

## The Relational Self

On the Vulnerability and Entanglement of the Self in Selected Work from Ettinger and  
Mendieta

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## Abstract

This thesis focusses on a relational understanding of the self by asking how the self is relationally constituted through others and the natural environment. This question is addressed by visually analysing Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). The research question that this thesis aims to answer is: how do Ettinger's painting on family relations and Mendieta's photograph on natural relations address relational understandings of the self through vulnerability and entanglement of the self with others and the world? By putting these artworks in conversation with each other and contemporary theory on relationality, this thesis approaches relationality through the entanglement of the self with others as well as through the entanglement of the self with nature. Through visual analysis of the artworks and an agential realist approach, this thesis reads the materials through each other rather than against each other. First, this thesis analyses Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) to address relationality through family relations and the self as relational with the other. Second, this thesis analyses Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) to address relationality through nature and the self as relational with natural surroundings. Finally, this thesis addresses how notions of self and vulnerability feature in both artworks and how the artworks bring up notions of self and vulnerability differently to consider the self as vulnerable. This thesis works towards understanding the self as intra-actively co-constituted through the blurring of boundaries while simultaneously addressing relational differentiality through the articulations of boundaries in both artworks. A relational understanding of the self challenges western individualistic notions of self that consider the self as separable from others which has resulted in the unequal distribution of vulnerability and safety, and as superior to nature which has resulted in environmental devastation. Understanding the self as relational is important to consider the self an active agency with ethical responsibility to care for others and the natural environment.

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## Introduction

Contemporary theory on relationality challenges individualistic notions of the self. Relationality asks us to consider the boundary between the self and the other and between the self and nature not as an absolute boundary but as blurred. As relationality challenges this separation of the self, contemporary theory on relationality also tries to understand the constitution of that supposed boundary. Western notions of self have been criticized as deriving from colonial considerations and understandings of self as separate and separable that are based on the self-other divide and the nature-culture divide (Wynter 2015; Kirby 2018). Sylvia Wynter criticizes the western notion of self for understanding one's own "existentially experienced, Western-bourgeois or ethno-class referent *We*" as applicable to all beings (Wynter 2015, 232; emphasis in original). The western colonial idea that the self is individualistic and understanding this notion as universal implies superiority and ignorance of other notions of self and to other ways of relating. The self as individual and separable are considerations of self that are prevalent in western society and do not account for all lived experiences. But is the self really individual and separable from others and the world around oneself? Is the self not constituted in relation to the world around the self through others, locations, experiences, natural surroundings, socio-political structures and so on of which the effects extend into the past, the present and the future?

According to Judith Butler, relationality "is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related" (Butler 2004a, 22; emphasis in original). Understanding the self as 'tied' to others and constituted by others and the world around oneself, challenges western individuality and the self as a separable and independent being. Relationality is based on the premise that the self is always already related, whether someone is conscious or aware of how they are relationally constituted or not. The entanglement of the self with others and with its surroundings reveals a necessary vulnerability of the self to affects beyond the self; a common vulnerability that is shared by all human beings. The entanglement of the self refers to how the self is not completely separable from others or the world around oneself but always already affected; Butler referred to this as 'the tie' through which the self is constituted relationally. While the self is constituted in relation to others and the world around the self, people are also differentiated and occupy different positions in society. The world is shaped by colonial endeavours that are based on western notions of self and the traces thereof still privilege some beings while marginalising others. In this sense, the self is relationally differentiated. These

considerations prompt questions about how to understand the self through vulnerability, how the self is entangled with others and the world, how vulnerability is distributed, how the self is differentiated, and what it means to be human.

Understanding the self as vulnerable and entangled with others and with the world around oneself is foundational to understanding the self as relational to work towards an awareness of differentiation of beings. In order to reconsider western notions of self and to provide another way of understanding the self, of understanding the self as relational, I conduct a visual analysis of Bracha Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) (see fig. 1) and of Ana Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) (see fig. 2) to understand and make tangible how the self already is relational. Ettinger's and Mendieta's works address different ways of being relational namely, Ettinger's work addresses the self as shaped through family relations and relations between the self and the other, and Mendieta's work addresses the self as constituted by its natural surroundings as relating to notions of belonging. While Ettinger's painting addresses the self as familiarly entangled, Mendieta's photograph addresses the natural entanglement of the self and the body; the artworks work together to illustrate and provide new ways of considering the constitution of the self. While the artworks each consider the constitution of the self from a different point of view, both artworks rely on an understanding of the self as vulnerable through relations and entanglements. In both artworks, notions of self and vulnerability come up and by reading the artworks with the literature, I hope to approach a relational understanding of the self. Through visual analysis, questions, issues, concerns and understandings about relationality, the self and vulnerability come up naturally from the artworks. In this thesis, I put two artists into dialogue with each other that I have not seen put into conversation with each other before, to address different aspects of relationality to arrive at a way of considering notions of self and subjecthood. The question that this thesis asks is: how do Ettinger's artwork on family relations and Mendieta's artwork on natural relations address relational understandings of the self through vulnerability and entanglement of the self with others and the world?

### Theoretical Framework

In my attempt to approach a relational understanding of the self, I draw on Butler's (2004a; 2004b) consideration of a common primary vulnerability as a point of departure. Vulnerability is considered to be, on the one hand, a common and primary experience of being human and, on the other hand, an exposure of the self whether physical or psychological that can be highly exacerbated due to social, cultural and/or political structures

(Butler 2004a; 2004b). My understanding of vulnerability and relationality has been influenced by Butler's consideration of a common primary vulnerability through which relationality is constituted. Relationality refers to the ways in which everything is connected and constituted in relation to everything, but also refers to the differentiation of vulnerability through those relations; I am constituted by the people around me, by my environment, and the social, cultural and political systems that structure society and the world. 'I' cannot be separated from other beings, things and structures as they shape who I am which makes me vulnerable by virtue of these entanglements. As Butler states, "we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to an other [which] makes us vulnerable" (Butler 2004b, 23). Vulnerability is a common and primary consideration that is foundational to what it means to be human. As I work with this consideration of vulnerability, I find that theorists such as Ettinger, Wynter and Erinn Gilson build on and/or expand Butler's understanding of vulnerability which develop and expand my understanding of vulnerability.

Butler (2004b) explains their consideration of the common and primary vulnerability of the self through the experience of infancy and the necessary dependency of an infant on another. Ettinger moves beyond Butler's consideration of vulnerability to address the common and primary vulnerability of the pre-subject; the becoming-subject shapes the self already prior to infancy which Ettinger refers to as trans-subjective and sub-subjective co-emergence (Ettinger 2006b) – which I address in chapter 1. Whereas Butler considers the effects of encounters as occurring in the present on the self, Ettinger (1994a; 1999a; 2006a) considers the effects of passed and transgenerational encounters as affecting the self. Karen Barad (2014) further entangles notions of temporality as they do not presuppose a pre-existing entity; in that sense, a subject cannot be affected by an encounter as this presupposes an unaffected subject prior to the encounter – which I elaborate on in chapter 2. Furthermore, following Barad (2014), a subject is constituted intra-actively and differentially – which I address in chapter 3. Whereas Butler's consideration of the formation of subjecthood appears to be linear, Ettinger includes the past in her consideration of subject formation and for Barad past, present, and future cannot be separated and are always already constituting the self. Since understanding relationality is tied to an understanding of subject formation, Butler, Ettinger and Barad provide perspectives that are based on different understandings of temporality. Considering the different approaches and how each approach challenges or moves beyond other perspectives, I stay in tension with their differences to address various aspects of relationality to reach a relational understanding of the self.

Considering notions of self, and particularly, the western notion of self that I mentioned earlier, Wynter critiques the western individual and separable consideration of self and proposes a consideration of self that is based on Butler's notion of performativity. In "response to the question of who-we-are," Wynter proposes to separate "the *being* of *being human* [...] form *being human* in purely *biocentric* terms" (Wynter 2015, 193; emphasis in original). Wynter builds on Butler's notion of gender performativity to address *being human* as performative in the sense that experiences of being human are differentiated and that behaviour is learned and reproduced – I elaborate on Wynter's notion of *being human* and how this accounts for how humans are positioned differently in chapter 3. Wynter understands the performative aspect of being human as the reproduction of stories, histories and narratives that often centre western experiences as universally applicable which disregards non-western notions of being. Such a notion of self cannot account for the entanglement of things, beings and the world at large; the western universalizing thought does not account for the continued effect of coloniality on socio-political structures that constitute and differentiate the self. Considering the self as entangled, performative and differentiated, challenges individualistic notions of self that are prevalent in western society and works towards understanding the self as relational through the entanglement of the self with others and the world.

Relationality seems to relate closely to a common vulnerability of beings because the self is constituted in relation to others and the world around oneself. This vulnerability can be corporeal, affective, existential, ontological, intersubjective, sub-subjective and trans-subjective, but mostly vulnerability refers to an exposure, whether corporeal or psychological, conscious or subconscious, voluntary or involuntary, or private or socio-political – I develop vulnerability as corporeal, affective, existential, ontological, intersubjective, sub-subjective and trans-subjective in chapter 3. Butler addresses vulnerability as commonly shared by all beings but also considers the heightened exposure of some bodies to violence due to social, cultural and/or political structures (Butler 2004a, 29). Gilson builds on Butler's dual understanding of vulnerability to address the common vulnerability through which the self is constituted as "intersubjective vulnerability" as distinguished from vulnerability as a "heightened susceptibility to harm" (Gilson 2015, 24). By distinguishing these considerations of vulnerability as Gilson does, she departs from the consideration of vulnerability as a characterisation of a group of people whose vulnerability is outside of the self (Gilson 2011, 319). Rather, by understanding the self as relational through vulnerability, the self is part of the systems and structures that create and reproduce the heightened vulnerability of certain people. Furthermore, as Barad states "entanglings entail differentiatings [and] differentiatings



entail entanglings” (Barad 2014, 176). Relationality and vulnerability are not merely the entanglement of beings with each other and the world, but also how these are differentiated. I am not trying to argue that we are all part of one collective being but that these entangled relations constitute people differently and the self is part of the systems and structures that privilege and marginalise people.

These different understandings of the self, vulnerability and relationality allow me to approach a nuanced answer to the central research question that is considered through temporal, spatial, transgenerational and intersubjective entanglement. The various considerations of self, vulnerability and relationality of different authors and theorists that build on each other’s work, sometimes explicitly, are in tension at times; this allows me to critically reflect on the artworks by Ettinger and Mendieta in a nuanced manner. By showing how the different approaches of the theorists relate to each other, it becomes clear that they do not necessarily agree with each other, but they do address different aspects of relationality. As I work with different approaches to relationality throughout this thesis, I aim to arrive at a way of considering notions of self and subjecthood that is not only grounded in theory but is also supported by the visualisation of relationality in two different artworks. These artworks also approach relationality from different angles which makes visible and tangle how the self might be understood relationally through notions of vulnerability and entanglement with others and with the world.

## Methodology

To understand how the self is relational, I conduct a visual analysis of Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) which each address different aspects of relationality. Through visual analysis, I first closely consider the artwork by asking what is visible in the artwork; is it a painting or a photograph; which methods and/or materials have been used to create the artwork; where is the artwork located within the larger body of work of the artist; and what are the artist’s perspective on and thoughts behind the artwork. By asking these questions about the artwork, I am not imposing my research question on the artworks but allowing the artworks to naturally bring up questions about subject formation and the constitution of the self in relation to others and the environment. Visual analysis allows me to work from the artworks to bring in theory to reflect on how notions of relationality and self are apparent and how they are visualised and what implications this has for the theory. In my analysis, I read the visual cues

from the artwork together with the literature to understand how the self is constituted in the artwork.

I have selected one artwork from each artist's body of work that speaks to my research question. From Ettinger's work, I have selected a painting that illustrates how the self is constituted through one's family history as well as through one's relation with others. From Mendieta's work, I have selected a photograph that visualises how the body is constituted through its relationship with nature and the environment. Since my thesis is about relationality, the artworks cannot be seen as isolated from the larger body of work of each artist and the artwork's place within the artist's body of work – I address this in the relevant chapters. Just as the artworks cannot be seen as separate from the artist and their larger body of work, this thesis is a product of my interpretations of the artworks, my readings of the literature and the meaning and importance I give to certain observations and interpretations of the artworks and the literature. As Barad states, “[m]eaning is not an ideality; meaning is material. And matter isn't what exists separately from meaning. Mattering is a matter of what comes to matter and what doesn't” (Barad 2014, 175). The observations I make about the artworks are not absolute and the interpretation of those observations shifts and changes depending on who is giving meaning to them. So, central to questions about what it means to be human are questions about how we give meaning and about how I produce meaning in this thesis, both in terms of the artworks and of notions of self, vulnerability and relationality.

In addition to visual analysis, the approach I take in this thesis is based on Barad's agential realism which allows me to engage with the artworks and the literature as agencies in my research. According to Barad, “an agential realist elaboration of performativity allows matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing intra-activity” (Barad 2006, 136). My aim is not to merely represent the artworks or the literature but bring them into my discussion on relationality as active participants and also consider myself as an active participant. As Malou Juelskjær et al. state, “[a]gential realism can be characterized as a non-representational theory. Challenging the idea of theories as simple reflections or representations of reality, and instead offering a relational and performative understanding” (Juelskjær et al. 2020, 142). In this thesis, I am not simply using the artworks to show relationality, rather I use the artworks to *understand* relationality. In order to do so, I will read the artworks, literature and my interpretations together, not as fixed but as arriving at meaning by building on and learning with the materials. By reading the materials together and through each other, I can explore different perspectives without excluding interpretations to address different aspects of relationality, vulnerability and self. Here, I understand interpretation as a

reading of the artworks and the literature that is not merely an explanation or representation, but a reading together of materials to approach an understanding of them. The artworks can be addressed through different readings and visual cues from the artworks can be understood differently depending on the reading of the material. However, my aim is not to favour or exclude interpretations, but to use different interpretations to approach a nuanced understanding of relationality. The theories and literature I have selected not merely explain the phenomena, but work with the artworks to better understand relationality, vulnerability, notions of self and their entanglement.

The phenomenon that this thesis explores is vulnerability as foundational to understanding the self as relational. As the researcher, I am also entangled with the material that is used in this thesis such as the artwork and the literature as my reading of them is not fixed but also always already affected. As Barad states, “[i]n my agential realist elaboration, phenomena do not merely mark the epistemological inseparability of observer and observed, or the results of measurements; rather, *phenomena are the ontological inseparability/entanglement of intra-acting ‘agencies.’* That is, phenomena are ontologically primitive relations – relations without preexisting relata” (Barad 2006, 139; emphasis in original). By conducting visual analyses of the artworks, I allow the artwork to bring up questions about relationality; the artworks are agencies as they provide knowledge about relationality through their specific visualization of relations. I am not outside this process but entangled with the research I am doing and as Juelskjær et al. state, “[t]he researcher is thus not a neutral knowledge-creating subject but works with and through the studied phenomenon in a situated and entangled manner, leaving no external position from which it is possible to produce knowledge. The researcher is an iteratively becoming and entangled part of the world being explored” (Juelskjær et al. 2020, 152). My entanglement with the artworks and the literature affects my reading and interpretation of them and as the artwork and literature are agencies in this thesis, as the researcher and writer, I am also an agency in this process.

Consequently, I have a responsibility toward the artworks and the readings to not impose interpretations on them but to learn with the material and allow it to speak. Juelskjær et al. characterise this responsibility as “*response-ability* [which] indicates that the responsibility lies in the researchers *both* making themselves susceptible and sensitive to different forms of response *and* in enabling a response, providing the phenomenon under study (of which the researcher is an enacted part) with the opportunity to respond” (Juelskjær et al. 2020, 143; emphasis in original). Through the continuous intra-activity between the artworks, the materials and the researcher, each simultaneously co-constitutes the other. As a

researcher, it is my responsibility to allow the intra-activity to come through in the analyses and readings of the materials to work towards understanding notions of self, vulnerability and relationality and the ways in which these concepts intra-act and differentiate. Furthermore, response-ability “involves giving an account of the practices that enact a specific cut and determine how a given phenomenon materializes and becomes meaningful, and it involves explaining what is excluded from mattering” (Juelskjær et al. 2020, 145). While this thesis explores a relational understanding of self that is based on vulnerability, I carry a responsibility to attend to the ways that relationality and vulnerability are differentiated. It is important to account for the materialization and differentiation of vulnerability to discuss and consider relationality in a nuanced manner.

In an agential realist approach, matter is considered to always already have agency; to always already be entangled through affective relations. Furthermore, regarding the notion of matter in an agential realist approach, Barad states that “matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming – not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilising process of iterative intra-activity*” (Barad 2006, 151; emphasis in original). While I will elaborate on the notion of intra-activity in chapter 3, it is important to know that intra-activity in Barad’s terms does not presuppose a pre-existing entity; matter is not affected and then becomes something else or something new, rather, matter is always already intra-acting. So, as I have mentioned before, my interpretation of the artworks in this thesis and not fixed or absolute, rather I aim to give the artworks agency as I consider the questions that are raised by my reading of the artworks. Importantly, “[i]t is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the components of phenomena become determinate and that particular concepts (that is, particular material articulations of the world) become meaningful” (Barad 2006, 139). Through the exploration of the different visualisations of relationality in the artworks, the boundaries and the various aspects of relationality come into focus. By reading the artworks, literature and my interpretations thereof together, notions of self, vulnerability and relationality gain meaning.

To answer how to understand the self as relational through vulnerability and entanglement of the self with others and the world, I first conduct a visual analysis of Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) to address relationality through family relations and relations between the self and the other in chapter 1. Ettinger is an Israeli-born artist and writer, and psychoanalyst and philosopher. Her artworks consist of mixed media drawings and paintings and often engage with issues of trauma, war, memory and

transgenerationality. In addition to her paintings and artworks, Ettinger wrote about relationality and her written and creative works support each other to understand relationality from a theoretical as well as a practical point of view. In 2006, she published *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006) which is a collection of essays on her understanding of relationality and subjecthood that are interspersed with some of her artworks. Ettinger's family is Jewish and the topic of transgenerational trauma of the Holocaust and more broadly the influence of past generations on oneself are some of the main concerns in her creative and in her written work. Furthermore, in Judaism, religion is automatically passed down to the child via the mother and, in Ettinger's written and artistic work, the passing on of information, history and trauma is both modelled on and occurs through pregnancy or the matrixial, meaning both literally the mother as well as a more figurative notion of the maternal. The matrixial refers to the interdependent relationship between the carrier and the carried, the emergence of the child, and the transformation of the body into a maternal body; the matrixial body comes into being with the child through trans-subjective co-emergence. In chapter 1, I elaborate on Ettinger's notion of matrixiality and critically consider how this relates to binary notions of gender. Ettinger is known for her conceptualization of the matrixial space and trans-subjective co-emergence. I use these concepts to understand the constitution of the self in relation to others to answer how Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows an understanding of the self as constituted through family relations.

Following the analysis of Ettinger's work, I conduct a visual analysis of Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) to address relationality through nature and the relation between the self and its natural surroundings in chapter 2. Mendieta is a Cuban-born artist and photographer. At 12 years old, Mendieta was sent to the United States with her sister as part of Operation Peter Pan; a United States project that deported children from Castro's communist Cuba (Perreault 1987; Nestor 2021). Mendieta's photographs often relate to her experiences as an immigrant and of being uprooted from Cuba and her artworks engage with notions of belonging, nature and the spiritual and physical connection between her body and nature. Between 1973 and 1980, Mendieta created her *Siluetas* Series (Mendieta 1973-1980) which are photographs of traces of a naked feminine body – Mendieta's body. In some of the photographs the body is physically present in the image and concealed using natural elements such as sand, leaves, flowers, ice, dirt, blood, water and more, while in other photographs, the body is created using those natural elements. Mendieta explores the relationship between her body and nature from the perspective of belonging by exploring and blurring boundaries. "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) is the first artwork in the *Siluetas* Series (Mendieta 1973-

1980). The photographs are attempts of rooting her body in nature and expressing a desire to belong beyond nationalistic borders. Mendieta's artwork provides another angle through which to consider relationality as her artwork related to (home)land and belonging to answer how Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágu" (Mendieta 1973) shows an understanding of the self as constituted through nature.

Finally, in chapter 3, I address how notions of self and vulnerability feature in both artworks and how the artworks bring up notions of self and vulnerability differently to consider the self as vulnerable. I consider notions of self and how the considerations of self that come up from the artworks challenge or provide new insights into western considerations of self. Through a relational understanding of the self, the self is necessarily vulnerable. However, vulnerability can be considered from various angles and is not merely a common and existential condition, because vulnerability is also differentiated. This brings me to consider why it is necessary to rethink notions of being human and to understand the self as relational through vulnerability and entanglement; the self carries a responsibility to care for the world around oneself which includes but is not limited to other beings and our natural surroundings. The socio-political structures by which humans are differentiated extend to nature and the environment and it is important to recognize the self as part of those systems and structures to care for others and the environment.

## Chapter 1: Becoming Together

The selected artwork from Ettinger's collection that is analysed in this chapter is "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) (see fig. 1). Through visual analysis, this chapter explores the visualization of relationality through family relations and the mother-child relationship. "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) is part of more recent work by Ettinger and therefore serves as a great case study to explore the visualization and illustration of family relations and relating to others in recent work by Ettinger. As this artwork is a more recent work of Ettinger, it allows me to address the position of this artwork in relation to Ettinger's broader body of work including her written and artistic work. Ettinger is known for her "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) series and *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), which materially, technically and methodologically explore the entanglement of past generations with the present and how one is always already constituted in relation to one's family and one's ancestry through trans-subjective transmissions of traces of trauma. Considering that the "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) artworks visualize this familiar relationality, especially as they are published in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), analysing "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) provides new insights into the artistic visualization of a relational understanding of the self through an entangled notion of the self with one's family and others. Through an analysis of the relationship between the figures in the painting, this chapter explores relationality as family relations and the mother-child relationship and how these relations constitute the self to work toward approaching a relational understanding of the self as entangled with others. The question that this chapter aims to answer is: how does Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) show an understanding of the self as constituted through family relations?

This chapter analyses how Ettinger makes family relations and transgenerational transmission of trauma and history visible and how these affect the conceptualization of the self. First, I closely analyse the artwork in terms of the visible image, the references in the title of the work and the artwork in relation to Ettinger's earlier work, namely "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) which is important to understand how Ettinger visualizes the constitution of the self through familiar and non-familiar relationality. Following the visual analysis of the artwork and the positioning of the artwork in relation to Ettinger's larger body of work, this chapter explores subject formation by using pregnancy as a model for carrying and caring by relying on Butler's (2004a; 2004b) understanding of a primary common understanding of relationality. I address how Ettinger's notion of the matrixial and Butler's

consideration of a primary, common vulnerability both work towards addressing relationality as a common human condition. Then, I discuss Ettinger's (1992; 1994a; 1994b; 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 2006b) work on the notion of the matrixial and trans-subjective co-emerge in relation to the artwork by also using Griselda Pollock's (2006) introduction to some of Ettinger's written work. Delving into the notion of the matrixial is important for understanding relationality through subject formation as well as to address the notion of femininity. Next, I address the understanding of the self in relation to the other as following from the discussion on pregnancy and the matrixial, because that allows me to expand the notion of the matrixial to move beyond familiar relationality to address the relationality of the self and other. Finally, I discuss the transgenerational transmission of traces of trauma that is apparent in the "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) series and the extent to which this is visible in the selected artwork and understood through its relation to Ettinger's other work to understand "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows an understanding of the self as relational.



Fig. 1 Ettinger, Bracha. 2018c "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3." Painting. Artspace. March 10, 2022. <https://www.artspace.com/bracha-l-ettinger/rachel-pieta-medua-3>.

### 1.1 Visualizing Relationality with Others

"Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) is made using oil-based paint on canvas and the dominant colours that have been used are red, purple and pink tones. Looking at the



painting, various figures are visible of which four are identifiable as resembling human figures due to the contours of their arms and shoulders, their visible facial expressions, or the hair that frames their faces. While these four figures are identifiable, their contours are blurred which makes it difficult to see where one figure begins and another one ends. In the foreground of the painting, three figures are illustrated more sharply. They are hunched over each other, and the sides of their left arms and shoulders are visible as their bodies face the left side of the painting. The most left figure appears to be a young child who is held by the middle figure whose face is not visible, but the figure's head is identifiable by dark shoulder-length hair. The figure in the foreground on the right is hunched over the middle figure with some distance between them and appears to be looking down at the child and the figure holding the child. The fourth figure is standing in the background behind the child and the figure holding the child. The figure is painted in more muted colours and the facial features are less pronounced. Furthermore, there appear to be more than four figures, but these are not distinguishable and identifiable as such.

The name of this artwork, "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c), refers to three strong feminine figures namely Rachel, Pieta and Medusa, who are related to Christianity and Greek mythology. Rachel is a biblical figure who is known for being a wife – Jacob's second wife – and a mother – Joseph and Benjamin's mother. Pieta refers to Christian art depicting Mary holding the dead body of Jesus. The most well-known Pieta is Michelangelo's *Pietà* sculpture which is based in the St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City. Medusa is a figure in Greek mythology who has venomous snakes as hair and means guardian and protector. While these three figures are not related to each other or even from the same tradition, they each refer to strong female figures. Rachel and Pieta refer to maternal figures and Pieta and Medusa refer to protective figures. As the three figures in the foreground are hunched over one another and looking down on each other, the relationship between the figures appears to be protective as one figure is holding a child similar to Pieta art. The child is literally held by the middle figure and is also figuratively held and protected by the other figures in the painting. This reflects the character traits of Rachel, Pieta and Medusa. The figures in Ettinger's painting are assumed to be women as the title refers to three traditionally female names, the bodies of the figures are softened around the contours, the figures have long hair, and the combination of red, purple and pink tones is traditionally associated with femininity.

As the title of the painting refers to protective, maternal figures, one could assume that the figures are in some way related to each other or have a maternal relationship. The figure

holding the child might be the child's mother, the figure on the right might be the child's grandmother and the fourth figure in the background might be another female relative or relative from the maternal side. The maternal relationships in the image are based on notions of caring and carrying, and on familiar relationality. Ettinger specifically addresses notions as caring and carrying through matrixiality, through the experience of being carried and cared for during pregnancy. While this understanding of care and carrying is based on familiar relations, these notions are not necessarily limited to familiar relations and are also experienced with other beings. The painting also addresses non-familiar relationality; since the figures from Christianity and Greek mythology are not related familiarly, the figures in the painting do not have to be related familiarly and their entangled and affective relationship transcends traditional and familiar ways of relating. This non-familiar reading of relationality in the painting address relationality and notions of caring and carrying beyond the familiar and addresses these notions as extending to the relationality of the self with the other.

The name of the painting also tells us that this is the third and final painting in a series of artworks referring to these figures together; "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 1" (Ettinger 2018a) and "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 2" (Ettinger 2018b) are paintings that similarly visualize feminine figures standing behind each other and holding each other, however, these paintings are made using more muted and neutral colours. In addition to this being the third painting that brings illustrations of Rachel, Pieta and Medusa together, Ettinger has also produced artworks that refer to either one of these figures and work that refers to other biblical or Greek mythological figures sometimes in combination with one of the three named here. Another series of artworks by Ettinger that I have already brought up earlier is named after Eurydice, who is a figure in Greek mythology; after Eurydice unexpectedly dies, her husband, Orpheus, tries to bring her back to life. Earlier work by Ettinger, namely her "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) artworks which feature in her written work *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), addresses themes of grief, transgenerational trauma and experiencing the past in the present through techniques, methods and materials to address how familial relationality affects the constitution of the self. By using archival images and manipulating them in current times, Ettinger has tried to technically, methodologically and materially show how subjects are marked and constituted through the past and by traces of one's family. In that sense, the "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) series supports and visualizes Ettinger's written work in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), which explores the matrixial encounter. Considering Ettinger's larger body of work including both written and artistic work, an overarching theme of how family relationships and transgenerational trauma are constituting the self can be

observed. Familiar relationality and transgenerational trauma are overarching themes in Ettinger's writing which work to address how the self is relationally constituted through others and how the self is always already affected by the past and by one's ancestors.

More recent work such as "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) is not as specifically linked to Ettinger's written work in the way that the "Eurydice" (Ettinger 1992-2006) series is, but by being part of Ettinger's complete body of work with relationality being one of the main concerns, one needs to consider the relationships between her various artworks and her writing. Addressing Ettinger's work on matrixiality and familiar relationality works towards understanding how "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows the constitution of the self as based on earlier conceptualizations of relationality by Ettinger. The themes of experiencing the traces of the past and of the deceased in the present feature in Ettinger's work which is concerned with the feminine, the maternal, the matrixial, and transgenerational transmission of information and trauma. In her writing, Ettinger has explored this process of passing on information through generations and how the self is constituted because of it. While earlier artistic work addresses themes of transgenerationality and familiar transmission of traces of trauma through the use of archival material and the publication of the artwork in written work, "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) appears to move beyond the notion of familial relationality. While earlier work by Ettinger explores matrixial relationality through familiar relationships, the figures in "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) relate to each other but not necessarily through familiar relationality, similar to how the biblical and Greek mythological figures of Rachel, Pieta and Medusa relate to each other without being related through family or the same tradition.

## 1.2 The Becoming Subject

The relationship between the figures in "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) could be that of a child, mother and grandmother as the title of the painting refers to maternal figures. However, the relationship between the figures does not need to be familiar as the biblical and Greek mythological figures to which the title refers are not related familiarly either. The figures in the painting are linked through a feminine relationship considering that Rachel, Pieta and Medusa refer to women, the colours that have been used are associated with femininity, the contours of the figures are feminine, and the figures appear to hold and protect each other which is traditionally considered a feminine trait. The artwork shows an affective relationship between the figures that is based on holding and being held, and carrying and being carried which suggests a feminine relationship and refers to the biblical and Greek

mythological figures of Rachel, Pieta and Medusa who are symbolic of feminine caring and carrying. According to Ettinger (2006b), this experience of feminine caring and carrying is foundational for one's understanding of oneself in relation to others as the experience of being cared for and being carried by a feminine figure is a primary condition of one's being and is universally experienced by all beings. As Butler states, "we are, from the start, given over to the other, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of bodily requirements, given over to some set of primary others" (Butler 2004a, 31). The 'bodily requirement' refers to the experience of being a child and being dependent on another for one's survival; because, as Butler states, "infancy constitutes a necessary dependency, one that we never fully leave behind" (Butler 2004b, 24). While this bodily requirement can refer to infancy as Butler does, the notion of one's bodily requirement occurs earlier during pregnancy and subject formation.

Ettinger goes a step further than Butler in this regard to expand this notion of one's bodily requirement to include pregnancy and the pre-subject; pregnancy might be the most intimate, dependent and co-emergent relationship one experiences, and the experience affects how one relates to others and to carry others as well as to being carried by another. The bodily requirement also refers to the experience prior to that of birth as a condition of pre-subjectivity which affects and constitutes oneself, which is a subconscious and unconscious dependency. Ettinger refers to this as trans-subjective and sub-subjective transmission and co-emergence (Ettinger 2006b), which addresses how information is communicated unconsciously and subconsciously between subjects during pregnancy through the womb. Rather than referring to the unconscious transmission of information between the becoming-mother and the becoming-child, Ettinger differentiates between trans-subjective (or transsubjective or transobjective) and sub-subjective transmissions; sub-subjective, in Ettinger's writing, refers to a partial relating, meaning the transmission of information on a subconscious level, and trans-subjective refers to a transitive relating, meaning the transmission of information across beings (Ettinger 1999b). These multidimensional transmissions of information occur when one is linked and connected with others, including but not limited to the child being linked to the mother during pregnancy. Through this unconscious and subconscious, or rather trans-subjective and sub-subjective, transference of information one is constituted in relation to the other and the other is constituted in relation to oneself. Thus, the subjects emerge together as both mother and child come into being together as entangled individuals through a process of exchanging information. In "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c), these notions of trans-subjective and sub-subjective co-

emergence are visible as the figures are illustrated using varying degrees of sharpness and blurriness; some figures are distinguishable from each other while at the same time they are blurred together. This indicates that although the figures represent individual persons, they are existentially linked together through the transference of partial (sub-subjective) information across subjects (trans-subjective) which allows each figure to emerge in relation to the other figures (co-emergence).

In her writing, Ettinger uses pregnancy to illustrate these notions of trans-subjective and sub-subjective co-emergence as well as to think through the emergence of subjecthood because pregnancy is a universal and primary experience of all beings through which one comes to be (Ettinger 2006b). Every person has come to be a person by first being a clump of cells that grew into a baby in a womb. Through this experience, everyone has been dependent for its development and coming into being on the womb and the maternal body. Therefore, pregnancy is a universal experience of being literally and figuratively tied to another being and of being cared for and being carried. Furthermore, in the womb, one encounters another for the first time, and one experiences being dependent on another, the mother, for the first time. The body has to create an environment in which the baby can grow because the baby is dependent on the other body to be able to live. The figure of the child in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) is held by a maternal figure and although these figures are recognizable and identifiable as individuals, they also merge as some parts of their bodies are more sharply distinguished from other parts of their bodies that are blurred together. Through this experience of being held, the child experiences the presence of the mother and of being cared for and carried.

Furthermore, not just the baby is developing and coming into being through a co-dependent relationship with the womb, but the body carrying the baby also emerges as a pregnant body and as a matrixial figure. While the baby and the matrixial body are individual subjects, the boundaries of subjecthood are blurred through the biological process of the child needing and living off the matrixial body for its survival. Not merely the child, in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), comes into being through its relationship with the carrying mother, but the mother also comes into being as a maternal figure. Through this process, one is not only constituted in relation to the other but the other is constituted in relation to the self as through pregnancy the maternal body also emerges. Therefore, the notion of pregnancy as being held by the womb and being carried by the matrixial body is a relatable and universal experience of subject formation which serves not merely as an example of how one is constituted through one’s relationships with others and specifically the

maternal or matrixial body, but also as a model that allows one to think through various aspects of trans-subjective and trans-generational transmission of information. Although the experience of pregnancy is pre-subjective and unconscious, an awareness of this primary universal vulnerable experience might work towards an understanding of the self as always already in relation to another.

### 1.3 Blurred Binaries and Boundaries

The illustration of the subject formation of both the child and the mother by Ettinger in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) can be a model for understanding the self as always already in relation to others. The notion of the matrixial allows for a broader and more general conceptualization of subject formation through pregnancy and being carried. Matrix refers to the womb as ‘matrix’ in Latin means uterus. Symbolically, the matrixial refers to the interdependent relationship between the carrier and the carried, the emergence of the child, and the transformation of the body into a maternal body. The matrixial body comes into being with the child through trans-subjective co-emergence. However, the figure of the mother is not limited to women but is used more broadly to refer to the carrying body both during pregnancy as well as in relationships. As Pollock states when introducing Ettinger’s written work, “in the matrixial *borderspace*, we all were exposed already in prenatality to a sexual difference that must, therefore, be acknowledged as ‘feminine.’ Not ‘of the feminine’ in the sense of belonging to one sex as defined in/by the phallic binary masculine/feminine” (Pollock 2020, 6; emphasis in original). Notions of femininity have been associated with a biological binary of men and women, and discussions of pregnancy tend to return to phallogocentric binary ways of thinking.

However, by emphasizing the pre-subjective experience and transferring the focus from the phallus to the matrixial, Ettinger aims to move away from a biological sexed binary. Ettinger refers to matrixial difference as “a feminine sexual difference *beyond* the binary difference between the sexes – whether it is understood biologically (male/female) or in terms of identities (masculine/feminine)” (Ettinger 1994b, 56; emphasis in original). In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) the figures appear feminine, but they are not necessarily female. The gender of the figures is ambiguous and not identifiable as other than feminine. Femininity is not based on a biological binary as femininity and masculinity can be expressed independently of the biologically sexed body. The figures in the painting appear feminine because the colours that have been used are associated with femininity, the contours of the figures are feminine, and the figures appear to hold and protect each other which is

traditionally considered a feminine trait. That being said, these considerations are not based on the biological sex of the body, but on the expression and performance of the body. While Ettinger expresses an intention to move beyond binary, heterosexual and non-transgender ways of thinking, I wonder to what extent she succeeds. Pregnancy has been associated with women, but to account for pregnancy in non-female bodies, the matrixial and the feminine might serve to refer to those conditions while accounting for a wide range of bodies.

Furthermore, pregnancy and the womb are models for ways of thinking through relationality and subject formation and thus used more symbolically than simply biologically. The notion of the feminine might not be used by Ettinger to refer to the female sex specifically, the notion of femininity is associated with traditional expressions of womanhood and thus appears to remain associated to some extent with biological sexual difference. When considering “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) the figures are feminine because of the reference to Rachel, Pieta and Medusa, the use of colours and the motherly, protective stance of the figures. However, when visually analysing the figures, these figures’ genders are ambiguous; the bodies are not identifiable as male or female according to the biological sexed binary, rather the bodies are identifiable as feminine due to the stance of the figures and the contours of their bodies, the expression of femininity is a performance of gender that is independent of the biological sex of the body. While Ettinger’s notion of the matrixial and the illustration of figures holding each other serve to discuss various aspects of subject formation and relating to others through relating to family, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) brings up associations of femininity without the figures being identifiable as women as referring to biological sexed binary; the figures appear feminine independently of the biological binary, however, this femininity is still based on associations with traditional expressions of womanhood. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), Ettinger illustrates this moving beyond a biological binary by illustrating feminine figures that are not necessarily women. However, tension remains as the term feminine is linked to traditional expressions of womanhood and motherhood.

That being said, the matrixial figure represents the womb in which the subject emerges through trans-subjective co-emergence. The figure of the mother does not merely refer to the carrying body but to the encounter with the mother since one’s co-dependent, co-emergent relationship with the mother is one’s first encounter with an other. Therefore, Ettinger uses the term m/Other to refer to the mother and not to revert to heterosexual, non-transgender and binary notions of motherhood, because “the matrixial designates ‘woman’ not as the Other but as co-emerging self with m/Other” (Ettinger 2006b, 218). Subsequently, the figure of the

womb and the m/Other is not limited to the literal womb or the mother but can be considered more broadly as other beings which affect us and how one is already affected by these relationships prior to being an individual or subject. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the child is held by a mother figure or, rather, matrixial figure: its first experience of being cared for and being carried as the figure of Pieta refers to a mother holding her child. The womb can be considered as a mediator of information or as Ettinger states, the “womb/matrix is conceived of here not primarily as an organ of receptivity or ‘origin’ but as the human potentiality for differentiation-in-co-emergence” (Ettinger 2006b, 219). The transmission of information between the mother’s body and the baby through the womb is unconscious and yet allows both subjects to emerge through that transmission of information. This relationality is visible in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) as the figures are illustrated using varying degrees of sharpness and blurriness which indicated the connection and relationship between the figures while they are still recognizable as individuals. The figure of the child in the painting is not marked with clear contours as the child’s emergence is never independent, but always already in relation to others such as the mother and its ancestry as it is embodied and trans-subjectively transmitted by the mother. Therefore, the matrixial can be considered a model for how subjects emerge together yet as relational beings.

Such unconscious transmission of information and trans-subjective co-emergence occurs beyond pregnancy; one emerges and is constituted as a subject through all information one sub-subjectively and trans-subjectively receives through various relationships as well as prior to individuation through trans-generational information that is carried in the matrixial body. As I mentioned before, the various figures in the artwork are not clearly distinguishable from one another as the figures are blended with paint while at the same time at least four figures can be identified by their face, head or arms. These figures simultaneously emerge together while also being recognizable as individual figures. This blurring of boundaries between the figures symbolizes the matrixial trans-subjective co-emergence that affects the formation of the subject. The self is relational in this sense as it is unconsciously constituted through and by others. The space in and through which this trans-subjective co-emergence appears is named the matrixial by Ettinger: “the matrixial borderspace is modelled upon a particular conception of feminine/prebirth intimate sharing” (Ettinger 2006b, 219). The boundary or border between the child and the mother or between the self and the other cannot be clearly drawn as each affects the other. As Ettinger states:

“The Matrix is modelled upon certain dimensions of the prenatal state that are culturally foreclosed, occluded, or repressed. It corresponds to a feminine dimension



of the symbolic order dealing with asymmetrical, plural, and fragmented subjects composed of the known as well as the not-rejected and not-assimilated unknown and to the unconscious processes of change and transgression in borderlines, limits, and thresholds of ‘I’ and ‘non-I’ emerging in co-existence.” (Ettinger 1992, 99)

The matrix is the womb as it refers to a space where a thing or being develops and is formed. This does not merely refer to the physical development of a being but to the self and to subjecthood. The matrixial space is where information is unconsciously and subconsciously shared between subjects.

Through the matrixial encounter, subject formation through pregnancy can be seen more broadly as referring to a subject being constituted through various encounters during pregnancy as well as post-partum. So, although the figures in the painting are not necessarily related to each other, their relationship is matrixial in the sense that they are holding each other and the limits between the figures are blurred which suggests an intimate, inseparable relationship and the constitution of subjecthood in close relation to the other figures. As the figures are feminine but not necessarily women and the figures relate to each other but are not necessarily familiarly related, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) appears to be an illustration of subject formation through matrixial encounters that are not limited to familial encounters but shows how one is constituted through all encounters with others to varying degrees as the child relates differently to the figure holding it and to the other figures in the painting.

#### 1.4 “I” in Relation to “You”

In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the blurring of the boundaries and contours of the figures not merely signifies the co-emergence of subjects but also signifies the ties by which those subjects are subsequently bound together relationally. While Ettinger’s written work explicitly refers to subject formation through pregnancy, the relationship between the figures in the painting does not necessarily refer to a maternal relationship in the sense that the figures are familiarly related. The painting is an illustration of affective relationships between figures beyond the matrixial encounter as the figures relate to each other but are not necessarily familiarly related similar to how the biblical and Greek mythological figures of Rachel, Pieta and Medusa relate to each other without being related through family or the same tradition. Pregnancy is not merely an example or an illustration of a universal experience of relationality, but that it is used to think through various aspects of always already being in relation with others and being constituted through others, some of

which have already been discussed such as one's first encounter with another, namely the m/Other. Through pregnancy, one comes to understand oneself in relation to another on an unconscious level, this is a relational understanding of oneself. Therefore, pregnancy is a model through which to understand how the self is affected by encounters with others. Furthermore, each encounter affects and constitutes the self differently which is important to understand how the self is relational through differentiated encounters. As Butler states, relationality "is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related" (Butler 2004a, 22; emphasis in original). The tie or relationship through which one is connected to others affects both oneself and the other or rather, the self and other affect each other which creates a tie and constitutes a relationship. In "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) this is visualized by the blurred contours of the figures which makes it impossible to identify where one figure can be separated from another. As the figures are individuals yet not separable, they constitute one another which visually connects the figures.

Through such affective ties and the primary affective tie with the m/Other, one continuously merges and emerges as one is affected by others and affects others; the self is always already constituted in relation to another. Butler states, "[i]t is not as if an 'I' exists independently over here and then simply loses a 'you' over there, especially if the attachment to 'you' is part of what composes who 'I' am" (Butler 2004a, 31). This happens subconsciously and cannot be clearly marked in time as it is a continuous process of building and shaping connections and relations. While Butler addresses how a subject is undone by another through an encounter with the other, Ettinger would say that the self is always already undone by various encounters with others. While the self is never a completely independent individual but always exists in relation to others, the self is also distinguishable from others. As "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows various figures who merge, some figures are still identifiable, thus illustrating the entanglement of oneself with others while acknowledging the subject as a whole. The relational tie which binds the self and the other as well as the distinction between the self and the other is based on the formation of the subject through trans-subjective and sub-subjective co-emergence; subjects emerge through encounters that transfer partial information across subjects. Prior to the subject being a 'whole' and independent being, the pre-subject is affected through the trans-subjective transmission of information which is sub-subjective between the baby and the mother – the self and the other. As Ettinger states, "[f]rom the matrixial angle, subjectivity is an encounter in which partial subjects co-emerge and co-fade through continual retuning and

transformations via external/internal borderlines and borderlinks” (Ettinger 1994a, 138).

Through the formation of the subject in the womb, one becomes entangled with the m/Other as both subjects emerge as relating to each other.

However, the subject formation that takes place in the womb does not end at birth, but one continues to be shaped and constituted as a subject through various encounters. In this process, but also more broadly speaking about any encounter one has with another, both subjects encounter each other and continually affect and shape each other as subjects. This is visible in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) as the figures are not necessarily familiarly related but are still constituted in relation to each other and affected by the other figures. According to Ettinger, “[d]uring co-emergence and co-fading, both the presubject (I) and the m/Other (partial-subject, non-I) are transformed in different but related ways” (Ettinger 2006b, 220). Returning to the notion of the womb and pregnancy, both child and mother emerge and come into being as differentiated and related to each other. By using pregnancy as a model to think through these relations and conditions of subject formation it becomes clear how one is shaped and affected by a m/Other, but this is always already the case, which is illustrated in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) by the figure holding the child. The “‘I’ as partial-subject and ‘non-I’ as its archaic m/Other” (Ettinger 2006b, 220) to which Ettinger refers, is another way of referring to the self and the other with the “I” referring to the self, the pre-subject or the subject coming into being and the “non-I” referring to the other, the mother, the womb or m/Other. Thereby, Ettinger emphasizes the construction of the “I” through the other by referring to the other as the “non-I.” In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the “I” might be the child who is coming into being and the “non-I” might refer to the other figures by whom the child is carried both literally and figuratively as the subjects are distinguishable from one another but only partially as the borders of their subjecthood are blurred by their encounters with other as the contours of the figures are blurred with the other figures.

Since one is always already constituted in relation to the m/Other as well as the other in relation to the self, they cannot be delineated. In this sense, the “I and non-I are linked in trans-subjectivity on a sub-subjective level” (Ettinger 2006b, 219). As one is shaped and constituted by others, one cannot simply speak of an independent and separable “I” as the self is always already constituted in relation with and to others and the other way around on the unconscious and subconscious level. The encounter through which both ‘you’ and ‘I’ are constituted in relation to each other allows a new self to emerge that has been affected by another. According to Ettinger, “what this vulnerability implies is not a sacrifice of myself in

a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness” (Ettinger 1998, 145). The encounter between the self and other does not imply a complete loss of subject for a completely new subject to emerge, rather, one is continually shaped and affected by encounters with others through which one grows and develops by taking on lessons one trans-subjectively and sub-subjectively learns from others as well as by leaving behind aspects of oneself that no longer serve a purpose.

As it has been already discussed, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes this relationality as some (parts of the) figures are delineated more sharply than other (parts of the) figures, which suggests an emergence of subjects through encounters with others. While in the previous discussion the blurred boundaries articulated the inseparability of the figures as well as their differentiation, in this context, they also articulate the vulnerability of the self to the other. The self is never static, but always in motion and always partially disappearing and partially emerging as the figures in the artwork. As Butler states, this is a common human vulnerability that “precedes the formation of ‘I’” (Butler 2004a, 31). The self is vulnerable in this sense as it is continually affected by encounters with others on a subconscious level. Thus, an encounter with another implies an agreement between the self and the other “to undergo a transformation the full result of which you cannot know in advance” (Butler 2004b, 18). The transformation that Butler addresses as a result of an encounter with another is continuous and never static; when meeting someone, one can never know the full effect of that person and that encounter on oneself.

“Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) shows how subjects are held and carried by maternal figures through which the subject is constituted. Although the painting appears to be a visualization of intimate matrixial relationships, the relationship between the figures is not necessarily familial. As Ettinger refers to Rachel, Pieta and Medusa, three strong, protective and feminine biblical and Greek mythological figures, the relationship between the figures might seem distant. However, this might signify how relationality transcends biblical and Greek mythological representation to address relationality across traditions. As has already been mentioned before, in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), Rachel, Pieta and Medusa represent a mode of relating beyond traditions and family to show how these traditions also exist in relation to each other as one exists in relation to others. While the earlier discussion on non-familiar relation addressed how the figures in the painting are not necessarily related familiarly and their entangled and affective relationship transcends traditional and familiar ways of relating, in this context the notion of non-familiar relationality expands the notion of the matrixial to address notions of caring and carrying as extending to

the relationality of the self with others. Matrixiality has been discussed in terms of the womb as referring to subject formation during pregnancy which is based on the biological familiar relation between the matrixial body and the child; however, another aspect of the matrixial refers to a universal existential condition of being constituted in relation to others and of relating to others broadly as extending beyond the familiar. The blurring of the contours of the figures in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) suggests that one is affected by and affects the people surrounding oneself. An important aspect of such relationality is that it is never static and always in motion and never finished. The continuous movement of emerging and shaping the subject through various encounters is visible in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) as the background of the painting is filled with unidentifiable figures which might represent encounters with figures through which one is constituted.

### 1.5 Haunting Figures

Subject formation through the experience of pregnancy is formative for one’s understanding of the self in relation to others as pregnancy is the first encounter with the m/Other. The m/Other is similarly constituted through its relationship with their m/Other which signifies a transgenerational line of matrixial encounters which shape the subject. The matrixial encounter is informed by previous trans-subjective co-emergences which could also be addressed as transgenerational transmissions of information. In her writing, Ettinger addresses the matrixial encounter as “[engendering] diffused traumas, traces, pictograms, fantasies and unconscious connections and readjustments in both its partners” (Ettinger 1994a, 138). Furthermore, she states that “[a]ffective traces of a matrixial encounter echo, in the present, earlier matrixial encounters while modifying older traces and being modified by them” (Ettinger 1999a, 354). As Ettinger states, various traces from the past including but not limited to trauma are passed on through matrixial encounters which inform and constitute subsequent matrixial encounters, thus a child is also affected by its mother’s matrixial encounter with its grandmother and so on. One is not only constituted by the carrying, matrixial figure but by generations of information being embodied by the mother as the mother is constituted by her mother and so on.

Transgenerational trauma shows the entanglement of the past with the present and of familial relationships as it addresses how information and history are transmitted through family relationships and one is affected by family history and ancestry. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the figures that are visible are surrounded by shapes of supposed distant figures which hauntingly appear in the background and are to some extent

indistinguishable from the more sharply illustrated figures. While the relationships between generations and between oneself and one's ancestry become clear through trauma, it exposes an unconscious network of relations and ties that already exists, and one already is affected by the history of past generations. As I addressed in the Introduction, Ettinger's interest in transgenerational trauma stems from her family's experience during the Holocaust and her experience of being a child of Holocaust survivors. While the transgenerational trauma in Ettinger's artworks might be derived from her experience of the Holocaust through her parents, the notion of transgenerational trauma is not limited to the Holocaust and also applies to other experiences of transgenerationally transmitted traces of trauma, pain and/or grief. In "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c), various distinguishable and indistinguishable figures appear in relation to one another as if traces of the past haunt the present and the formation of subjects in the present. The connections between oneself and one's family and ancestry affect each other and through these relationships, one comes into being.

The traces of past generations can be those of trauma and pain but do not necessarily have to be, however through trauma, pain, and grief one is confronted with the effects another has had on oneself. As Butler states, "in this experience something about who we are is revealed, something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that those ties constitute a sense of self, compose who we are" (Butler 2004b, 18). While the experience of transgenerational trauma might confront one with the blurred distinction and inseparability of oneself with one's family and ancestry, it only shows how one is always already constituted by various encounters with others who have been constituted similarly through encounters with others. These encounters leave traces as the self is continuously reconstituted and emerging as a new self. This occurs similarly across generations. There appears to be a similarly reciprocal relationship with others across time, such as ancestors, as with others in the present; the self is affected by the transgenerational transmission of trauma, history and other information but the self also has the responsibility to care for the traces of the past. According to Pollock, "we need to work to transform, as Ettinger suggests, *transgenerationally transmitted traces of trauma* even when we did not experience it directly, and take responsibility to care for and carry what we have not necessarily caused (Ettinger Vol. 1: 7, 8)" (Pollock 2020, 27; emphasis in original). One's confrontation with trauma, pain or grief from past generations addresses a responsibility to carry and care for those effects similarly to how the self was carried and cared for in the matrixial encounter. Through the acknowledgement of one's embodied pain, trauma and vulnerability, one embraces one's humanity as these are existential conditions of humanity. In this sense, transgenerational

encounters and relationships are reciprocal as one can take care of the pain of the past in the present and relationality occurs across time and is not bound by encounters in the present as these relationships always already are in place.

As “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes the haunting of the trauma, pain and grief of past generations, the notion of caring and carrying returns in the images of the child being held as trauma is transmitted through those same matrixial notions of caring and carrying. While the figure of the carrying mother illustrates the experience of coming into being through pregnancy, it can also signify one’s responsibility to care and carry for the traces and encounters through which one is constituted. Since one is affected by transgenerational transmission of various traces of trauma, one is also responsible to carry and care for that trauma, pain and grief. However, one needs to be able to recognise the ties by which one is constituted in relation to one’s ancestors because “vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter” because “when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself” (Butler 2004a, 43; emphasis in original). The affects by which one is constituted in relation to one’s family and one’s ancestry make one vulnerable as one is affected by their trauma, pain and grief – as well as joy and happiness, but these affects are not the same way confronting the self with one’s relationality. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the figures in the foreground are painted using quite vibrant colours, while the figures in the background have a more haunted quality due to their muted and grey tones. The artwork is not necessarily a ‘happy painting,’ but an illustration of the traumatic and painful traces from the past through which the subject is constituted.

Butler refers to an ethical encounter that can be read as a responsibility to oneself as well as a responsibility to one’s family and ancestry by caring and carrying their trauma through which one allows oneself to emerge. As Pollock states in relation to Ettinger’s writing, “we act ethically when, as a full Subject, we knowingly confront or respond to another subject, a full Other” (Pollock 2020, 8). Taking responsibility to care for and to carry the grief and trauma of past generations as embodied by the self through the matrixial encounter, one actively engages in a relational experience. Because through this experience, “the other is present for me both *as other*, as the real person, and as the ‘*other-of-myself*’, as part of my self-experience” (Fuchs 2018, 49; emphasis in original) and this relationality is “not just an ‘inner’ or ‘mental’ condition, but implies a shared *intercorporeality*” (Fuchs 2018, 46; emphasis in original). This shared intercorporeality is visualized in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), as I have addressed before, through the blurring of the figures;

this makes their bodies indistinguishable from one another to signify how one is physically constituted in relation to others through the embodied traces of encounters. Earlier, the blurring of the figures articulated the inseparability of the figures and the vulnerability of the figures to each other. Here, the blurred boundaries signify the physical, intercorporeal constitution of bodies through the embodiment of encounters. The attachment or tie between oneself and another or with one's family is always already present and constituting the self as are the effects of transgenerationally transmitted traces of trauma. When one can recognize those, one can ethically take responsibility for the pain, trauma and grief of past generations and consequently transform those traces of trauma by caring for them. This ethical taking responsibility is visible in the artwork as the figures are holding each other as if past generations affect the child. Furthermore, the maternal figure who holds the child signifies a caring and carrying that can also be turned around to address caring and carrying the pain, trauma and grief of past generations as these constitute the subject.

One's familial relationality is not limited to one's biological family and which is emphasized by the title of the artwork, "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c); as it has been discussed, Rachel and Pieta are figures from Christianity while Medusa is a figure from Greek mythology which signifies a coming together of traditions and the blurring of boundaries of notions of traditional familiarity. Although the matrixial encounter is modelled on a biological pre-subjective encounter, it is also applicable to families that are shaped by adoption, surrogacy, fostering, non-heterosexual family structures and so on. While the matrixial encounter is modelled after the experience of pregnancy and the experience of the becoming-mother and the becoming-child, the matrixial encounter addresses how this relationship between the becoming-mother and the becoming-child is constituting both subjects through an intimate trans-subjective and sub-subjective exchange of information. For example, if the biological matrixial body carries transgenerational trauma, this might still constitute the becoming-subject. These notions of subject formation explain how a subject does not come into this world completely independent. However, subject formation is never finished because a subject is continuously emerging and fading through encounters.

While one is affected by the information that is embodied by the m/Other, this is merely one's first encounter with another. Ettinger's concept of the matrixial encounter describes how a subject comes to be a subject through pregnancy, but the pregnant body is not necessarily required to fulfil a maternal role in the child's life postpartum. The child is affected in one way when they are carried by the person who will raise them and in another when they are carried by a person who gives the child up for adoption or when the biological



parent did not carry the child. The traces of (transgenerational) trauma, pain and grief on the matrixial body will affect oneself during the pre-subjective trans-subjective and sub-subjective subject formation. However, traces of (transgenerational) trauma, pain and grief are also communicated and affective in postpartum encounters through parenting and the subject might also be affected by the transgenerational transmission of trauma from non-biological caregivers post-partum. The point is that the child is affected. The subject is affected by encounters with others. Similar to how Rachel, Pieta and Medusa are from different traditions, the figures in the painting are constituted in relation to each other thus visualizing how relationality is not limited to traditional notions of family. The self is constituted through past encounters with others, in a sense, the self is haunted by a transgenerational line of matrixial encounters and the self has a responsibility to care for the trauma, pain and grief that is trans-subjectively and sub-subjectively transferred to the self through encounters.

### 1.6 Moving Beyond Earlier Work

“Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes how the matrixial “addresses an encounter – whose traces persist – experienced by every living person by virtue of having been born” (Pollock 2020, 13), thus illustrating the notion of being carried by a m/Other through which the self is constituted. In the painting, the relationship between the child and the feminine figure holding it can be recognized as matrixial and the relationship between the other figures can be seen as an extension of the notion of the matrixial to include a history of matrixial encounters in a transgenerational sense as well as matrixial encounters beyond the traditional family relations. “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) illustrates how a subject is carried and held, and how pregnancy is a model through which to consider the constitution and construction of the self through one’s relation with the m/Other. Furthermore, the artwork addresses how those encounters are already shaped by matrixial encounters of the m/Other through varying degrees of blurriness and sharpness as the self is constituted beyond the matrixial in the sense of having been born toward a constitution of the self through transgenerational matrixial encounters. Through this visualization of transgenerational matrixial encounters, familial relationality and the transgenerational transmission of traces of trauma, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes how things, beings, matter and the self are constituted in relation to one another. By doing so, this artwork moves beyond how these notions are brought up in Ettinger’s writing or earlier works, such as “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006).

The transgenerational transmission of information such as pain, grief and trauma has been visualized differently in Ettinger's "Eurydice" series (Ettinger 1992-2006) through techniques, methods and materials:

“[Ettinger] has developed a technical means of engaging (the use of photocopied dust) with the traces of lost generations (a selected archive of photographs) that also allows painting (the structural properties revealed by modernism's self-purification, such as touch, color, mark, gesture) to signify both a terminal grief and a co-emergence of contemporary post-Holocaust subjectivity with the subjects (the non-I's) of that which is also our tragedy.” (Pollock 2006, 7)

In the “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) artworks Ettinger allowed the artworks to affectively embody transgenerational entanglement by using archival material and using new techniques of incorporating and manipulating archival material in modern art to show the presence of the past in the present and to address historic entanglement between the past and the present. In conversation with Ettinger's writing, her “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) artworks investigate visually the relationality of the past and the present not as separable moments but as always already intertwined. “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) also visualizes the entanglement of the past and present albeit differently; without relying on archival material and new techniques, Ettinger brings both the past and the present into focus in the selected artwork through varying the degrees of sharpness and blurriness of the figures. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), one can recognize familial relationality across time and generations through a history of matrixial encounters; various figures are visible and are positioned protectively as standing behind each other which might suggest a familial relationship, understanding the figures as matrixially carrying and transferring embodied information from past generations.

The distinction between oneself and one's parents, one's family, one's ancestry and others is not clearly marked but one is entangled and tied to various other figures in one's life – present, past and future – to varying degrees. Where Ettinger used archival material and new techniques in “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) to bring into focus one's relationality with others, particularly one's ancestry, Ettinger visualized this relationality in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) by blurring the boundaries between the various figures. Ettinger has moved from using various materials to illustrate relationality to using paint to illustrate similar qualities and moved from visualizing familial relationality as in “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) to visualizing non-familial relationality as in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c). This shows a progression in conceptualizing relationality in Ettinger's work.

The “Eurydice” series (Ettinger 1992-2006) has gained its meaning partly because the paintings were incorporated in Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), while “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes relationality and one’s relation to other more independently. That being said, both “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and the “Eurydice” series (Ettinger 1992-2006) are positioned in relation to Ettinger’s writing which shows a relationality or tie between the visual and meaning-making. Although the relationality between “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) and Ettinger’s writing is explicit because the artworks were published in *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Ettinger 2006a), “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) is similarly connected to Ettinger’s complete body of work albeit differently. As “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) shows one’s relationship with family through the use of archival material, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes relationality as extending also beyond familiar relationality without using archival material that specifically hints at temporal entanglement.

“Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) inherently brings up questions of familial relationships and matrixial encounters across generations by virtue of the artwork’s relation to Ettinger’s writing and the “Eurydice” series (Ettinger 1992-2006) as well as other artistic work. The “Eurydice” series (Ettinger 1992-2006) addresses how history, trauma, and memory affect the present across time as it brings past and present together in one image, not as separate times coming together, but as constituting each other through the use of archival material. “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) also brings up questions about transgenerationally transmitted traces of trauma and relationships between people, however, the selected artwork brings up issues of relationality in a broader sense. The selected painting does not just address how one is constituted in relation to one’s family, but it visualizes how one is constituted in relation to others by bringing to the forefront both the familiar co-constitution as well as the construction of the self in relation to non-familial others. This is further emphasized by the title’s references to biblical and Greek mythological figures as it has been discussed earlier. “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) brings up broader questions of relating and being constituted in relation to others; not merely in relation to one’s family or one’s ancestry, but one is also constituted by various encounters with others, all of which affect the self differently.

## 1.7 Conclusion

To conclude, being constituted in relation to others and being tied to others by virtue of those relationships is a universal human condition because everyone has to have been tied

to another being during pregnancy in order to come to be. Throughout various artistic and written works, Ettinger has referred to the experience of pregnancy from the perspective of the becoming-child through the notion of carrying and caring. The notion of being carried and held, and of being cared for by another is a primary experience that one is not a separable entity as one is always already positioned in relation to another. In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the relationship between the child and the figure holding and carrying the child signifies matrixial caring and carrying as both the child and the matrixial figure come into being through the experience of caring and carrying. Furthermore, the other figures signify a similar relationality of caring and carrying as they protectively surround the mother and child figures. Through a variety of sharpness and blurriness of the figures, the figures appear to merge while also being recognisable as individuals which signifies a co-constitution and co-emergence of beings in relation to each other and as affecting each other. The blurring of the figures articulates the inseparability as well as the differentiation of beings, the vulnerability of the self in relation to others and the embodiment of encounters which physically, intercorporeally constitute the self.

The relationship between the figures in the artwork is not necessarily familial but points toward a broader conceptualization of non-familial relationality which is further emphasized by the references to Rachel, Pieta and Medusa who are figures from different traditions, namely Christianity and Greek mythology. The matrixial trans-subjective co-emergence and transmission of information are visualized in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) as it shows various figures, some of which are more easily distinguishable than others and the figures appear to merge as if to symbolize how each figure is shaped by the other figures. One cannot delineate the effects of matrixial encounters from past generations or encounters with others on oneself, thus one is never a separable being but always already constituted in relation to others, especially in relation to the maternal body.

“Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) can be considered a visualization of how people are constituted by the information of past generations and how one is affected by one’s family through the figure of the mother or, rather, the matrixial body. While earlier work by Ettinger, namely “Eurydice” (Ettinger 1992-2006) visualizes the transgenerational transmission of traces and familial relationality through reliance on archival material and new techniques, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) visualizes relationality in a broader sense to address non-familial relationality and how one is affected by others. “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) appears to address how one is constituted in relation to others more broadly as the relationship between the figures is not clearly marked.

## Chapter 2: Bodily Relationality with Nature

The selected photograph by Mendieta that this chapter analyses is “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) (see fig. 2). Through visual analysis, this chapter explores the visualization of relationality through nature and one’s environment. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is the first photograph in Mendieta’s *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) and brings together many of the elements that are addressed in later works from the series such as femininity, presence and absence, marking and tracing, belonging, and the cyclical relationship between the body and nature. Therefore, the photograph serves as a great case study to understand Mendieta’s point of departure for the other *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980). Notions of belonging, embodiment and nature relate to Mendieta’s personal story of displacement as she moved to the United States from Cuba as a teenager. Her *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) is an exploration of her relationship with nature and the earth and how her body is constituted in relation to the land and how her displacement has affected this relationship. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), in particular, explores the visualization of the exploration of one’s relationship with nature, one’s surroundings and (home)land. Through her photographs, Mendieta re-establishes and re-constitutes a relational understanding between herself, her body and nature that was always already there. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) and the sequential *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) are an expression of Mendieta’s desire for belonging with and being rooted in the earth and with her environment. Through an analysis of the relationship between the body, Mendieta herself, and its surroundings in the photograph, this chapter explores one’s relationality with nature, the earth and (home)land and how this relationality constitutes the self to work toward approaching a relational understanding of the self as entangled with its surroundings, environment and roots. The question that this chapter aims to answer is: how does Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) show an understanding of the self as constituted through nature?

This chapter analysis how Mendieta visualizes the relationship between one’s body and the earth and how experiences of displacement affect one’s sense of being rooted and of belonging. First, I closely analyse the photograph in terms of the visual image, and the references in the title of the photograph in relation to the *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) to discuss how the boundary between the body and nature is blurred in Mendieta’s work. This is important to understand the self in relation to the natural environment. Then, I expand on previously addressed notions of matrixiality by relying on Mendieta’s understanding of her *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) and Barad’s (2014) notion of re-turning. This will allow

me to account for the conceptualization of subject formation through nature. Next, I critically address the essentialisation of the feminine body as maternal in Mendieta's *Silueta* photographs (Mendieta 1973-1980). It is important to understand the tension between the feminine body and nature to approach a more nuanced understanding of matrixiality and of the relationality of the self and nature that the photograph addresses. Then, I address traces of the self as appearing in Mendieta's work by building on Hatty Nestor's (2021) analysis of Mendieta's work and notions of presence and absence. This helps me to address how the self as belonging and being rooted is understood through the absence and presence of the body. Finally, I use Carrillo Rowe's discussion on differential belonging to address notions of belonging and (up)rooting in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). This relates to Mendieta's personal story of displacement and a desire to belong that is not grounded in nationalistic belonging and allows me to address an understanding of the self as relational through the natural environment.



Fig. 2 Mendieta, Ana. 1973. "Imágen de Yágul." Photograph. Artsy. April 5, 2022. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ana-mendieta-imagen-de-yagul-from-the-series-silueta-works-in-mexico-1973-1977>.

## 2.1 Blurring Together the Body and Nature

“Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is a photograph of a naked body that is lying on its back in a grave-like hole made of large rocks which is a Zapotec tomb (Nestor 2021). The photograph is taken from a higher angle from the side of the feet of the body. The image is cropped in such a way that the inside of the tomb is visible, but not the surroundings of the tomb. The body is lying on its back in the middle of the tomb and its positioning reminds one of a corpse that has been laid out as the arms are lying next to the torso, the hands are on the sides of the hips and the legs are stretched forward together, which makes the body appear stiff. The body is covered in bundles of small white flowers that conceal the face and large parts of the body including the vulva and breasts. The body appears to be a part of its surroundings because it looks like the white flowers are growing out of the body and the tomb and the rocks are covered by dirt, small plants and weeds. This makes the body look like it belongs amidst the plants and the flowers in the tomb. The body is Mendieta herself, but as her face is not visible, it could be anyone. Although Mendieta’s breasts and vulva are concealed by the flowers that are placed on her body, the body still appears feminine. The curves of her body are accentuated as her hands are placed on her hips and her legs are stretched forward together. The feminine quality of the body is further derived from the delicate small flowers and the golden appearance of the skin as the sun hits the body. The femininity of the body is not derived from apparent sex organs, but from other signifiers such as the body’s curves, gentility and softness to address feminine aesthetics.

Notably, in this photograph, the body is physically present rather than imitated using natural materials as is the case in many other photographs from the *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980). In the *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980), the bodies – whether physically present or absent – appear as traces of Mendieta’s body. ‘Silueta’ means silhouette in Spanish, thus the photographs in the *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) are images of silhouettes or profiles or traces of bodies. As Nestor states, “[o]ver two hundred *Siluetas* were made between 1973-1980, and in form, location and concept they are all bound by universal omnipotence of energy and female figuration, mark-making, and perishability” (Nestor 2021, 2). The artworks in the *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) all portray feminine figures that leave marks and create traces of femininity, but these marks are never permanent as they are made using materials that naturally decay. In some photographs, such as “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), the body is physically present while in other photographs the outline or shape of a body is visible. The shape of the body is imitated using sand, rocks, plants, ice, flowers or even blood, thus mostly natural materials. The use of natural materials, such as the

use of flowers in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), integrates the silhouette into its surroundings, making the trace of the body appear as a part of nature. As Mendieta used natural materials to create marks, the materials perish over time as sand washes away, plants continue to grow and ice melts. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) and other photographs that portray a physically present body, the trace is destroyed as soon as the body gets up after the photograph is taken, which addresses the temporality of nature as always in motion that is also apparent in the body and the relationship between the body and nature.

As the name of the series of photographs refers to that which is visualized, namely silhouettes of bodies, the names of the individual photographs sometimes refer to the places where the photographs were taken; ‘Imágen de Yágul’ means an image of Yágul in Spanish and Mendieta took this photograph in Yágul which is an archaeological site in Oaxaca, Mexico. As Mendieta plays with and explores the presence and absence of her body in photographs, the location of this photograph signifies a similar tension and ambiguity between presence and absence; the archaeological site is a physical trace of a past presence of the Zapotec community. The ruins of the Zapotec community signify Mendieta’s connection with her Latin American heritage. By placing her body amongst the ruins of the Zapotec community, Mendieta physically connects with and roots herself in a part of her Latin American heritage. Mendieta plays with the presence and absence of bodies in her photographs as well as with the body’s relation to nature:

“I have been carrying a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth ... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body.” (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10)

Mendieta uses natural materials to create traces in some photographs and, in other photographs, she uses her own body such as “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) and chooses to experience and physically embody this connection between body and earth. Mendieta has purposely sought out the connection between the body and the earth and explored its relation through the use of natural material and various ways of inserting and integrating her body – physically or as a trace – into its surroundings.



While in the previous chapter, I addressed the blurring of the boundaries between the self and others, in Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the boundary between the self, the body and the natural environment is blurred. Mendieta has positioned her body amongst natural surroundings to re-establish a relationality between herself, her body and nature because she desires to belong and be rooted and to understand how she has been affected by displacement. "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) brings together issues of femininity, presence and absence, and belonging that Mendieta has explored and visualized through her body's relationality with nature. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta covers her naked body in flowers, she physically touches the ground with the entire backside of her body, she creates a trace of her body using photography and places her body amidst an archaeological site. By blurring the boundaries between her body and its surroundings, the relationality of the self and the environment is addressed in Mendieta's photograph.

## 2.2 Expanding Matrixiality as Relating to Nature

Mendieta refers to the womb as nature and homeland (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987), which addresses nature as a symbolic womb and subject formation through nature. Previously this thesis has addressed the matrixial and the womb as relating to familial relationality and used the womb as a model to think through subject formation and ways of relating to others; Mendieta refers to the notion of the womb in relation to nature as similarly constituting and shaping the self. In terms of subject formation, one might expand the model of the womb to include nature, homeland and environment as the self is constituted by one's natural environment similar to the way the self is constituted through others. While it might be clear that one is affected by one's family, the people around oneself and one's upbringing, one is similarly affected by the physical environment one grows up in which shapes one's relationship with nature. For example, the self and one's relationship with nature is constituted differently when one grows up in the countryside versus a big city. Mendieta reflects on the effect of the change in environment and of displacement that she experienced as a teenager as "having been cast from the womb" (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10). Here, notions of homeland and nature can be put into conversation with notions of the womb and the matrixial. Mendieta considers homeland and nature as similarly forming and constructing the self to the womb. Consequently, the symbolic notion of the womb relates to belonging; Mendieta describes leaving her homeland as a rupture in a process of development and growth that was left unfinished – if growth and development are ever finished. Her move

to the United States as a teenager did not allow her to fully develop a connection with her homeland, Cuba, which affected her relationship with her environment which includes but is not limited to Cuba and the United States.

Similar to the way the womb and the matrixial body create an environment for the pre-subject to develop, one's environment post-partum shapes and constructs the self through various encounters. Growing up in Cuba still constitutes a connection with the land even if Mendieta left Cuba young. Mendieta's experience expands notions of the matrixial as they call into question the pre-subject and subject distinction post-partum as relating also to one's natural environment. The distinction between the pre-subject and subject in matrixial logic is based on the moment of birth, however, subject formation is continuous and one's natural environment plays a role in subject formation post-partum thus the pre-subject and the subject cannot be as easily distinguished. As Mendieta reflects on her experience of displacement as being cast from the womb, this could be interpreted as the unfinished formation of the subject. The move to the United States could be considered a rupturing moment similar to birth, which determines a pre-partum and post-partum existence – or the pre-subject and the subject. Mendieta is constituted through her upbringing in Cuba and considers this the 'womb;' her homeland and her natural environment growing up carried, cared for and protected her similarly to the womb. These encounters can be with others but can be expanded to include encounters with nature and one's environment. By allowing her naked body to be held by the tomb and by its natural surroundings, Mendieta shows how she considers herself to be cared for and carried by nature and her environment as she returns to a connection between her body and nature in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). Mendieta refers to her *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) as "a return to the maternal source" (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10). Mendieta describes positioning her body within nature – whether the body is physically present or absent – as an experience that allowed her to return to a maternal source. The maternal source then refers to the earth and nature as carrying her and constituting the self.

### 2.3 De-essentializing the Female Nude

In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta has entangled her body with its surroundings to address a relationality between the body and nature to suggest a relational understanding of oneself with nature, the earth and one's environment. The association of women or the feminine with nature is often criticized for essentializing feminine qualities such as caring and carrying as natural (Rountree 1999; Leach 2007; Gaard 2011). However,

understanding oneself in relation to nature does not necessarily reduce this relationality to binary notions of sexual difference based on reproductive functions. Rather than completely rejecting any association between the feminine and nature, the dualistic, hierarchized and patriarchal devaluation of women's bodies as associated with nature and the natural needs to be de-essentialized. While maternal notions of carrying and caring are potential feminine qualities, they are not necessarily inherently feminine. The notion of the matrixial as based on the model of the womb similarly links female reproductivity to traits that are normally associated with femininity, such as caring, protecting and carrying. As the discussion on matrixiality in the previous chapter also addresses, to some extent femininity is still associated with binary notions of sex despite trying to move away from binary notions of sexual difference by relying on notions of femininity (and masculinity) which can be performed and expressed independently of the biologically sexed binary. Mendieta does not address her own body as matrixial, but addresses her surroundings as matrixial, as constituting herself, and as carrying her. By showing the entanglement of her body with nature, she allows the tomb to carry, hold and protect her body. Rather than essentializing the feminine body as matrixial, Mendieta addresses nature as matrixial as a feminine performance independent of the biological binary.

While distinctive features such as Mendieta's face, hair, breast and vulva are not visible, the body in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) appears feminine because, underneath the bundles of flowers, the curves of the naked body are visible and emphasised by the placement of the hands on the hips. A photograph of a naked female body exists in relation to social and cultural practices of representation that tend to sexualise and objectify naked female bodies. Regarding nude photography, Leslie Bostrom and Marlene Malik state that, "a female nude, even if created by a woman, still takes on the position of object/symbol/nude – the Other in relation to the socially dominant male subject" (Bostrom and Malik 1999, 46). Although the photograph portrays a naked female body, the body is barely visible underneath the flowers and merely gives the impression that it is naked; the body in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) is not necessarily sexualized. Despite what Bostrom and Malik state, not necessarily all images of naked female bodies are sexual because as "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) shows, the naked female body is not reduced to its sexuality or its binary sexual reproductive function. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta's naked body is visible and represents a connection with nature and the earth rather than a sexualization of the female nude. Furthermore, the photograph represents an attempt to return to the maternal, the matrixial and the natural, thus Mendieta addresses nature

as matrixial. While Mendieta's naked body appears feminine, it is not necessarily sexualised for the pleasure of the male subject, rather the photograph emphasises matrixial carrying by not explicitly showing features of the body.

In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the boundary between the body and nature is blurred as the body is covered in flowers and integrated with its surroundings. The border between the body and its surroundings is visually and aesthetically blurred in addition to the body's physical connection with the ground and the flowers. The integration of Mendieta's body in its surroundings shows how the body has become a part of nature as nature is a part of her body. Furthermore, Mendieta has expressed that the inscription of her body is an attempt to return to the matrixial as nature is a source of subject formation. Conceptually speaking, one is constituted in relation to one's environment, (home)land and nature through expressions and experiences of rooting and belonging. Mendieta's visualization of entangling her naked body with nature and her expression to explore the feminine, suggest a connection between the feminine naked body and nature that is not based on essentialized patriarchal notions of the female body as naturally reproductive; rather the entanglement shows how the body is constituted in relation to nature and how nature and one's environment— similarly to notions of the womb and matrixiality — is part of subject formation. A relational understanding of the female body in relation to nature is not necessarily an essentialization of the feminine body as naturally reproductive or maternal. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the body is not addressed as matrixial, but rather, the natural surroundings of the body are matrixially carrying and constituting the body.

#### 2.4 Re-Turning the Womb and the Tomb

In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the placement of the body in the tomb and the physical connection between the body and the earth exemplify "a return to the maternal source" (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10). The surroundings of the body — the tomb — hold and carry the body as the womb would do. While the notion of the womb relates to emergence and birth, the physical tomb relates to passing and death. By entangling the notions of the womb and the tomb in this way, the cyclical and entangled relationship between emergence and passing, and between life and death is visualized. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the tomb or the grave is the maternal source to which Mendieta 'returns' which entangles the carrying qualities of the womb and the tomb and addresses a cyclical relationship between life and death. The symbolic burying of the corpse-like body with flowers in a tomb returns the body to the earth and also re-turns the body and the earth.

As Barad states, not returning “as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again” (Barad 2014, 168). Mendieta’s body is not merely returned to the earth or nature, but rather it is re-turned as the relation between the body and the earth is continuously turned over due to their cyclical relationality. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), flowers are blossoming from the body which visualizes how new growth follows death. Similar to the womb, the tomb is symbolic of protection, caring and carrying. Notions of birth and death, and of emerging and passing are not separable; the body in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is at once a site of emergence for the flowers and a site of passing of the corpse-like body in the tomb which addresses the cyclical relationship between life and death.

In her photography, Mendieta explores the relationality between her body and nature and appears to reconstitute and rediscover this relationship between nature and her own body; a relationality that is re-turned, a relationality that is a continuous experience of establishing and fading relations. Through re-turning, “there is no moving beyond, no leaving the ‘old’ behind. There is no absolute boundary between here-now and there-then” (Barad 2014, 168). Mendieta’s bodily presence in the tomb and being covered with flowers can be turned over which brings past moments into the present which entangles the past and the present as well as the tomb, the flowers and the body, especially, through the quality of photography which allows one to return to a past moment. As Mendieta re-turns her body to nature and re-turns to a maternal source, she allows her body to be held again by the earth and her body is cared for and carried again. By doing so, she embodies a matrixial carrying that she experienced before moving to the United States. The reconnection with this matrixial carrying by nature of the past is then brought into the present; the boundaries between the past and the present are always already affectively blurred which Mendieta visualizes in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973). By turning the body and nature over and over again, their cyclical and entangled relationship is emphasized as the past and present cannot be separated; the past is always already present in the present and the present is always already existing in the past, affectively making them indistinguishable.

The notion of re-turning can be seen in the connection between the body and the earth that Mendieta establishes in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973); because the body is lying on its back, the entire body is touching the earth. The tomb in which Mendieta lies in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) enacts matrixial qualities as it surrounds the body and provides the body with an environment in which it can grow and develop. The reciprocal relationship between the body and nature is based on matrixial notions of carrying, caring and protecting.

The entanglement of the body, the tomb and the natural surroundings address the continuous experience of establishing and fading relations. Furthermore, on top of the body flowers are growing, which symbolizes a reciprocal relation between earth, body and nature, because, for the flowers to blossom, the body needs to be grounded and connected with the earth for all elements to work together. The flowers growing out of her body signify a co-constitutive relationality between earth, body and nature as being dependent on each other. Mendieta integrates her body into her natural surroundings which makes her body look natural amongst the flowers, weeds, rocks and small plants. By integrating the body with nature and its surroundings, the body has become a place of growth, development and emergence visualized by the blossoming flowers. The relationality of the body and nature is re-turned because there is no clear beginning or end to the growth and development of the flowers in relation to the body as there is no clear separation of the body and its natural surroundings.

In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), the notion of re-turning is not only addressed through the relationality of the past and the present and of the body and nature, but also through the entanglement of life and death, and of emergence and passing. As the photograph shows the emergence of life through the blossoming flowers, it also addresses death through the position of the body in the tomb. Life and death, and emerging and passing are continuously turned over in the photograph. According to Eleanor Heartney, Mendieta’s use of “shallow openings and earth mounds that formed the basis for [the *Siluetas* works] were wombs as well as graves” which “reinforced [Mendieta’s] sense of the cyclical nature of life, in which death is a beginning rather than an end” (Heartney 2004, 141). Life and death are inseparable in the image and are turned over again and again; neither life nor death is necessarily a beginning or an end because their relationality is cyclical, it is re-turned. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta’s body is seen lying in a tomb or grave which is associated with death rather than birth. However, the tomb forms the foundation for growth and development as symbolized by the flowers. Since the body is positioned in a tomb, the corps-like position of the body emphasizes the historical use of the location as a gravesite. The body appears stiff like a corpse and the flowers appear to be growing out of the body suggesting the body has been lying there long enough for new flowers to grow. The flowers represent new growth while the body in the tomb suggests death. “Mendieta’s body in [the *Siluetas* works] is not wombed, however, but instead buried, given a sense of underworld where flowers flourish from her (supposed) corpse, much like a burial ground. The symbolism of a womb, for its materiality at least, is to be encased within a cave; to be bound by possibility, beginnings, abundance and potentialities” (Nestor 2021, 18). By simultaneously

referring both to new growth and death, “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) addresses life and death, and emergence and passing as continuously establishing and fading relations.

Not only is the relationship between birth and death cyclical, but the relationship is also temporally entangled which is visible in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) as the association with birth and emergence appear at the same time as the association with death and passing which suggests the ambiguous boundary between them. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), the relationship between the body and its natural surroundings and between life and death is cyclical and one can speak of re-turning rather than returning; the tomb and the corpse-like body symbolize passing and the blossoming flowers symbolize emergence simultaneously. By re-turning to nature and the earth as Mendieta does in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), as I have already pointed out, she allows her body to be carried and cared for again by her natural surroundings. More specifically, Mendieta’s body is held by her Latin American heritage as the tomb is a ruin of an ancient Mexican community, which I address later in this chapter. The re-turning of the relationship between the body and nature is one of the central purposes of the *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980). In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), in particular, the tomb symbolizes carrying and passing and the flowers symbolize growth and emergence to address the entangled and cyclical relationship between passing and emerging and life and death.

Similar to the womb, the tomb provides the body with the right circumstances and environment in which to flourish and develop. The protection and carrying nature of the tomb provide the body with a supportive foundation from which flowers can grow similar to how the matrixial body provides an environment for the pre-subject to develop and emerge. Although the blossoming flowers suggest growth, birth and emergence, the body’s corpse-like position is associated with death and passing. The photograph does not only visualize either birth or death but both which suggests a blurred boundary and relationality between these conditions as individual but not separable. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is not merely a photograph of life or death, but by allowing for both interpretations simultaneously, the entanglement and interconnected relationship between life and death is brought to the foreground. By addressing both interpretations of the photograph, notions of emergence and passing and of growth and development show that not merely one’s development in the womb but more broadly one’s physical natural environment constitute the self as the relationality of the body and nature is matrixial and occurs repeatedly as it re-turns.

## 2.5 Traces as Ambiguous Belonging

In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta has inscribed her body in nature by blurring the boundaries between her body and its surroundings by covering the body with flowers and positioning it amongst the rocks of a tomb. Aesthetically, the body is made to look like it belongs, which reflects a desire to belong with nature and her natural surroundings. In the *Silueta* series (Mendieta 1973-1980), the bodies – whether physically present or absent – appear as traces of Mendieta’s body. By positioning her body into the earth as a trace, Mendieta has explored various ways of inscribing her body in nature and of addressing a relationality between her body and her natural environment; in some photographs, like “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), her body is physically present in the image, while in other photographs, she has created a body using natural materials. Thus, even when Mendieta’s physical body is not present in the photograph, a body or silhouette is always present, because even when the body is physically absent, its silhouette is present. This is “the kind of instance to which neither absence nor presence applies, not because they are intrinsically inapplicable but because the phenomenon in question represents their merging with one another to the point of indistinguishability” (Casey 1982, 564). Whether Mendieta’s body is physically present in the photograph or not, the body is always ambiguously present. The boundaries are blurred between nature and the body and consequently between presence and absence which suggests an entangled relationship of the body and the earth. The ambiguous presence of the body in Mendieta’s *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) addresses the entanglement of the body with its surroundings through different ways of inscribing the body in the earth. Furthermore, the ambiguous presence of the body also shows that despite the temporal and spatial specificity of the body in the photograph, the relationality between the body and nature and a desire to belong amongst nature remains.

As life and death are entangled and re-turned in Mendieta’s photographs, the presence of the body in the images is tied to a specific time and place to which one can re-turn by virtue of the nature of photography. In her *Silueta* artworks (Mendieta 1973-1980), Mendieta plays with various ways of placing and inscribing her body in nature to return to the sense of home or belonging. Through the blurring of the boundaries between her body and its surroundings, the inevitable removal of the presence of the body, and the photograph as a referent of a past moment, the body is ambiguously situated as neither present nor absent. Although in some other *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980), the body is physically absent, the body in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is physically present, however, in both types



of images, the body appears as a trace of Mendieta's presence. The present body in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) inscribes the body in nature by aesthetically integrating the body with its surroundings and addressing the temporality of the image due to the inevitable removal of the body. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), "the female figure [is] ghostlike, neither present, absent, dead not alive, ... preserved by a dwelling, an otherness" (Nestor 2021, 12). While Mendieta's body is present in the photograph, the body is blurred with its surroundings as has been discussed, which aesthetically makes the body appear neither fully present nor fully absent; the body does not fully belong in the photograph. The ambiguous presence of the body is further emphasized by the body's passive and corpse-like position. In other *Silueta* works (Mendieta 1973-1980), when the body is physically absent, a body is still ambiguously present as it has been imitated and created from natural materials. Whether the body is physically present or absent in Mendieta's photographs, it appears as a trace.

The ambiguous presence of the body and the traces of bodies in the photographs seem to refer to a sense of displacement of not fully belonging in a space despite one's presence in it. A sense of loss and displacement is apparent in her work as her longing to belong stems from a lost sense of home and homeland, as Mendieta desires to re-establish and reconstitute herself with nature or rather to experience her relationality with nature. In her photographs this is visible as she uses natural materials that are subject to natural decay or her body which she inevitably needs to remove, affectively destroying the image. The *Silueta* artworks (Mendieta 1973-1980) are "photographs of formations that were purposefully destroyed at the moment of their conception" (Nestor 2021, 6). While the photograph captures a moment of connection between body and nature, and nature and body, the inevitable destruction that follows the moment that has been captured leaves one unsettled which points towards displacement. According to Nestor, "Mendieta's *Siluetas* [(Mendieta 1973-1980)], like the *actual* present, are always bound to a sense of disappearance, ungraspability, loss. In this vein, to view photographs of *The Siluetas* is only to experience them as a cemented moment, a fragment of the very conceptual grounds in which they were conceived" (Nestor 2021, 6). In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta uses her body to create the image and she needs to remove the flowers from her body in order to get up which inevitably destroys the image. While the body might be present in the moment, the body never fully belongs. When Mendieta has used her own physical body, such as in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the presence of the body inevitably needs to be removed and when a body has been created using natural material, it inevitably fades and decays. The inevitable destruction of the image

in the moment points toward displacement and despite Mendieta's presence in the space, her belonging is ambiguous.

Due to the nature of photography, the silhouettes that Mendieta created are never fully in the past nor fully in the present. A Nestor states, "[t]hrough the application of natural materiality – fire, water, sand, and ice – Mendieta's figure is a presence tied to a specific time, place, and witnessing [...] the subjectivity of Mendieta, or indeed Mendieta's subjectivity, is remade and undone, and cannot be archived, recorded, or experienced" (Nestor 2021, 6). Only because the presence of a body was captured by the camera, one can bear witness to a presence that has long passed. Furthermore, this ambiguous presence is an inherent quality of photography as photographs capture a specific moment in time and space that will not occur again and freeze a moment in time and space which allows one to observe that specific moment closely in a manner that is only possible because the moment has been photographed. Therefore, a photograph always already is a trace of something that once was and is not only ambiguously present as a trace; a photograph visualizes a past that is now absent but remains present through the image. Photography affectively entangles the past and the present as the past remains present and one can re-turn to the past. The body in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) is understood through the spatial and temporal specificity of the image and the self is understood through the absence and presence of the body. The presence of the body is connected to notions of belonging and being rooted as the ambiguous presence of the body points towards the experience of displacement, of not fully belonging despite being present in a space.

## 2.6 Reconstituting Belonging by (Up)Rooting the Body

While the ambiguous presence of the body in Mendieta's *Siluetas* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) addresses a sense of displacement, Mendieta also actively sought to re-establish a sense of belonging amongst nature through her photographs. In Yágul in Mexico, Mendieta experienced a connection with her Latin American heritage from which she had been uprooted as well as a connection with the land and the earth from which she had been torn. Mendieta uses her artworks to express her desire to belong as well as to reconstitute a belonging amongst her surroundings. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), she seeks a connection between her body and the earth. As Carrillo Rowe states, "[d]ifferential belonging calls us to reckon with the ways in which we are oppressed *and* privileged as we move across sites of belonging so that we may place ourselves where we can have an impact and where we can share experience that will shape the community's consciousness" (Carrillo Rowe 2008,

42; emphasis in original). Mendieta's exile from Cuba and her experience of displacement have resulted in her creating "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) and the rest of the *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980). Through her search to reconnect with nature and to experience a sense of belonging, she explores various locations, bodily positions and natural materials in her photography.

In her *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) and thus in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta tries to reconstitute this sense of belonging, of being cared for, of being carried, and of being protected by rooting herself in the earth and her environment. In this exploration, Mendieta moves through national spaces and appears to find belonging with nature as existing between and beyond borders. Or as Nestor states, "Mendieta's *Siluetas* allude to a decolonised desire for belonging, of earthly survival" (Nestor 2021, 20). In the *Siluetas* artworks (Mendieta 1973-1980) and in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), in particular, Mendieta expresses a desire to belong not within national borders, but with the land and the earth. Earth refers to the physical dirt ground underneath the body and symbolically relates to life, death and loss. Importantly, the notion of the earth, here, extends beyond and across borders and is not grounded in nationalistic belonging. Through her photographs, Mendieta understands the relationality between her body and nature not as restricted by nations and borders, but this relationality addresses a conceptualization of nature as encompassing all natural and earthly environments. As "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) is a photograph of a body that is inscribed in the earth and its surroundings, the tension between belonging and the desire to belong comes into focus as one does not merely belong when one is present in a space. While Mendieta moved from Cuba to the United States, she was present in the United States as an other, as not completely belonging. Being present does not necessarily constitute belonging. Through her photography, Mendieta explores and reconstitutes relationality with the earth and with her environment by inscribing her body in nature in various ways. By inscribing her body in nature as Mendieta has done in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), she does not merely exist in the space but becomes part of it. Additionally, the natural surroundings become part of her through an interconnected, co-constitutive relationship between her body and the earth. Through the blurring of the boundaries between the body and its surroundings, the body is integrated and inscribed in nature to address the desire to belong.

The body's connection with the earth is emphasized as the body is lying on its back and thus touching the floor of the tomb with its entire backside. The body is visualized as being rooted in the earth with one's entire body. Plants and trees need to have roots in the

earth to get their nutrients to be able to grow and flourish. In the photograph, this notion of rooting is mimicked as the entire body is touching the earth and therefore appears rooted which allows flowers to blossom. This notion of rooting as occurring with plants relates to another notion of rooting that is derived from the symbolism of rooting plants. Rooting also refers to one's past and to where one comes from. 'Root' or 'roots' is defined as "something that is an origin or source;" "one or more progenitors of a group of descendants;" "an underlying support;" "the essential core;" and "close relationship with an environment" (*Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "root"). When speaking about one's roots, one can refer to one's family history, one's homeland, one's cultural practices and so on. The self is rooted in family structures, one's environment and cultural practices which all constitute the self, similarly to how trees are rooted in the earth and use their roots to absorb energy from the earth in order to thrive. These definitions of the word 'root' generally refer to a deeply ingrained familial, cultural and environmental belonging. These are important themes that Mendieta explores in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) and the other *Siluetas* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) as Mendieta experienced displacement and was uprooted from familial, cultural and environmental belonging to which she attempts to return and re-turn in the photograph.

In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta has notably rooted her body in the earth and connected it with her surroundings. For Mendieta, the desire to root herself comes from her experience of leaving – or as she states, "having been torn from" (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10) – Cuba, her homeland. She has moved away from a familiar location or home base; she has been uprooted from her home. For plants, 'uprooting' refers to pulling a plant or tree from the ground and relocating it, thus separating its roots from its familiar environment and moving it to an unfamiliar environment where it needs to relearn how to absorb energy from the earth; similarly, Mendieta has been uprooted from Cuba. Rooting relates to belonging and to matrixial notions of being cared for and being carried as Mendieta's body is matrixially held and protected by the tomb, in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). The carrying and caring quality of the tomb and the earth in relation to the body, re-turns the body to the earth and allows the body to flourish again as symbolized by the blossoming flowers. Rooting furthermore relates to the familiar as extending beyond family to include environment and culture, which is illustrated in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) by the natural surroundings through which the body is constituted. As Nira Yuval-Davis et al. state, "[b]elonging is about emotional attachment, about feeling 'at home' and ... about feeling 'safe'" (Yuval-Davis et al. 2006, 2). Experiencing a sense of belonging

means being in a familiar environment and being protected and cared for; belonging relates to a sense of security, safety and familiarity. In Mendieta's experience, she was uprooted from Cuba which separated her from her home(land) and a familiar environment. As Carrillo Rowe states, "[t]he sites of our belonging constitute how we see the world, what we value, who we are (becoming)" (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 25). Just as one's sense of belonging and having a safe and familiar environment constitutes the self, the self is also constituted and affected by being uprooted from this belonging.

While Mendieta has expressed a sense of displacement from Cuba, the *Siluetas* photographs (Mendieta 1973-1980) are not taken in Cuba, but in Iowa – where she moved after leaving Cuba – and in Mexico, where she "[gained] some understanding of her Latin American heritage" (Perreault 1987, 14). In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the body is lying in a Zapotec tomb in Yágul in Oaxaca, Mexico and Mendieta's body appears entangled with its surrounding as Mendieta has tried to inscribe her body in the tomb and its natural environment. Regarding the *Siluetas* artworks (Mendieta 1973-1980), Nestor states that Mendieta "created abstracted female figurations by physically inscribing her body into the land, as an expression of belonging" (Nestor 2021, 2). Nestor argues that the integration of Mendieta's body is an expression of belonging and suggests that the process of producing the photographs created a sense of belonging. According to Carrillo Rowe, "[b]elonging is about where you long to belong" (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 35). Thus, belonging somewhere and feeling at home and safe is not necessarily related to one's roots. As Mendieta was uprooted from Cuba as a teenager and she expresses a desire to belong with the earth and with nature in Mexico, she addresses a broader notion of belonging as extending beyond and across national borders to encompass a belonging with her Latin American roots. "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) expresses a desire to belong with nature and the environment and to belong with her Latin American heritage. While Mendieta was uprooted from Cuba, she connected with her Latin American roots in Mexico, which indicates a belonging beyond and across nationalistic belonging.

Mendieta's displacement and move to the United States from Cuba was part of Operation Peter Pan; a United States project that deported children from Castro's communist Cuba (Perreault 1987; Nestor 2021). As a direct result of this displacement, Mendieta's expressions of belonging in the *Siluetas* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) need to also be regarded in light of this colonial endeavour and how it affected Mendieta's sense of and desire to belong. As Carrillo Rowe states, "our belongings are conditioned by our bodies and where they are placed on the globe" (Carrillo Rowe 2008, 43). Operation Peter Pan that brought

Mendieta to the United States ‘tore’ her from the familiarity and safety of family, history, land and culture. Mendieta’s uprooting from Cuba and her move to Iowa in the United States caused her to experience displacement rather than belonging, which not merely relates to Mendieta’s personal experience of displacement, but touches upon broader notions of belonging in nationalistic contexts that have been affected by colonial endeavours. As Nestor states, Mendieta’s *Siluetas* (Mendieta 1973-1980) and “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) “cannot be considered solely through the prism of personal displacement, but [can be considered] also as an expression of a universal need for belonging” (Nestor 2021, 4). The displacement affected her sense of belonging in a national context. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) should not merely be regarded as an expression of displacement or Mendieta’s personal loss of homeland, rather, the photograph brings up questions of belonging within or beyond nationalistic belonging and of one’s relationship with one’s natural surroundings.

Mendieta sought to experience a sense of belonging with the earth and with nature, which reflects a notion of belonging that is not necessarily tied to national identity. The notion of belonging does not merely relate to being present in a space but relates to having connections and relationships in a space that are based on a sense of safety and familiarity through shared history, land or culture, beyond and between borders. The connection with her Latin American heritage that Mendieta experienced in Mexico, addresses a shared history and culture between Mendieta’s upbringing in Cuba and Mexico. Her familiarity with Cuban history and culture resonated with the history, land and culture in Mexico which addresses a familiarity and common ground through Latin American heritage with which Mendieta could connect from both a Cuban and a Mexican base. The experience of belonging then extends beyond and across national borders. By inscribing her body in nature in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta constitutes a relational understanding of self with the earth that is not rooted in nationalistic belonging but based on notions of being cared for and protected by the natural environment.

## 2.7 Conclusion

To conclude, as the self is constituted by others, the self is similarly constituted by one’s environment, the earth and nature, and one’s roots as these affect one’s sense of home and belonging. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) is a visualization of how one is connected with nature and how one is constituted through one’s environment and notions of belonging. In the photograph, the body and nature appear almost indistinguishable which

signifies their relationality. Mendieta refers to nature as a womb which is derived from her experience of personal displacement; nature can be considered as matrixial because the land and the earth carry and protect one which affects one's experience of being in the world and constitutes the self. While the association of the feminine naked body in nature might bring up essentialising notions of women as maternal, the natural surroundings of the body are addressed as matrixial rather than the body itself. Rather than completely rejecting any association between the feminine and nature, matrixial notions of caring and carrying can be performed independently of the binary based on biological sex.

Mendieta addresses her *Siluetas* works (Mendieta 1973-1980) as “a return to the maternal source” (Mendieta 1981, quoted in Perreault 1987, 10) and “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) specifically visualizes how the relationality of the body and nature and notions of life and death, of emerging and passing are re-turned. The body is rooted in the earth, it is symbolically rooted in both life and death as the tomb which supports the body can be interpreted both as life and death simultaneously; the tomb symbolizes death by virtue of its historic use but also symbolizes life through matrixial notions of carrying and protecting. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta's body is held by the tomb in which she lies, her body is rooted on the floor of the tomb and flowers appear to grow from her body. The blurred boundary between life and death emphasizes the cyclical nature of life and constitutes the body in relation to nature and nature in relation to the body. The symbolic burying of the corpse-like body with flowers in a tomb re-returns the body and the earth. Mendieta entangles life and death, nature and the body, emergence and fading, and growth and decay in one photograph. This relationality between the self, the body and nature always already exists and re-returns as the past and the present are entangled. Especially, through the use of photography, one can return to a past moment, which is continuously brought into the present. Relationality is not bound by temporal constraints as the quality of photography shows that past moments can be re-turned and thus are never completely in the past. The re-turning of the body and the earth, of photography and of life and death, addresses relationality as a continuous experience of establishing and fading relations, as never finished.

In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) and in other *Siluetas* works (Mendieta 1973-1980), Mendieta plays with leaving traces of her body – whether the body is physically present or absent – by inscribing her body in the earth as an act of becoming part of the natural surroundings and nature becoming part of the body. Through the inscription of the body amongst its surroundings, the self can be understood as being constituted by the earth and one (home)land. In her *Siluetas* series (Mendieta 1973-1980) and thus in “Imágen de

Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta has reconstituted a sense of belonging, of being cared for, of being carried, and of being protected by rooting herself in the earth and her environment. The connection between the body and the earth expresses a decolonised desire to belong beyond and across national borders. The blurring of the boundaries between the body and its surroundings emphasizes the entangled relationality between the self and nature through a cyclical and co-emergent relationship. Specifically, the surroundings, nature and the earth are addressed as matrixial rather than the body as the body is constituted through the natural surroundings similarly to subject formation through the womb. Nature and the body are not conflated but entangled as well as individual yet inseparable. The relationality between the body, the self and nature is constituted through an affective relationship that is rooted in a spatial belonging with the earth as non-nationalistic belonging. The self is not merely constituted by encounters with others, but also by its natural environment as relating to belonging and being rooted. The relationality between the self and nature is not linear but is continuously turned over as the self is affected by its natural surroundings.



### Chapter 3: The Vulnerable Self

Notions of self and of vulnerability can be seen both in Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) (see fig. 1) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) (see fig. 2). Although the artworks appear different – firstly because one is a painting and the other a photograph – the artworks share a sense of relationality and a consideration of the self as not individual but entangled. Central to discussions of relationality is the consideration of what it means to be human and particularly one's position as a human in this world. Questions about what it means to be human are related to questions about the self and the conceptualization of self. As Butler states, relationality "is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related" (Butler 2004a, 22; emphasis in original). Throughout this thesis, I explore how the self is constituted through ties and connections between people as well as between people and the environment. Specifically, I explore how these relations constitute and affect the self. The question that I ask in this chapter is: how do vulnerability and notions of self feature in both Ettinger's and Mendieta's work to approach a relational understanding of the self?

This chapter analyses how notions of self and vulnerability have already been addressed in the artworks and how this might affect one's understanding of what it means to be human. Firstly, I consider the self as appearing naturally and existentially relational in Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). I rely on Vicki Kirby's (2018) consideration of ecology to build on the discussion in chapter 2 on the relationality of the self and nature. This is important to understand how a relational understanding of the self challenges western considerations of the self as separable from nature. These considerations of the self and traditionally western considerations of self are further complicated using Wynter's proposal of a praxis of being human. This allows me to address the reproduction of socio-political power structures through western thinking. Considerations of the self as relational are apparent in "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) and show how the self is vulnerable by virtue of its relationality with others and the natural environment. Next, I address the unequal distribution of corporeal vulnerability by building on Butler's (2004a; 2004b) consideration of a primary common vulnerability. This allows me to build on considerations of vulnerability as relationally constituting and differentiating the self. Then, I use Gilson's (2011; 2015) notion of intersubjective vulnerability to complicate notions of bodily vulnerability. This is important to understand the self as positioned within the systems

and structures that privilege some bodies while marginalising other bodies. Finally, I will address ethical practices of care and responsibility as following from the self as being constituted in relation to others, as is illustrated in “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), and in relation to nature and one’s environment, as is visualized in “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973). This is important to understand how a relational understanding of the self is an appeal to ethics.

### 3.1 The Naturally Relational Self

When we can see how we are always already constituted through others and our environment, we see that the self is never an individualistic, isolated, or separable entity. When discussing and analysing Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), notions of self, are central to those discussions and analyses. As it has already been discussed in de previous chapters, both artworks blur boundaries of the self in relation to others or the natural environment to address the relationality of the self both in relation to others and in relation to one’s natural surroundings. Furthermore, both artworks rely on notions of caring and carrying which affect the emergence of self. As chapter 1 and chapter 2 discussed, it has become clear that the self is not a completely separable entity, but always already constituted in relation to and affected by others and one’s environment. As Carrillo Rowe states, “the meaning of self is never individual, but a shifting set of relations that we move in and out of, often without reflecting” (Carrillo Rowe 25). The relations through which the self is constituted are continually shifting and the self constantly emerges and fades through these relations. This process occurs subconsciously whether one is aware of it or not. The shifting relations and moving in and out of these relations extend to one’s relation with nature, one’s surroundings and the environment as “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) showed and are thus not restricted to intra-human relations. As the self is constituted by encounters and shifting relations with others and one’s physical environment, the self is vulnerable to the effect of others and one’s environment.

In Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the various figures illustrate the relationships between people as relating to familial relationships and extending to any relationship between the self and the other. The blurring of the contours and boundaries between the figures visualizes a self that is not separable from others and that emerges through encounters with others. These encounters occur across time and space as the other is also affected by encounters with others which resonate in the encounter between the other and

the self. As Barad states, “[t]he ‘self’ is constituted through the incorporation of the Other within the ‘self.’ The Other interrupts within/through/as the constitution and deconstitution of the self” (Barad 2019, 541). In “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c), the figures are partially incorporated by the other figures through varying degrees of sharpness and blurriness in the painting. Barad considers the encounter with the other as constituting and deconstituting the self; the self needs to be deconstructed to be reconstructed by the encounter, which occurs simultaneously and is not a chronological or linear process. Ettinger has addressed this in her writing as emerging and fading, or rather co-emergence and co-fading (Ettinger 2006b; 1994a). The prefix ‘co-’ refers not only to the non-linear process but to the constitution of both the self and the other; the effect of the encounter is not one-directional as the self also affects the other(s). The effect of others on the self and of the self on others makes the other vulnerable to the self and the self vulnerable to the other.

In addition to intra-human interactions shaping the self, the emergence or constitution of the self is, furthermore, considered to be related to nature and the encounter between one’s physical body and one’s natural surroundings in Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973). “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) addresses the relationality between the body and its natural surroundings as reciprocal by visualizing how the flowers require the foundation of the body in order to grow. While the self is constructed and affected by its relationship with other beings as well as by its relationship with nature, western thinking often assumes the relationship between the self and nature to be one-directional (Kirby 2018). Following that same western thinking, nature is often considered to be less than human; however, this is a flawed and hierarchized consideration of the relationship between humans and nature (Kirby 2018). I am not trying to say that there is no inequality amongst humans or that the relationship between nature and humans is hierarchized this way everywhere, on the contrary, I aim to address and challenge the claimed superiority of western thinking. Kirby refers to the entanglement of humans and nature as “a system, indeed, an ecology, because its evolution is not a linear narrative from failure to improvement, [or] a hierarchy of competitive exclusions whose final resolution is the ascendancy of man” (Kirby 2018, 130). At the foundation of the western separation of human and nature, is the flawed idea of the human as separable, completely individual – from the natural environment as well as from each other – and the final outcome of evolution (Wynter 2015; Kirby 2018). However, the human is entangled with nature, while also differentiated from nature; humans and nature constitute each other and are not separable in that sense, but they are also differentiated through western socio-political structures that have favoured humans over nature.

The western hierarchical separation between human and nature, between the self and the non-human other, is flawed as these ways of thinking also affect and constitute the self; a hierarchical understanding is still a relational understanding of the self and nature and by positioning oneself 'above' nature, one positions oneself in relation to nature. As Kirby states, "[n]ature, now under erasure, is the stuff of this outside, and it is crossed out because any attempt to know it, to represent or even experience it, will be construed through the organizing ciphers of human intervention" (Kirby 2018, 124). Attempts to understand and rationalize nature always occur through interpretation by humans while nature is affected also by the presence of humans. In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta has placed her body amongst nature, which in turn also affects the natural surroundings. The presence of Mendieta's body in nature makes the relational entanglement of human and nature explicit. Nature is affected by the presence of the human body which addresses how the human is part of natural systems. As the self is vulnerable to the effect of the other and the other way around, the self is also vulnerable to nature and one's environment. Furthermore, nature and the environment are vulnerable to humans by virtue of the entanglement of humans and nature.

In "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the natural surroundings of the body are symbolic of considerations of belonging and for belonging within the natural system or ecology, as Kirby calls it. To understand nature, one needs to consider oneself to be a part of a system of interactions, not above the system as an observer, but as an active participant in the system. Kirby addresses the duality of the human and nature by stating that "what we thought was *radically* outside – the ineffable, the non- and outside-human interpretive frames of reference – is somehow at the very center of who and how we are and even what we decide" (Kirby 2018, 126; emphasis in original). As "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) addressed notions of belonging through the integration and inscription of the body in nature, one's surroundings are a constitutive element of our being. One is never an individual separable entity but always constituted by human and non-human others which extends to our natural and physical environments. Subconsciously, one is affected by the interactions of the system and one's position within that system as a set of relations that one moves between and in and out of. The self is not separable from others nor its surroundings, but the self is an integral part of a system of nature that affects and is affected by the self; this constitutes the self and nature as vulnerable in relation to each other.

### 3.2 Decolonising the Self

Furthermore, the understanding of the self as ‘above’ nature and as individualistic is a profoundly western understanding of the relation between the human and nature and of the position of the human within systems of relationality. As Wynter states, western thinking “necessarily [falls] into the trap [...] of conflating their own existentially experienced, Western-bourgeois or ethno-class referent *We*” with a universal notion of what it means to be human as applicable to all human experiences (Wynter 2015, 232; emphasis in original). The self as individual and separable are considerations of self that are prevalent in western society, while various other cultures and societies consider the human as entangled and integrated within natural systems and ecologies. The entanglement of the self and nature is visible in Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) and Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and addresses the transgenerational entanglement of the self and others. It is important to recognize the vulnerability of the self in relation to social and political power structures and in particular how people are differentially privileged and marginalised in order to address these systems and rethink them.

The western hierarchical consideration of the human as above nature has historically been translated into colonial endeavours as western colonizers considered cultures and societies to be ‘uncivilized’ partially because they were based on a more equal and reciprocal relationship between humans and nature (Rao 2013; Wynter 2015). The interactions between colonisers and the colonised in the past continue to constitute human beings as western thinking continues to be reproduced. Consequently, Wynter proposes “the *overturning* of the now globally hegemonic, *biologically absolute* answer that *We-the-West* at present give to the question of who-we-are as humans” (Wynter 2015, 235; emphasis in original). The western notion of self as individualistic does not account for all lived experiences of self and other ways of relating to other people, nature, animals, things and the world at large. The western colonial idea that the self is individualistic, and understanding this notion is universal implies superiority and ignorance of other notions of self and other ways of relating which disproportionately exposes some bodies to violence. Mendieta’s work, in particular, can be regarded in light of coloniality as her displacement was the result of a colonial project and consequently made her question notions of belonging of the self as extending beyond national borders. It is important to critically consider notions of self and the position of the self within this world, especially considering what history teaches us in relation to coloniality. The western notion of self as separable and individual reinforces socio-political power structures which disproportionately expose certain bodies to violence.

In light of the colonial effects of western notions of self, it is important to critically consider what it means to be human and one's position in the world. In "response to the question of who-we-are" Wynter proposes "[the] *separation of the being of being human [...]* from *being human* in the purely *biocentric* terms" (Wynter 2015, 193; emphasis in original). Wynter calls for the consideration of a performative notion of being human; considering one to be human simply based on biological conditions is different from the performance and enactment of learned behaviour that positions one in society. Wynter does not reject the biological consideration of the human but calls for additional performative consideration of being human. Wynter proposes a consideration of the human that is based on acting and behaving humanly; one is not necessarily human by virtue of being in this world, but one acts, behaves and *is* human. This conceptualization of the human is grounded in performative notions of the human. Wynter builds on Butler's consideration of the performativity of gender that considers gender to be the performative expression of the adherence to qualities that belong to men or women which are learned behaviours rather than absolute markers of identity. In response, Wynter states that the performativity of gender "is also true with respect to the range of the other also *genre-specific*, fictively constructed, and performatively enacted roles/identities of the *class substance* (including *rich/poor* and, at the world-systemic level, *developed/undeveloped substance*), of *sexual orientation substance*, and, of course (and centrally so), of *race substance*" (Wynter 2015, 195; emphasis in original). The social and cultural organisation of identities and the separation of certain identity categories such as the division between rich and poor and developed and underdeveloped are based on a set of learned behaviour that has been attributed to a group of people. The learned behaviours reproduce themselves which uphold the identity categories as well as the hierarchical organisation of identities in society as well as across the globe. For Wynter, *being* human is the experience of the self as shaped and positioned through socially, culturally, and politically reproduced organisations of identities. The enactment of *being* human is rooted in understandings of self that are based on culturally, socially and politically reproduced notions. In this light, *being* human is also related to an awareness of these learned and enacted behaviours as constructing and positioning oneself in relation to others.

Considering being human as performative means accounting for the reproduction of essentialized and learned notions of what it means to have a certain identity or role, rather than considering the qualities that have been attributed to an identity as absolute. Our current way of being in the world is based largely on reinforced notions of class, gender, sexuality, race, ability and other separations which produce inequality as some identities are considered

to be 'better' or 'above' others. These separations are reproduced through a lack of protection and security on a political level, which I address later. We are affected by these ways of organising our world and also when one considers themselves 'above' others – whether consciously or subconsciously through the internalization of learned ideas –, one is affected by that behaviour as the self is constituted in relation to others, all others, regardless of whether the interaction is direct or indirect, or positive or negative. A performative notion of what it means to be human accounts for the ways that the world has been shaped through the hierarchization of identities and roles. One is not an onlooker of the injustice or inequality but an active participant in a society that is constructed accordingly, and the self is shaped and constructed within that framework. As Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows, the self is always already constructed in relation to others and this construction and shaping of the self is continuous and not spatially or temporally bound. The self is never a stable or separable entity but always acts within a framework of performatively organised identities which reinforces the lives of some people as more vulnerable than the lives of others. Through social, cultural and political power structures such as (the remains of) colonial power structures, the exposure to violence of some groups of people is heightened which makes them vulnerable. The self does not exist independently of those structures, however, vulnerability is differentiated through those power structures.

Through the transgenerational entanglement of the self that is addressed in "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c), the past is re-turned "as in turning it over and over again" (Barad 2014, 168) and past encounters are never really in the past as they are entangled with the present. The entanglement of the self beyond direct spatial and temporal encounters constitutes the self as vulnerable by virtue of this relationality. The self is entangled with past encounters of one's ancestors, and thus in relation to colonial endeavours; whether one's ancestors were colonizers or colonized, one's current position in the world is affected by it because the hierarchized notions of self are continuously reproduced and transmitted through social, cultural and political processes. Decentering the western notion of the self and considering the human as performative as well as considering the grounds on which the notion of the human is delineated works towards decolonising notions of self. An awareness of the reproduction of the social, cultural and political power structures that organise societies and an awareness of *being* human, positions the self within the structures that marginalises some and privileges others. The self is vulnerable through the transgenerational entanglement and the self is vulnerable to social, cultural and political power structures because one does

not exist outside of them but is constituted by the same structures that privilege as well as marginalise certain bodies and people.

### 3.3 Revealing Corporeal Vulnerability

To understand how the self is constituted in relation to others and one's environment, one needs to understand how one is also vulnerable because of their relationality. In "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c), the self is considered to be constituted through notions of caring and carrying that are based on the model of the child or pre-subject being carried by the matrixial body during pregnancy. The pre-subject is dependent on the matrixial body to create an environment for the pre-subject to develop. Furthermore, post-partum, the baby is dependent on the care of another for its survival; this dependency renders us vulnerable. As the model of the matrix provides a universal understanding of the self as being shaped by other beings, it also provides a common experience of vulnerability and dependency. Additionally, "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) shows how the self is not only constituted by others but also cared for and carried by one's natural environment for one's sense of belonging. The sense of belonging affects the self and locates the body as vulnerable by virtue of our physical location in the world. Notions of care, both by other people as well as by one's natural environment, render the self vulnerable because it constitutes the self through a necessary dependency; a dependency that is foundational to being human and *being* human.

Commonly, vulnerability is understood as a duality; vulnerability is a requirement for love and care but also exposes one to violence or hurt. Or as Gilson states, "[b]eing vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and to find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of these feelings. *Vulnerability* is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us" (Gilson 2011, 310; emphasis in original). On the one hand, vulnerability exposes one to violence or to being hurt, whether physically or psychologically to varying degrees. One can be hurt because of personal rejection or a relationship not working out how one hoped or expected, but one can also be systemically subjected to violence due to social and political circumstances. When vulnerability is imposed as one is subjected to violence due to the colour of one's skin or because of whom one loves, the vulnerability is not voluntary, but the result of a lack of security and safety by social and political power structures. On the other hand, one needs to be vulnerable in order to connect with others, because when one starts relationships, both platonic and romantic, one needs to voluntarily expose oneself and be vulnerable to allow for a relationship to build even if the risk is being hurt. This exposure



extends beyond an encounter between the self and other, because to some extent it is a voluntary and conscious reveal of the self to the other and an awareness of the effect of the other on oneself and of the self on the other. In “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), Mendieta is naked which is a vulnerable exposure to the gaze of others, however, by exposing herself, she was able to connect and reconstitute her body in relation to nature and her environment. While the naked body is a possible exposure to pain or violence, it is also a voluntary exposure that enables connection.

The duality between care and connection, on the one hand, and pain and violence, on the other, complicates the notion of vulnerability. Vulnerability is related to safety because one needs to feel safe to be vulnerable with another and enable oneself to connect with others, but when safety is lacking, one is exposed to pain or violence. While one experiences one’s vulnerability in moments of pain, vulnerability is an existential human condition. “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) addressed notions of belonging as enacting a sense of safety and familiarity, however, this vulnerability becomes exposed to Mendieta through displacement. Furthermore, “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) addressed how transgenerational trauma and the transgenerational transmission of pain and grief similarly expose one’s vulnerability. Through the pain one experiences due to displacement or due to transgenerational trauma, the vulnerability of the self and our physical bodies is revealed to us, but only because one always already is vulnerable by virtue of being. Because one’s vulnerability is often revealed through experiences of pain, vulnerability is often regarded as scary, undesirable and/or weak which results in an aversion to vulnerability and a closing off of the self for all the ways in which one is relational. As Butler states, “we cannot, however, will away this vulnerability. We must attend to it [and] even abide by it” (Butler 2004a, 29). While our vulnerability might be revealed in moments of pain and hurt, vulnerability is an existential human condition that is part of our primary bodily vulnerability that one needs to care for and take care of.

“Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) addresses the constitution of the pre-subject and how this constitutes one’s primary experience of vulnerability through being carried and being cared for. As a child one is dependent on another for one’s survival and “one cannot will away [a primary vulnerability] without ceasing to be human” (Butler 2004a, XIV). Notions of care position the self through a necessary and primary dependency that is foundational to being human. Every being has been dependent on another during infancy for their survival which makes one vulnerable and this bodily vulnerability remains as one is vulnerable to the touch of another and while this ‘touch’ can be caring, it can also be violent.

By virtue of being a body, one is vulnerable which, on the one hand, enables care and, on the other hand, can be painful. In moments of pain and violence, one is confronted with one's existential vulnerability. Or as Butler states:

“In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. This vulnerability, however, becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions, especially those in which violence is a way of life and the means to secure self-defence are limited.” (Butler 2004a, 29)

The self has always already been exposed to the effects of other beings and one's environment, this is foundational to one's existence. Vulnerability constitutes one as a human being, primarily because one is vulnerable to the care of others. However, this vulnerability becomes revealed to us in certain situations and some people are more aware of this vulnerability as they are exposed to violence and a lack of security more often than others. Additionally, every person is vulnerable by virtue of the physical location of our bodies within socio-political structures which renders our sense of belonging as “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) shows. Vulnerability is an existential or foundational part of life; one is confronted with this vulnerability when one is not cared for or when one does not belong, when safety and familiarity are lacking, and one is exposed.

The existential vulnerability of one's body relates to a primary consideration of vulnerability that is shared by all beings; every person has been dependent on another for our survival because babies cannot take care of themselves yet and thus need another person as addressed through Ettinger's “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c). This dependency changes but does not go away when one grows up. Or as Butler states, “we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to an other” and “[w]e come into the world unknowing and dependent, and, to a certain degree, we remain that way” (Butler 2004b, 23). By virtue of being a body, one is vulnerable because one is dependent on another. While the body needs and requires love and care, this is not guaranteed or assumed within this consideration of existential vulnerability. Certain bodies will receive more care than others, or in other words, some bodies are less protected and exposed to pain and violence to a greater extent than other bodies. According to Butler, “[p]art of understanding the oppression of lives is precisely to understand that there is no way to argue away this condition of a primary vulnerability” (Butler 2004b, 24). One needs to consider one's existential vulnerability and particularly how that vulnerability is not exacerbated by social, cultural and/or political systems. One is part of the same system that privileges some

while marginalising others. One needs to acknowledge one's own existential vulnerability to address the exposure of other bodies to violence. One needs to understand how the self is constituted in relation to others and to one's environment, in order to acknowledge how oneself is vulnerable also because of the relational constitution of the self.

### 3.4 Understanding the Self as Intersubjectively Vulnerable

While vulnerability can be understood as a common and existential condition, vulnerability is also differentially distributed amongst people across the globe to various degrees. In response to Butler's conceptualization of vulnerability as an ontological condition, Anu Koivunen et al. ask: "what happens to structures of privilege and marginalisation if vulnerability is understood as a universal condition of all (human) life?" (Koivunen et al. 2018, 2). Since I am relying on Butler's notion of vulnerability as a point of departure, this question is relevant to this thesis. Vulnerability is "part of bodily life" (Butler 2004a, 29) in the sense that every body has been and is affected by the touch and the care of another. By virtue of being a body, one is vulnerable. However, that same vulnerability to care also exposes one to the possibility of pain and violence. When this vulnerability "becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions" (Butler 2004a, 29), one experiences one's corporeal vulnerability also in a differential manner. Mendieta experienced this corporeal vulnerability through the experience of displacement which resulted in her searching to belong which she expresses and tries to reconstitute in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). Certain social, cultural and political structures expose some bodies to injury and violence to a greater extent than other bodies; in other words, some bodies are less protected and cared for than others on the social, cultural and/or political level. The lack of security and protection that disproportionately exposes some bodies to violence needs to be acknowledged as an exacerbated experience of one's ontological vulnerability.

While vulnerability is a physical, bodily exposure to harm and/or care, vulnerability is not merely a condition that is experienced by bodies that are disproportionately exposed to violence. Vulnerability is a common, human condition as has been discussed. Gilson (2015) specifically separates these considerations of vulnerability to address the exposure of some bodies to violence not as outside the self, but as part of the same systems and structures that position the self. Gilson distinguishes "intersubjective vulnerability" "as a common, fundamental, formative condition" from vulnerability as a "heightened susceptibility to harm" (Gilson 2015, 24). On the one hand, every person is vulnerable, and our vulnerability is existential and ontological, precisely because everyone has been a child who is dependent on

the care of another. On the other hand, this vulnerability can become exacerbated, and some bodies are disproportionately exposed to harm and violence compared to other bodies. These notions of vulnerability are related; the acknowledgement of our intersubjective vulnerability might work toward acknowledging and acting on the unequal exposure of certain bodies to violence. The consideration of vulnerability in this sense addresses the differentiation of vulnerability. Furthermore, intersubjective vulnerability “is also the condition of our responsiveness to one another” (Gilson 2015, 24). It is through this common, constitutive consideration of vulnerability that caring and carrying are reciprocal and multidirectional; one is not merely a receiver of care but can also give care to another. Both Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) position the self in relation to others and to one’s surroundings which necessarily implies intersubjective vulnerability of the self. As it has been discussed, this vulnerability can become exacerbated through experiences of displacement or trauma, but intersubjective vulnerability also positions the self as an active agency.

Intersubjective vulnerability considers, similarly to matrixial vulnerability, the constitution of the subject as multidirectional; not only the child is constituted through matrixial notions of care and carrying, but the matrixial body is also constituted as both bodies trans-subjectively co-emerge. Intersubjective vulnerability relates to understandings of what it means to be human and notions of self because it considers all bodies as active participants and as carrying responsibility for the systems that disproportionately expose some bodies to violence. Considering vulnerability as existentially, ontologically, intersubjectively, trans-subjectively and sub-subjectively constituting the self moves beyond the dual understanding of vulnerability that has been discussed earlier to address vulnerability as common and existential as well as differentiated. By acknowledging vulnerability also as an ontological condition, the group of people whose vulnerability is exacerbated is seen within the framework of care and protection or lack thereof rather than being perceived as weak. Or as Gilson states, “by specifying that vulnerability is a condition of potential we can depart from the conventional assumption that vulnerability is a property that characterizes only certain individuals in specific circumstances” (Gilson 2011, 311). By recognising and acknowledging vulnerability as both ontological as well as exacerbated under certain social, cultural and/or political situation, all beings are involved and responsible for the systems that privilege some and marginalises others. Furthermore, “[u]nderstanding oneself as vulnerable therefore involves an understanding of the self as being shaped through its relationships to others, its world, and environs” (Gilson 2011, 319). The self is always already vulnerable by

virtue of being a body and because the self is consciously and subconsciously constituted in relation to others and the world around one. The self is vulnerable precisely because one always already exists in relation to the other and the environment and one is part of various social, cultural and ecological systems.

Vulnerability is the foundation of relationality and thus a praxis of relationality relies on an awareness of one's vulnerability and a consciousness of one's vulnerability as well as others. While the vulnerability of some people to certain social, cultural and/or political systems is not specifically addressed in the artworks beyond the notions of displacement and belonging in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), understanding the self as relational and vulnerable is an important step towards addressing those inequalities. As Butler states, "[a] vulnerability must be perceived and recognized" because "when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself" (Butler 2004a, 43; emphasis in original). Recognising the vulnerability of a group of people to certain political inequalities is the first step to addressing the living conditions of that group. As one is always already constituted in relation to others, one is part of the social, cultural, and political systems that privileges some and marginalises others. This vulnerability is not completely external to the self rather one is an active agent within relational systems of vulnerability. An awareness of the self as vulnerable and relational might work towards addressing the oppression as it is an incitement to care for and a responsibility to protect others. Furthermore, when we extend the notion of intersubjective vulnerability to encompass the environment, nature and the earth and recognize the relationship between ourselves and nature as mutual and reciprocal, this can be an incitement to care for our physical and natural surroundings as they care for us.

### 3.5 Enacting Relational Responsibility

Vulnerability extends beyond intra-human relations, and one is not only vulnerable to the touch of or care by others, but also to one's physical and natural environment. In terms of vulnerability, as addressed before, Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) illustrates the self in relation to the other and the self as vulnerable to the other and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) visualises the self in relation to nature. Also, in relation to nature, certain bodies are exposed to natural violence to a greater extent while others experience the effects of natural devastation and the exposure of their bodies to the effects of nature to a lesser degree. In other words, privileged and western societies create and are responsible for a large part of the environmental devastation while non-western societies

are experiencing the effects. Similar to the differential exposure to physical violence, the exposure to the effects of environmental devastation is unequally distributed across the globe. Western societies are affected but experience the effects to a lesser degree. This relates to the hierarchical consideration of humans in relation to nature and we return to notions of self and what it means to be human; as long as western societies consider themselves to be above and better than nature, the environmental devastation will continue to spiral. When we consider the self as part of natural systems and as an active agent within those systems, we can hopefully see the reciprocity between the self and nature and carry the responsibility to care for nature as it cares for us.

Similar to how one is situated within political systems, and social systems, one is situated within natural systems and ecologies that are based on relationality and dependency. In the most basic sense, without Earth, without the environment and nature, humans cannot exist. While the self and nature are relational, the dependency between the self and nature is not widely acknowledged as the self in western thinking is still often placed ‘above’ nature as has been discussed. According to Kirby, “[t]he centrality and implicit superiority of being human recuperate the cogito, without any qualification, by denying that the sociality of the larger environment, the ‘big’ picture’ in this case, might also be internalized and necessarily to what human-species being is and can be” (Kirby 2018, 123). The critical consideration of the superior position of the human in relation to nature in western thinking returns to the consideration of the self in relation to nature; positioning the human as superior to nature is unfounded. Rather, our environment and nature are fundamental elements in the construction of the self which Mendieta visualizes by blurring the boundaries between her body and its surroundings. As Kirby questions this positioning of the human in relation to nature, she asks: “[i]s it possible that ecology is not external – the ground and environ to and within which our identity is indebted, but instead, something more intimate, familiar, already received and ‘owned’?” (Kirby 2018, 126-127). Nature constitutes who we are and thus is already part of who we are and is not completely ‘outside’ the self. One’s natural environment and one’s surroundings establish one’s physical familiarity and sense of belonging; one’s environment cares for and carries oneself during subject formation and beyond.

As an agent within this system and ecology, one carries responsibility for caring for the environment. One must not just consider oneself in relation to nature, but also consider nature in relation to the self; nature affects humans and is an active agent in ecology. Or as Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman state:

“Nature is agentic – it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and the nonhuman world. We need ways of understanding that agency, significance, and ongoing transformative power of the world – ways that account for myriad ‘intra-actions’ (in Karen Barad’s terms) between phenomena that are material, discursive, more-than-human, corporeal and technological.” (Alaimo and Hekman 2007, 5)

Nature and humanity do not act independently of each other even if western thinking believes so, because the actions of humans affect nature and acts of nature affect humans. All these actions constitute relational ties and entanglements not merely between humans, but also amongst the human and the non-human world including but not limited to nature. This conceptualization moves beyond a mere encounter to address how intra-actions between nature, humans, and material and immaterial systems constitute phenomena. According to Barad, these “intra-actions enact agential cuts, which do not produce absolute separations, but rather cut together-apart (one-move)” (Barad 2014, 168). ‘Intra-actions’ account for the ways that the self is already constituted through entanglements that do not presuppose pre-existing entities. Furthermore, ‘agential cuts’ account for the differentiation and the grounds on which subjects and bodies are delineated. The self is constituted in relation to others and the environment, not as separable things or beings, but as affective agencies within phenomena.

Intra-activity does not presuppose pre-existing entities and constitutes the becoming-subject as already entangled and differentiated; the relationality of the self is both intra-active and differential. As Barad states, “[e]ntanglements are not unities. They do not erase differences; on the contrary, entanglings entail differentiating, differentiating entail entanglings. One move – *cutting together-apart*” (Barad 2014, 176; emphasis in original). The intra-actions through which the self is entangled do not imply a complete mergence of subjects but encompass the differentiation of subjects simultaneously with their co-constitution. Through agential cuts, the self is constituted differentially as well as entangled. In this sense, relationality refers to differential entanglement rather than to oneness. Phenomena are constituted through intra-active cutting together-apart as the self is co-constituted and differentiated at the same time; through intra-actions, the self is spatially and temporally entangled and simultaneously, the self is cut together-apart as differential to another. Understanding relationality as multidirectional requires one to take into consideration the consequences of the simultaneous intra-action and agential cutting through which differentiation takes place. The self is relational and vulnerable by virtue of the constitution of phenomena such as becoming through intra-activity and agential cutting which differentiates the self.

We are vulnerable because our physical and natural surroundings intra-actively and differentially constitute the self. As it has been discussed, Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows how the pre-subject and the subject emerge through notions of caring and carrying, while Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) addresses how the self is also constituted through the care and carrying of nature. By considering the self as both intra-actively and differentially constituted in relation to these systems and structures, the self is agential and carries responsibility which implies a practice of care. As Alaimo and Hekman state, "[e]thical practices – as opposed to ethical principles – do not seek to extend themselves over and above material realities, but instead emerge from them, taking into account multiple consequences" (Alaimo and Hekman 2007, 8). When understanding the self as an agency within systems and structures of human and non-human entanglements, the self is constituted as responsible for the consequences of the intra-actions and the agential cuts through which differentiation occurs. Understanding the self as relational and as part of a larger system of interactions and encounters with others and the environment is a necessary appeal to ethics. The constitution of the self through the entanglement with others and the environment does not presuppose a pre-existing entity, rather the self always already is relationality entangled through intra-activity and differentiability; thus, the self carries an ethical responsibility to care.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter addressed notions of the self and of vulnerability that can be seen in Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). In both artworks, the boundaries are blurred between the figures and between the body and its natural surroundings to address the self as relational. The blurring of the boundaries of the self in the artworks works towards understanding the constitution of those boundaries as differentiated. In "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) as well as in "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), the self is intra-actively and differentially constituted in relation to others and in relation to the environment through notions of care and carrying. The self is vulnerable by virtue of the intra-active constitution and differentiation of the self. The understanding of the self as intra-actively and differentially constituted, moves beyond western individualistic considerations of self and what it means to be human. Historically, the hierarchical and claimed superiority of individualistic and separable notions of self have resulted in colonial endeavours and the hierarchization of humans based on identities. The considerations of self that can be seen in "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and



“Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) go against these western notions of self and address how the self always already is intra-actively and differentially constituted in relation to others and the natural environment. The constitution of the self implies a necessary vulnerability of a self that is always already entangled.

On the one hand, the self is vulnerable by virtue of being a body and a subject, and on the other hand, every being is vulnerable because they are constituted in relation to each other. Vulnerability is common because it is corporeal, affective, existential, ontological, intersubjective, trans-subjective and sub-subjective and it becomes exposed when someone is subjected to pain and violence. However, vulnerability is also differentiated and the vulnerability of another is not necessarily outside oneself; the self acts within the same social, cultural and/or political framework that privileges some and marginalises others. Barad’s notion of intra-action and cutting together-apart addresses how the self is always already constituted in relation to others and the environment while simultaneously being constituted differentially. The human and non-human world do not constitute one entity but rather are differentiated and situated differently through social, cultural and political power structures. The self is an agency within systems of intra-actions and agential cuts which is an incitement to care and to take responsibility for the consequences of the intra-actions and the agential cuts through which differentiation occurs. The self is not outside those systems and thus the inequalities and injustices occurring in those systems are not outside the self but constitute the self. The self is constituted through intra-activity and differentiability, which extends beyond a deeply intra-human relationality to encompass the relationality of the self and with nature as “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) does. Likewise, the self carries a responsibility to care for nature, not as outside of the self but as constituting the self. Understanding the self as being vulnerability constituted through intra-activity and differentiability, constitutes the self as an agency that carries an ethical responsibility to care for others and the environment.

## Conclusion

This thesis asks how to understand the self as relational and how the self is constituted as vulnerable and entangled with others and with the world by analysing Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973). A praxis of relationality and being relational relies on an understanding of the self as vulnerable and entangled with others and the world. This is evident in Ettinger's painting which addresses familiar relationality and the relationality of the self and the other as well as in Mendieta's photograph which addresses the relationality of the self, the body and its natural surroundings. By visually analysing Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973), I explore how an understanding of the self as relational is based on understanding the self as vulnerable and entangled with others and with nature which might approach an ethics of care.

In chapter 1, I ask how Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows an understanding of the self as constituted through family relations. The visual analysis of "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) showed how the various figures in the painting are blurred and how the figure of the child is held by another figure in the painting. The child is constituted in relation to others and this constitution of the self is understood through the matrixial notion of care and carrying as referring to the experience of pregnancy from the perspective of the becoming-child or the pre-subject. The self comes into being through trans-subjective and sub-subjective co-constitution as Ettinger calls it, which refers to the transmission of information between the child and the matrixial body on a subconscious level through which the child is constituted and comes into being as a subject. Subject formation through co-constitution extends beyond familial relations which is emphasized by the reference to different traditions in the title of the artwork and by the relationship between the figures in the painting which is not necessarily familial. Furthermore, the self is constituted through the transgenerational transmission of information as the accumulation of passed encounters affects and shapes the self. "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) shows how a subject comes into being through matrixial notions of care and carrying that are illustrated by the child who is carried and how the self is constituted in relation to others beyond family relations as the relationship between the figures is not marked. In chapter 1, I argue that the self is constituted in relation to others. This is important to work towards a relational understanding of the self that is based on the entanglement of the self with others which constitutes a necessary vulnerability.

In chapter 2, I ask how Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) shows an understanding of the self as constituted through nature. The visual analysis of "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) shows how the boundary between Mendieta's body and its surroundings is blurred as the body is inscribed into nature. The body is symbolically rooted in the earth and is matrixially held by the earth as the body is held by the tomb and protectively surrounded by nature. In the photograph, life and death are entangled as the body lies in a tomb and appears lifeless while flowers emerge from the body; the relationship between the body and nature, between life and death, is cyclical. The relationality between the body and nature is matrixially re-turned to address how the self is continuously constituted through the experience of establishing and fading relations; the constitution of the self is never finished, and the self continuously moves in and out of relations that constitute the self. Furthermore, in light of Mendieta's personal experience of displacement, the self can be understood as being constituted by the earth and by one's (home)land through Mendieta's inscription of her body amongst its surroundings which expresses a decolonised desire to belong beyond and across national borders. The blurring of the boundaries between the body and its surroundings emphasizes the entangled relationality between the self and nature through a cyclical and co-emergent relationship. However, the body and nature are not made to appear to be conflated, rather the body and nature are relational and differentiated in Mendieta's photograph. "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) is a visualization of how one is connected with nature and how one is constituted through one's environment and notions of belonging. In chapter 2, I argue that the self is constituted in relation to the natural environment. This is important to work towards a relational understanding of the self that is based on the entanglement of the self with its natural environment which constitutes a necessary vulnerability.

In chapter 3, I ask how vulnerability and notions of self feature in both Ettinger's "Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3" (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta's "Imágen de Yágul" (Mendieta 1973) to approach a relational understanding of the self. In chapters 1 and 2, I address how the self is relationally constituted and, in chapter 3, I specifically address relationality as a way to *understand* the self. Both artworks address subject formation and, in particular, how the self is not a completely separable entity; Ettinger's painting illustrates how the self is entangled through its relations and encounters with others and Mendieta's photograph visualises how the self is entangled through its relations with nature, the natural surroundings and the earth as symbols of belonging. In both artworks, the boundaries of the self are blurred which works towards an intra-active understanding of the self. While the boundaries are blurred, figures

remain identifiable in both artworks, which works towards understanding how those boundaries are constituted differentially. Understanding the self as relational moves beyond western notions of the self as individualistic. The constitution of the self as relational implies a necessary vulnerability of a self as the self is, simultaneously, constituted intra-actively in relation to others and nature as well as differentiated through socio-political power structures that privilege some and marginalise others. The intra-active and differential constitution of the self extends beyond intra-human relations as addressed through “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and encompasses the relationality of the self and nature which “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) addresses. Through an understanding of the self as relational, the self is understood as an active agency that carries an ethical responsibility to care for others and the environment. In chapter 3, I argue that the self needs to be understood as relational through vulnerability and entanglement with others and the natural environment. This understanding is important to work towards understanding the self as an active agency with an ethical responsibility to care.

The self always already is relational as it is constituted by others and the environment which the artworks have respectively shown, however, to approach an ethics of care and an understanding of the self as agential, we must understand the self as relationally vulnerable. An understanding of the self as relational goes against western notions of individualization, because rather than considering the self as separable and ‘above’ nature, a relational understanding of the self addresses the intra-activity and differentiation of the self with others and the natural environment. Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) has shown how the self is constituted in relation to others and Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973) has addressed how the self is constituted in relation to the natural environment. A relational understanding of self implies an understanding of the self as an entangled part of social, cultural, political and natural systems, rather than the self as separable from those structures and systems. Such an understanding relies on an understanding of the self as vulnerable by virtue of these relations and how these structures intra-actively and differentially position the self within those systems.

Thus, by showing how the self is relational and analysing how the self is constituted relationally in Ettinger’s “Rachel – Pieta – Medusa 3” (Ettinger 2018c) and Mendieta’s “Imágen de Yágul” (Mendieta 1973), this thesis works towards understanding the self as intra-actively co-constituted through the blurring of boundaries while simultaneously addressing relational differentiability through the articulations of boundaries in both artworks. Understanding the self as relational means understanding the self as both entangled and

differentiated by the structures that privilege some and marginalise others. It is important to understand the self as relational to address socio-political power structures to be able to break with the reproduction of privileging and marginalising and consequently to care for others. Furthermore, understanding the self as relational is important to address the role of these power structures in environmental devastation to be able to care for the natural environment. Caring for others and the environment is crucial for our survival, very similar to how an infant is dependent on a caring environment for its survival. A relational understanding of the self through vulnerability works towards a relational ethics, which might optimistically approach an ethics of care for others and the environment through which we are constituted.

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