

Inner Experience

by Verónica Rossi

Dear Mercedes,

I've been thinking for days about writing you this letter. It's Sunday. It's warm outside and I'm alone, no one is going to interrupt me. Through the window, I'm witnessing the arrival of spring, as many types of azaleas bloom, their waves of perfume flooding the sidewalks of Washington DC these days.

I'm now a traveller between worlds, as you have been for years. Those journeys of yours shaped the specific kind of artist you've become: a versatile one, who is interested in the medium as much as in the concept. Those journeys also defined the research we undertook long ago. Our exploration into the history of History, in search of characters who inspired you to make artworks that sit in the present while looking at the past, following Walter Benjamin, whose work made the past present.

Your work is centred around those journeys, diasporas, exiles, migrations, and displacements. It's testament to your condition as a migrant woman. The body in transit is central to your work, as much as the longing and solitude of the traveller. In your work with tapestries, the body has been replaced with textiles. It's reshaped by their materiality and colours. Embodied in the embroideries that retell images from the past so as to rethink History.

I remember our first investigation together. We studied the Argentinian writer and traveller Eduarda Mansilla. She was born in 1834 in Argentina's capital, Buenos Aires, in the region of Rio de la Plata, the river dividing Argentina and Uruguay, but also weaving them together, as it provides a sense of cultural homogeneity.

Eduarda got married at the age of twenty-one to Manuel Rafael García, a diplomat with whom she began to travel around the world. In one of these trips, maybe in Washington DC —not far from where I'm writing to you— she would have written her 1860 novel *Lucía Miranda*. This book tells the story of a 16th-century

captive woman who falls in love with the indigenous chief who kidnapped her during the attack on the Sancti Spiritus fortification, the first Spanish settlement in the territory we know today as Argentina, which ended in utter and complete failure for the Spanish expedition.

The figure of the captive is integral to the matrix of Latin American literature, and it has generated successive rewritings by authors from Eduarda Mansilla in 1860 to César Aira and Jorge Luis Borges. Resulting from an exercise in historiographical imagination, your work *The Captive* is yet another twist in a sequence of narratives that weave the past.

The second investigation we undertook revolves around a peculiar figure: Catalina, the Lieutenant Nun, also known as Antonio de Erauso. Catalina escaped from the Old Convent in San Sebastián, in what today is Spain, hiding in a grove of chestnut trees. There s/he took off their veil, discarded their habits, cut their hair, and turned their clothes into a pageboy outfit.

According to some sources, in the early years of Erauso's transformation s/he puts a plaster on their breasts to prevent their growth and dry them out. Breasts signal an obstacle to pass as a man. There is a religious connotation to this act, which reminds us of Saint Perpetua, a warrior saint who experienced her own spiritual and bodily transformation. Even though she is often depicted as a mother nursing her baby, Saint Perpetua was transfigured into a man and became a soldier of Jesus Christ.

Erauso, on the other hand, embarked on a journey overseas to the American continent—with all the dangers involved in crossing the ocean— and reached Punta de Araya, in present-day Venezuela. In these American regions, s/he served as a soldier of the Spanish empire for nineteen years.

There is a poetics in Erauso's writings. Their memoirs present an imaginary that incorporates the myth of the virile woman, the female soldier, the gambler, and the heavy drinker who lives like a man, fighting, gambling, killing.

In Catalina's (or Antonio's) memoirs, images play a structural role in organising the story and cementing the hero's masculinity.

This is how El Cid, the most legendary of Castilian knights, makes appearance in Erauso's autobiography. Sporting a thick beard, El Cid had lived in the chronicles, poems and comedies of medieval Castile. In their writings, Erauso brings him back to challenge their own virility, as s/he kills him in the streets of Lima, Peru, thus putting an end to the life of a quintessentially Spanish hero.

Sea travel in Erauso's time responded to economic, religious, and political factors, which were typically linked to territorial conquest, religious conversion, the exploitation of men and women, as well as the classification and assimilation of territories and peoples. Displacement across the space was linked to the acquisition of knowledge. As the object of knowledge was far away, travelling became the practice that bridged that gap.

Erauso lived in times of unrest. There is a sense of vulnerability and helplessness in the imagery surrounding their life in the late 16th century. Filled with fantasy, humour and even surreal elements, the images in the tapestry can also be regarded as a dream of Catalina or Antonio.

These images come from coeval artworks made in response to the conquest of America. But you've reinterpreted them: they are no longer faithful. Even though they seemed so when we first carried out research work and established a dialogue between historical images sourced from the collections of museums, libraries, archives, and churches.

For some, travelling makes it possible to escape from reality without making excuses or experiencing further effects in one's everyday life. And so we are reaching the end of a journey that has involved, just like those journeys made by ancient travellers, some sort of shift.

For women travellers, moving across the spaces often responded to a need of expanding one's vision, in order to experience, to live and write. For us, it's a displacement in time, in search of the traces they left behind.

I send you a hug from Washington. Hoping to see you soon,
Verónica

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