringing Cusicanqui into our conversation.

