

For Love and Theory: An Ofrenda

ALTAR OF THE ALTER

Ofrenda: From the Spanish language, and more specifically, from contemporary Chicana/o cultural practices. An offering to a beloved.

Altar: From the Spanish language, and again, more specifically, from contemporary Chicana/o cultural practices. A construction, usually visual, in this case linguistic and imaginative, that unlike its orthodox Christian usages, for example, sacralizes (that is, sets apart as sound and whole unto itself, from the Latin, *sacer* / *sacrus*) the human or the mundane, because it is beloved, and thus deified. As a Chicana/o art practice adapted from a more general cultural practice of setting up religious or profane altars in the home to patron saints and absent relatives, perhaps upon the television or upon a bureau, the altar is a transtemporal and transphysical space where self or selves are offered to the other, the alter, whose life or being is recognized as a precious gift to the devoted one(s).

In Chicana/o art practices, the altar renders sacred the beloved. What is offered is the pretense to self-sufficiency. What is honored is the indispensability of community with the other(s). What is sacrificed in the name of our love for and devotion to the other is a fixed notion of identity. What is *atoned* through it is the alienation of one self from another self. The altar manifests our transformation by the other. In the willfully constructed space of the altar, identities are dissolved in the desire to intercourse with the other, in the will to conjure an other through the images, words, memories, gestures of that other that have become a part of us. Because it evokes a physically absent other, the altar functions to prevent this wound from closing. Our altar / alter renders us vulnerable, open, receptive. The only fixed image of the alter as altar is a thickly painted, fruit-like, blood-red heart.

Though there may very well be snapshots or sketches of the evoked other as a part of the offering, the altar is a kind of portrait with no fixed central image, that is only partially enclosed by bits and pieces of what might have turned into a frame. As if gazing into a mirror that becomes an entryway to the un-verbalized, the portrait of the self as metamorphosing being (hopefully, a productive redundancy) functions therefore as an ever-changing file that at some

point in the metonymic chain of associations ceases being directly about the other, in any literal or representational way. Like the objects scattered upon the altar, however, (flowers, incense, favorite toys and gadgets, fruits, letters and the like), the associations arrived at through the reveries provoked by the homaged alter, inextricably, if enigmatically, further bind the homaged and the flayed. The experience of the altar becomes an experiencing of the alter as self: In the altar, I encounter my alterity.

Altar-writing: In an altar, one simultaneously writes with and against the beloved, at once for and in spite of the other. This altar-writing is a ritual of immolation (*altäre*, akin to the Latin *adolēre*, to burn up) that mediates change in the emergence of the other, of an alter. Here one evades at once the boredom of repetition and the danger of adherence through an alter-native figuration of the other's work. In this sense, the beloved here is less of a centerpiece than the mediator of new amorous encounters — one loves through the other.

This altar-writing is not about a depressed narcissism that mourns the loss of an object, but a kind of amorous discourse in which absence engenders a writerly fatigue. Unlike the depressed writer, the altar-writer does not search for a thing, an idea, or a revelation in the other's *œuvre* that could compensate for what is absent — that which cannot be represented. Here, there is no immediate desire for representation, only a languorous wish for figuration through which one can enter the other's image-repertoire without attempting to seize anything right away. In writerly languor, I wait, I defer, I procrastinate, I postpone, hence a protraction of my desire for the other.

Community: An altar is invested with the power of communication because it is predicated on the idea of community. The gathering of objects, fruits, and flowers involves a communal effort through which friendships are formed, ideas are exchanged, and transitions are mediated. An altar-writing works against both the existence of autonomous subjectivity and the instrumentality of communication. It is rather the figuration of a productive noise that can engender in the "reader" the desire to imagine, to construct, unorthodox community.

Community, not as a project of fusion, of commonality, of consensus, but as Jean-Luc Nancy defines it, as a bond that is formed through opposition against immanent power. Unlike currently dominant notions of nation, whose collective ethos repress difference and force homogeneity, community signifies a relational in-commonness that exposes our singularities. It is, as Nancy describes it, a finitude of the *I's*, who are always *others*. To invoke the figure of the altar / alter is a desire for the experience of being in-common; it is a mode of sharing that exposes one's own sense of alterity: The experience of the other's alterity

exposes one's own sense of otherness. Community is thus formed in the sharing of identity as alterity.

THE LIGHTED CANDLES

The cultural habit of defining, that is, of conceptually mastering through the construction of divisions based on ideologically perceived differences, is interrupted by the secret (and we are induced to believe shameful) desire to embrace the strange(r) over and over again. The socially dangerous impulse to transcend the limitations of what are generally perceived as our identities at the very least provokes us to an illicit affair with the intellectual and ideological other. It threatens to make exiles of us; it promises to deliver us to experiences uncolonized by the pretension to authoritative knowledge.

Theory can be the attempt to *plasmear* (embody, materialize) the tension between definition and the as-yet unverballed experience, to *itself* be the translucent image of a culture's newly created finites, nestled within the womb of the infinite. It can be the trysting of the narrated and the poetic. In the seemingly socially useless practice of theorizing, a space of play can emerge that desacralizes (undoes) privileged cultural strictures and envisions, and thus ovulates, the creation of alter-normal (cf. ab-native) modes of being. To proffer one's self on the bed of theory is to embrace the unmappable experience that is thought. It is to become a sacred, sacrificial slut who makes an intercourse of encounter. It is to become a s/he capable of loving a culture's refuse. To flay one's composed self erotically in and through thought is to become receptive to impregnation by the unknown self, the alter self, and the unconceptualizable. It is to love the alter as *mi otro yo*.

Like the objects ritually, metonymically, evocative of the honored other, love constitutes us, as does thought. Perhaps thought is one of love's creative gestures. Bruises, stains, odors, psychic and physical changes in our bodies mark love's transformation of us, its mediation through us. These resonant traces of the other now in our being, like the crystal at the heart of this other computer through which we write, allow us to transcend physical and temporal differences, and to access the other in other media, that is, in other ways.

Theory: From the Greek *theōria*, meaning a looking at, a viewing of. A practice of spectatorship that takes us outside of our world, outside of ourselves; it displaces our sense of self-containment by exposing us to the other, to the alter. In the spectator act of theorizing, I am exposed to my alterity, to my difference, and thus become conscious of my exteriority as my identity becomes intertwined with the other's — we do not merge into one, but are exposed to differences that make us alike (*semblable*). Such an exposure of specular differences inaugurates

a critical consciousness towards the notion of identity that makes facile gestures of identification difficult. The aim of theory, as Foucault reminds us, is "to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such." Hence the transformative power of theory: "as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible" (Foucault 155).

Mediation: The tranquil weeding up of the stubborn and seemingly ubiquitous mental forms of one's marginality and the seeding of more desirable blooms. A kind of practice where we no longer think of centrality, but rather of *ombliquesidad* (vs. *ombliquismo*): We are all belly buttons, middles, the very gut of being. Alterity, we realize, is the norm, not the exception.

THE FLOATING INCENSE

Irony: From the Greek *eirōnia*, dissimulation. Making other, alter, altar. To laugh upon discovering our complicity, that is, our identity with everything we reject and abjure, everything we imagine and desire.

Self-reflexivity: In the mirrors of self-reflexivity, I see my split self.

Paradox: To watch the lovingly shaved body of orthodoxy tremble in fear, anticipation, or delirium.

THE SWEETS, THE PLAYTHINGS, AND OTHER OBJECTS STREWN ABOUT

Seduction: Its root words in the Latin signify to lead apart. To persuade to engage in some uncommon activity, and thus, the lingering moralistic overtones of leading astray from the perceived common good. The feared heart of the matter: To entice, with the object of an illicit intercourse with an unsuspecting other. Being a wily old dog, the *maestra/o* leads through desire.

Likeness of a Dog: The figure of the critic as cynic (from the Greek, *kynikos*, dog-like; *kyōn*, a dog), as *perro callejero*. The roaming, homeless dog functions unexpectedly, for the tourist visiting from dog-catching regimes. This mangy creature is an omnipresent threat of contamination and disease, and at the same time a startling reminder of the easy ability of unmastered animals and other people to cohabit. There is the sudden realization that the unmastered does not threaten us. Our horror of the scarred flesh of these wandering animal-beggars ravages us. But this fear can yield to compassion, and we can begin to identify with what we were taught to fear as unapproachably other. In this *encuentro*, we too become *perros callejeros*.

Virtue: "[An] effective power or force; efficacy; potency; especially, the ability to heal or strengthen; as, the *virtue* of a medicine" (*Webster's Dictionary* 2042) — rooted in what can, positively, be imagined as an ancient notion of felicitously realized manliness (Latin: *vir*, man); a becoming of self, through expansion of self, and not the desire to limit the other. To let the self wander into desired and imagined forms of being that move us beyond, for example, culturally-perceived sexual and gender identities, or other power-invested, ideologically-motivated projections of identity. To proffer our transgressions of condoned identities as a love offering in the spectacle of one's social immolation. To occupy even the margin's margins without self-righteousness or sentimentalities, but rather simply to bring ourselves into view and to make these zones, generally perceived as uninhabitable, visible.

The Fruits: Images of the human body and of past and present lovers. Bottles of cologne and lotions with which we care for our bodies. Combs, mirrors, cosmetics. Erotic postcards. Letters, hastily scribbled notes. A small and dark, crimson velvet chest. The body is a chamber of practices from which our love and theory spring, and to which these return to further find expression. The body, as we live through it, is the proverbial, B-Movie altar of love and sacrifice to the self and the other. Through the erotic rituals of the body we invoke the culturally strange, the queer — in us, in the other.

A Few Bugs: The thinker as parasite is not an enemy of the larger body with which s/he cohabits (to the interesting accusations of opportunism, vicariousness, and uselessness). There is an identity between "parasite" and "host" that mediates their coexistence and that allows the former's function as agent of transformation of the social body. The parasite does not so much react to particular stimuli as find ways to adapt to a myriad of situations. It is a living organism within a living organism and therefore its principal function is change. The theorist preys upon the system lovingly. Culturally, the parasite is indeed perceived as "noise" because of a collective cultural identity that mediates recognition and the possibility of naming. A culture's cynic manipulates deep and invisibly pervasive cultural formulae with virtuosity and virtue, that is, beyond narrower motivations of personal or short-term social gain. (See Ross's "No Montagues Without Capulets: Some Thoughts on 'Cultural Identity.'")

Melancholy: Why is writing disabled here? Is it the excess of memory traces that overwhelms to the point of tongue-tiedness? Or is it a melancholic recognition of the redundancy of the figure of love, once it is avowed? Perhaps this anxiety murmurs against the invocation of discipleship? Or still, perhaps, this narrative aporia is simply an affective response, an emptiness manifesting the loss of

interest in a belated communication, an asymbolia in a familiar field of the image-repertoire?

The idea of an altar is a melancholic one. Its mnemonic structure forces us to encounter the presence of absence. In an altar, every object is also a signifier of loss, but displayed in such a fashion so as to generate an excess of presence. In the figure of the altar, we may thus encounter a schizophrenia or a simultaneity: the valorized image of the other that disrupts individual tranquillity, imposing a kind of non-communicable grief, and / or a narcissistic identification with the other, an affective cohesion that engenders imagination, semantic excess, and the desire to speak.

Opposition: Resembling the early modernist writers of mid-nineteenth century France, described in *Mélancolie et opposition*, "post-68 theoreticians" share a profound "consciousness of failure," the failure of resistance as a transcendental project against immanent power. Too conscious of its marginality to devise expansive and inclusive theories of resistance, this critical community imagines modes of oppositionality that are appropriative, diffuse, local, and sporadic. There is no general nor total program of change here; only singular maneuvers within an insurmountable system of power. Attentive to their own constitutions and functions within the hegemonic system against which they work, these critical maneuvers are self-reflexive about their historicity and self-critical of their complicity.

THE FLOWERS

Fragrant Acacias: In the claustrophobic room of Sylvia Molloy's *En breve cárcel* [Certificate of Absence], the unnamed protagonist's will to control and to certitude through the power of narrative is interrupted by the fragrance of the cut flowers in her otherwise spartan cell. The wildness at the enigmatic heart of thought and writing into which the writer's crisis of identity propels her is invoked — even channeled — through that seductive fragrance.

Small, Wild Roses: Passionate reading is an active, not passive, receptivity. The one who writes receptively about another's work returns to that other, and to the larger culture, which was produced in him through the text. This writer departs from the recognition of the collective or transpersonal nature of creativity. There is beauty in writing as a gesture that acknowledges that first it was s/he who received.

A Flowering Cactus: A critical and passionate theoretical practice provokes in us resistance and resentment. The thought we are offered confronts the complacency of our beliefs. The passionate thinker pushes us beyond the self-righteous

orthodoxies that underpin much of our "progressive" thought. Even among allies, this kind of theorist is both the black sheep and the wily dog. This thinker addresses his activities to the present, thus having sacrificed in the self, the cultural pretense to immortality through writing.

Fleurs du mal: The figure of an epochal ennui. The sense of malaise with one's own complicity in a system whose disciplinary power interpellates even one's claim to oppositionality. The sense of critical claustrophobia at a time when even running ahead is a form of political belatedness, in an era when resistance has become the very condition of power. We are facing once again the Baudelairean predicament of modern melancholia but in an epoch when his self-conscious politics of "hypocrisy" can no longer offer us an alternative vision. How does one then imagine a politics of hope that works against our contemporary form of critical spleen?

METONYMIC DEPARTURES

Torn from a Journal: Nostalgia for a definable critical and pedagogical practice. Tactics to subvert the commodification of "the progressive"? What is disruptive noise now?

Unidentified Flying Objects: Forays into the non-rational, the para-academic. With the critique of the subjective and cultural relativity and self-interest of previously authoritative knowledges (scientific, philosophic, religious), there are no longer any fields of knowledge or experience that can be logically barred from the play of our minds. To transgress is still to follow one's curiosity or desire, into the Do Not Enter Zones. Echo: "Radical" aperture to the unknown "feels" like the "natural" movement of an untrammelled being. The boredom (disinterest) that most political, intellectual, artistic activity elicits from us is an invitation to what initially feels like a sacrificial leap unto the altars of the unknown. For love, theory, and the unnameable, ours is a will and a desire to couple with the cultural monsters of our time. Perhaps those seemingly definitive alters, are within the labyrinth of our own unknown being and desire. As they say in cocktail lounge scenes in the movies, "What's your pleasure? What'll it be?"

THE REFUSE

Allegory: From the two words "all" and "gory," if the altar is misread as a narrative of alterity.

Resistance: A mode of struggle against oppression. The recycling of the post-68 dictum that one is always "inside" power: Opposition and resistance do not

constitute a dichotomy of effective and ineffective means of social and political transformation, but rather two modes of contestation against dominant relations of power. How might "lateral affiliations" between solitary and communal resistances, spontaneous and concerted oppositions, peaceful and violent struggles, evade the recuperative tendencies of the dominant power more effectively?

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The Last Word: What Diogenes would refuse to utter.

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