

Maternal Touch in Pilar Rodiles's *Bidún* (Undocumented)

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Sami Nair, in his *La inmigración explicada a mi hija* (2001), claims that Spain has become a country of immigration during the last decade and quotes the statistics that there are more than 300,000 undocumented immigrants residing in Spain, in addition to the 100,000 who acquired legal status in 1991 (18). While Nair's statement reflects the irrefutable social reality of what Spain has recently become, Javier Casqueiro's report about racism in Spain, published in *El País* on January 26, 2001, suggests that the sudden increase in the number of immigrants has largely produced negative reactions among native citizens. Casqueiro claims that according to research conducted in 2000 by the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 49.4% of Spaniards consider themselves racists and 48.6% feel somewhat or absolutely intolerant of other ethnic groups and foreign customs. The latter statistic is alarming, the journalist notes, because it reflects a 13.6% increase from a study performed in 1994 by the same institute. These data reflect an intensification in xenophobia in Spanish society, concomitant with an upsurge in immigration, and reveal an attitude that challenges the belief in an accepting, multicultural society based on mutual deference.

In tune with more populist public sentiment, a divisive discourse that hierarchizes Europe over Africa and native citizens over immigrants occasionally issued from the mouths of political figures. For instance, as reported in *El Mundo* on December 2, 2002, the government sub-delegate to Tarragona, Angel Sagardy, made chauvinistic comments, referring to African immigration as an invasion: "Aquí

necesitamos gente, pero no a toda Africa.” More well-known and vigorously disputed racist statements are those Marta Ferrusola, wife of the former president of the Generalitat, Jordi Pujol, made in February 2001. She condemned Kurdish immigrants who arrived on the French coast for being difficult in spite of the host country’s hospitality because they requested a diet that observed the rules of their religion. Ferrusola also lamented Catalonia’s generous social assistance to North African immigrants who have no interest in learning the region’s cultural history. Both Sagardy and Ferrusola’s comments point to an underlying mentality that the host country’s self-interest takes precedence over hospitality and when munificence is offered, immigrants need to comply with the cultural codes of their new homeland and conceptions of its historic mission. One problem this formula poses is that immigrants are perceived as indebted to generous native residents.

In contrast, many non-governmental organizations led by both Spanish and immigrant social activists and journalists have been working robustly to thwart social hostility toward immigrants and to promote a critical understanding of immigration among their fellow citizens since they first witnessed the dead bodies of African immigrants appearing on Spanish shores on November 2, 1989.¹ Numerous artists and intellectuals also lent their voices to the call to resist xenophobia and ignorance by creating works that bring this social issue to the fore. Among them are authors Juan Goytisolo, Gerardo Muñoz Lorente, Adolfo Hernández Lafuente, Eduardo Mendicutti, and Nieves García Benito; film directors Montxo Armendáriz, Imanol Uribe, Icíar Bollaín, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, Chus Gutiérrez and Carlos Molinero; and pho-

tographers Núria Andreu and Rick Dávila, to name but a few.² In this essay I add Pilar Rodiles to the aforementioned list because this Canarian painter provides a unique perspective on the discussion of immigration with her 2000 collection of paintings, *Bidún* (Undocumented).³ While many artists have attempted to represent immigrants with respect and equality, disavowing any hierarchical relationship, Rodiles draws attention to herself as a subject that looks at photographic images of immigrants facing uncertain situations. In so doing, the self is put forward as an important component in the consideration of immigration and, consequently, immigration becomes a matter inseparable from one’s own reality. Rodiles stresses this premise by communicating the irrepressible proximity one feels to immigrants. Her paintings draw on diverse techniques to express inchoate emotional reactions that flow into and converge with photographic images of immigrants detained in Tarifa who are worrying about their bleak future. Rodiles takes self-disposition as the founding method of composition in pieces belonging to this collection in which she paints the death of immigrants in the Strait of Gibraltar. At times, she literally places herself onto the canvas to paint a large representation of the ocean that holds silhouettes of dead immigrants painted on a sheet of acetate.

In this article, I will consider how Rodiles’s irrepressible sensibility to others develops into a novel ethical agency that differs from the self-restrained, respectful, and yet distant position one takes in order to avoid establishing a hierarchical relationship. I will demonstrate how Rodiles’s active and yet deferential self-offering comes into dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas’s notion of self and other as one entity that is

mutually complementary and indivisible. Of particular interest are the mechanisms through which the boundaries between self and other are blurred in Rodiles's paintings so the proximity between the painter herself and immigrants—whether photographed or drawn—is constantly evoked. With this in mind, I shall be concerned with her pictorial manipulations such as brush strokes, staining, scratching, and chemical processing over photographs in order to demonstrate how these artistic languages serve to underline the other's importance in the self's subject formation. Furthermore, I will examine how Rodiles's paintings remind the viewer of the need for self-reflection before the image of others.

The primary theoretical framework for my analysis draws on Cathryn Vasseleu's notion of "maternal touch"—the term she formulates by espousing Levinas's ideas of the "maternal" and "touch" in her *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*. As in Levinas's theory, the maternal here represents an ethical agency divorced from all material accountability. It does not refer to a productive body or the agent of patriarchy's reproduction.⁴ Rather, Vasseleu confirms that Levinas's concept of maternity is seen as "a reversal of the autonomy of subjectivity" and an act of "donating hospitality" (101, 103). She goes on to explain that Levinas renders "touch" as "the exposition of an affective involvement with others" in which the self is not suppressed nor is the other's alterity annulled (98). In other words, the "maternal touch" is an ethical sensibility that the self embodies as part of the human condition. While Vasseleu's term does not differ much from Levinas's ideas, I choose to employ her term because it offers a sense of visual language appropriate to the analysis of paintings.

Norman Bryson's understanding of painting as the result of a mixed effort between the tactile and the visual is instrumental in defining Rodiles's ethical aesthetics as "maternal touch." In *Vision and Painting*, Bryson elaborates that brush strokes link the realm of the invisible with the visible through a touch that transforms into vision (163). Thus, painting is a physical substantiation in which the painter's perception fuses with the tangible by bringing together both perceptual and physical touch. In this sense, "touch" is not limited to a passive demonstration of emotions—being affected—but extends to an act that has as its purpose communication with others. "Touch" establishes a network with unknown others and constructs the self as tied to the other—the very idea that sits at the bedrock of Levinas's theory of subjectivity.

Rodiles is not part of the establishment of Spanish artists such as Miquel Barceló, Eduardo Chillida, and Guillermo Pérez Villalta, who need no special introduction to international art *aficionados*. Nor does she represent what José Martín Martínez calls "the new face of Spanish art, of a cosmopolitan generation," referring to the group of mainstream artists based in Madrid and Barcelona who are gaining recognition in the international art scene such as Susana Solano, Miguel Navarro, and Juan Muñoz (247). Yet, Rodiles has certainly been an important member of the effervescent contemporary Canarian art world since she settled in Las Palmas (Gran Canaria) in 1969 after completing her education in Madrid and Seville. She has exhibited in many galleries around the country as well as in Sweden. The most fundamental lynchpin of her art has been the revelation of a humanity we all share despite racial, gender, and cultural differences. She does this by drawing on her personal experiences

in and knowledge of North Africa.⁵ Born and having spent her childhood in Tetuán, Morocco, while the African country was a Spanish protectorate, Rodiles has used her painting to show aspects of affinity between the two cultures and has often identified with those who are marginalized within their own culture—in particular, with North African women.⁶ Given her social consciousness and cosmopolitanism, it comes as no surprise that she painted immigrants in Tarifa, where she has exhibited several times. It is also no coincidence that a large influx of African immigrants has begun to appear on the shores of the Canary Islands. However, a discussion of immigration through painting is a novelty in contemporary Spanish culture.

Rodiles's *Bidún* collection was first presented at a collective exhibition entitled "La familia en Africa y la diáspora africana," in the Second International and Interdisciplinary Conference held at the University of Salamanca from April 9 to April 13, 2002. She displayed eight paintings out of the twenty-six pieces that constitute the collection. The paintings depict drowned immigrants whose names are unidentified and immigrants waiting to be documented, probably for deportation. None of them acquire a proper identity, as the collection's title indicates. In this collection Rodiles experiments with new techniques in an attempt to emphasize crude emotional reactions to the unjust situation African immigrants face. Among the eight works from the *Bidún* I saw in the artist's studio, six are paintings in which Rodiles manipulates through staining and chemical processing press photographs taken by two female journalists commissioned by the Tarifan City Hall—María José Iglesias and Angeles Rondón. The other two paintings are compos-

ites of color pigments applied with paintbrushes. The photograph-based paintings portray numerous young men and a girl who seem to be confounded as they, upon arrival, are guarded in a local sports facility used as a refugee center. For these paintings, Rodiles undertook a series of processes to transform the colored photographs into black and white paintings, regressing from modern technologies to rudimentary media. She first obtained the photographs in digital form and then printed and photocopied them. Next, the painter lithographed the photocopies to remove colors, drew human silhouettes with thick markers between the lithographed immigrants on some paintings, and diluted colors with chemicals on others. In the two paintings that do not involve photographs, she combined acrylic pigments (a mixture of pigments in an acrylic emulsion) and latex (a water emulsion of synthetic rubber used to give a coating to a canvas). In addition, she used hard water that contains calcium salts to create a destructive and disorderly effect. These two works evoke the openness of the ocean and its proximity to the land in a disarray of dark and light blue shades and a sand color. In one of these compositions, Rodiles added a layer of iridescent acetate onto which she etched several silhouettes of immigrants who represent the dead at sea.

Among the works described above, I will consider three paintings that best reflect Rodiles's stance on immigration and her particular pictorial styles. I will argue that her ethical consideration plays a central role in her aesthetics and that her destructive construction through abrasions and discolorations in particular serves to erode the ideological division between self and other and to accentuate instead the

proximity between the painter herself (as well as the viewer) and the photographed immigrants. Pictorial manifestations of her emotions represent waves of the ocean as well as a large ship that could have transported the immigrants safely. They express the painter's desire to offer herself as the ocean that embraces the dead immigrants who are painted as silhouettes and, thereby, provide a site for their memory wherein self and other cannot be separated. Two prominent techniques Rodiles uses repeatedly to communicate her message are the inscription of ghostly figures by drawing human silhouettes with markers and acetate engravings and the deliberate corrosion of some parts of the images to evoke a ghostly presence of the dead in our own perceptual reality.

I will begin by describing the two paintings that are composites of multiple processes and permutations of photography. The first photographic image shows a group of African immigrants at rest, sitting at a tableside where refreshments are served. Most men look astray and are pensively silent. Only two men are looking forward, but they do not look at the camera or are unaware of being photographed. Instead, their gaze goes beyond the photographic space. One man in the upper right corner expresses fatigue with his eyes closed, his head downward, and a blanket on his shoulders. The young man in the center looks down with a fist covering his mouth, as if he were coughing. The rest of the immigrants turn their heads to the side and many look apprehensive of an unknown future ahead of them.

Like the first, the second photographic image depicts the immigrants' anxiety in an unfamiliar setting. This time the photographers photograph the immigrants

standing behind a bleacher against a white wall. Sports jackets hang over the fence to be dried, while most of the men seem to experience chilliness as they button up their jackets, tuck their hands into their pockets, or cross their arms as a defense against the cold. Except for one man who is half-smiling in the second row, the men are looking around in an attempt to observe their new surroundings. They seem quite unable to verbalize their impressions. Neither of the photographs communicates joy or the celebration of a safe arrival in a new land of opportunities. It is obvious that the two female photographers/journalists wished to document the overlooked aspect of immigration—the immigrants in a refugee center—from a humanitarian stance. The photographs seem to be snapshots taken swiftly with an ethical awareness that taking photographs might disturb or disrespect the immigrants. The use of a horizontal angle seems a conscious choice the photographers made to avoid hierarchizing the relationship between the photographed and themselves.

Rodiles transforms these photographs into paintings to visualize her or other viewers' possible reaction to these photographs rather than to question the photographers' ideological position toward immigrants. Rodiles implemented multiple processes to turn the photographs into paintings: first, she printed the original, digitally-formatted photographs, photocopied them, and then lithographed them. On the lithographed images, which have undergone a process that removes colors, the painter inserted multiple strokes of forceful scratches that intervene diagonally in the images. Notably, the process regresses from the most recent technology to a basic manual operation as if the painter wishes to return to the

most rudimentary venue that connects all human beings and, in so doing, to draw on universal humanism. The process also traces the modification from a clearly delineated visual representation to a blurred, jumbled and inconsistent subjective vision, and from colorful completeness to contrasted fragmentariness. The abrasion of the photographic image is more pronounced in the first image. The scratchy strokes overrun the photograph from one corner to the other, affecting the entire image. In the second painting, much less photographic space is invaded by rough strokes. They are concentrated in the lower area. Unlike the first one, scratching here does not emphasize a sense of sharpness and disturbance because it is rather partial. It is wider and more blunt, evoking the softness and undulations of waves. Furthermore, sparse water discoloration in both upper and lower corners, produced with papers rather than brushes, adds the gentleness of the splashing of water foam. Although the photographic images are used in their entirety without the isolation or amplification of any one part, the end result differs greatly from the originals.

Despite the destructive effects performed on the photographs, Rodiles's pictorial interventions in the photographs—abrasions and discolorations—should not be understood as an attempt to decontextualize or obliterate the preexisting references. Nor do they offer a critical statement about the photographs. Instead, what is created is a layer of the painter's emotional response to the photographic images. Thus, the photographs here function as an iconographic precedent rather than an example of intertextuality.⁷ This does not mean that Rodiles does not seek a relation with the photographs. She certainly uses them as more than mere references. Rodiles's expunging and

bleaching constitute an inscription of a sense of responsibility before the faces of immigrants captured in the photographs. It is no coincidence that the faces are emphasized as a result of the techniques Rodiles applied. As Levinas argues in his *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, the face of the other is a language prior to words that calls for self-sacrifice:

Face, already language before words, an original language of the human face stripped of the countenance it gives itself—or puts up with—under the proper names, titles, and genera of the world. An original language, already an asking, and precisely as such (from the point of view of the in-itself of being) wretchedness, penury, but also already an imperative making me answerable for the mortal, my fellowman, despite my own death—a message of difficult holiness, of sacrifice [...]. (199)

In this sense, the photographs in Rodiles's collection transcend the category of images; they also represent a non-verbal expression that begs for a response and an emotional plea.

The fact that Rodiles's techniques accentuate the faces of the immigrants in the photographs is significant. They bring to the surface the photographs' coded messages that are not explicitly expressed and yet are not severed from them. Rodiles's photographic manipulation, therefore, is the visualization of what Régis Durand calls "seeing and thinking photographically" (144). Durand explains, drawing on Barthes's comparison of the still photograph with a palimpsest, that seeing and thinking photographically signifies being able to sense a tremor of the worldview implicit in the image:

As he compares the still to a palimpsest, Barthes points out the ambivalence of its signifying regime: it is both *empty*, in a state of *depletion* (nothing comes to fill the signifiers which it calls up, and its existence never exceeds the fragment), and *full* (it superimposes different levels of perception and analysis, and, being a palimpsest, it never ceases to call for decipherment). That is because the still carries with it not signs but *marks or accents*, which designate the displacement of the center of gravity—a center of gravity of which Eisenstein says that it is transferred inside the fragment, into the elements included within the image itself. (143)

Durand's interpretation of Barthes resembles Vasseleu's reading of Irigaray's understanding of vision. In a way similar to Durand's emphasis of the photographic configuration as "marks or accents" that produce a perceptual shift, Vasseleu points out that for Irigaray vision is open to and affected by the sense of touch. Tactility, therefore, is integral to vision (12). What Rodiles does, in this regard, is make visible an emergence of thought that results from a change in her perceptual realm when seeing the photographs. In other words, she materializes her indescribable feelings of being affected by the image of immigrants by painting over the photographs, a process which results in an accentuation of the faces of the immigrants.

The indivisibility of vision and touch is reconfirmed in Bryson's interpretation of painting. The critic defines strokes as a performance that bridges the visible with the invisible, the spectacle and the end product, and that helps confirm the link between the sense of touch and the realm of the invisible:

the strokes also exist in *another space* apart from the space of spectacle; a space not so much convergent with the silk (though the silk intersects with it, it is a *section* of that other space) as with the body of the painter; it is *his* space, and in a sense it is blind; the movements executed there will, as they touch the silk, leave marks I can construct as a *scaena*, a spectacle, but these marks are also simply *taches*, traces left behind in the wake of certain gestures, but remaining below the threshold of intelligibility (recognition), blind marks which support, eventually, the sigils from which I can construct the landscape scenically, but which are also independent of the sigils they bear [...]. (163-64)

Following this interpretation, Rodiles's scraping technique, which conveys an inarticulable yet sensible being in relation to the immigrants, represents a movement into the invisible. She in fact turns "taches" (the invisible) into the "scaena" (the visible).

Rodiles's scraping and staining, which strengthen the perceptual force in the photographs, constitute her presence and her abstract transfiguration. It is her way of expressing how much she is "touched" by the image of the photographed immigrants. Through her tactile interference transformed into vision, she envisions a possible coalescence between the viewer and the photographed immigrants. Notably, Rodiles's addition of abrasive layers also transforms the backdrop portrayed in the photographs. The original spatial locations of the photographed immigrants (the tables in a refugee center and a bleacher between a fence and a white wall) are altered, producing the sensation of drift. In the first painting based on the image of immigrants sitting around

tables, Rodiles primarily scrapes out the spaces between their heads and upper bodies, making their faces float over the scratch lines. The second painting, which utilizes the photograph taken in a bleacher, erases the fence, turning the photographed place into a ship that navigates over an ocean—the image of which is created through the rough strokes that replace the fence. Additionally, the semantic coincidence between the two words in Spanish (spectator stand translates as “grada” and shipyard, as “gradas”) compounds the painting’s metaphoric metamorphosis. Both paintings locate immigrants not in a fixed, stable space of land but at sea, on the constantly undulating movement of waves. Thus, the re-evocation of the sea turns the arrival of the immigrants at Tarifa into a continuation of their travel rather than a completed future settlement. The partial de-framing of the photographs—another effect produced by the scratch strokes—can be viewed as an intention to relocate immigrants in an open space rather than a temporary detention center.

In the two photograph-based paintings, Rodiles prefers rather immediate and coarse manual operations. She employs sharp objects and papers to visualize her hand movements across the image rather than using refined instruments such as brushes. Although this method does not convey a mastery of precision, it transmits the idea of force and nearness. It also hints at humanism by resorting to the most rudimentary human tools we have. The emphasis on tactility, then, is a manifestation of the painter’s desire to better understand both the physical and psychological conditions in which immigrants find themselves—being bare, unequipped, and deprived. It is important to note that such identification occurs in an amorphous and anarchic mode.

Rodiles’s expression of hand movements point to an addressee—the immigrants—and yet does not constitute a subject that can be verbally or visually constructed. The origin of the movements is anonymous and captured only in the form of an advance towards others. What is traceable is a chaotic and ungraspable presence that forcefully reaches out to others. In my view, this vestige of movements constitutes what Vasseleu calls a “maternal touch”—the demonstration of an ethical subjectivity that exists only in relation with and to others. Within this scheme, the self is neither a logically assessed and independent entity nor a non-being. It exists through a maternal touch that embodies both the sign of being vulnerable—the state of being subjected to the needs of others—and strong—the will to offer hospitality. Thus, in essence, a maternal touch represents a desire to offer without taking hold of anything.

Examples of Rodiles’s efforts to communicate self-giving as her position toward immigration are bountiful. In order to engage with such a case in some detail, I will describe the third painting—one that is not based on a photograph. This time she mixes and applies, in an unruly fashion, various hues of blue color and of sand brown onto the pictorial space of 130cm X 152cm. The color combination evokes the sea bordering the land. This painting continues with the motif of roughness and crudeness, as in the other two paintings over photographs.⁸ Brush strokes here are as disorderly and rebellious as is the technique of scraping and diluting in the two lithographed paintings. Several layers of drawing and an adulteration with hybrid color mixtures and hard water suggest Rodiles’s intended labor to achieve the effect. On top of this coarsely painted fabric is placed an iridescent acetate

engraving of human figures that are not marked by any racial or sexual categorizations. These figures do not pose frontally. They are repeated silhouettes of the same human being, standing sideways with his or her head downward. They are dressed with pants and a hooded jumper. When displayed, the shimmering acetate material achieves the visual illusory effect of simultaneous visibility and invisibility.

In this painting, the materials and methods of executing and exhibiting the work serve to illustrate Rodiles's sensibility and responsibility in the death of immigrants. The entire process of painting reveals how she tries to sense the complex web of emotions immigrants experience. First, as the artist explained in an interview given to me in October 2002, she spread the fabric onto the floor so she could place herself onto it while she painted. In doing so, she literally puts herself onto the canvas and into the picture in which immigrants will be represented. The implication of this process is that Rodiles can transfigure a trace of herself into the sea as well as float over it like immigrants. Second, she knelt down, squatted, and drifted around to lay colors on the white fabric. Her deliberate self-burdening turns the process of creation into a ceremony of distress, as if she wishes to participate, even if minimally, in the pain of crossing the ocean and feeling displaced. The fabric Rodiles uses to create an image of the sea is also relevant to our analysis. She chooses a strong, resilient fabric made of cotton or hemp primarily used in sailcloths, awnings, or canopies. The fabric's durability makes it suitable to protect human beings from the excessive damage of sun, wind, and water. The material connotes a sense of self-sacrifice and self-endurance in the sheltering of others. Thus, the canvas here repre-

sents a protective medium like the sailcloth that resists the sea's threats and, therefore, a space where a maternal gesture is extended to those immigrants who die in a tempest before arriving in Spain. Another detail that reinforces the maritime evocation of the painting is that Rodiles used hard water (water with a relatively large amount of calcium salts) to mix and dilute. Like hard water, seawater contains high degrees of salts that act as a destructive force in painting.⁹ Obviously, abundant references to the sea are not marginal to signification. If Rodiles's human silhouettes over the aquatic space represent drowned immigrants, a series of maternal connotations attached to the sea—water, liquidity, darkness, profoundness, protection, and the womb—add force to Rodiles's self-sacrificial gesture.

Rodiles's attempts to bear the burden of cohabiting with the other do not end with the production of her paintings. As she revealed in the interview, she rolled up her paintings rather than framing them properly, then carried them on her shoulder to the exhibition in Salamanca. Like the immigrants who cross the sea with a small bag of basic necessities on their shoulders, she traveled from the Canary Islands (a Spanish territory geographically located in Africa) to Salamanca (Europe). Her method of carrying the paintings in a small bag is a simulation of the immigrant's journey and resonates with a spiritual pilgrimage whereby one walks through unfamiliar terrains—a self-sacrificial gesture—with the aim of encountering the meaning of life. It is certainly an insignificant sacrifice compared to that of immigrants, yet Rodiles is disposed to undertake an uneasy voyage. Also, on a practical level, carrying the paintings on her shoulders was the only way Rodiles could afford to participate in the exhibition. This

is because, despite being a Spanish territory, the entrance to the mainland from the Canary Islands is treated as if it were a trip beyond the national boundary and therefore, belongings such as paintings are subject to tariffs.

As much as there is a narrative dimension surrounding the production and transportation of paintings, Rodiles's paintings themselves have a quality of *ekphrasis*—the ambivalent coexistence of a verbal component with a visual representation, or vice versa.¹⁰ Signs of ekphrasis can be traced in her use of silhouettes of dead immigrants in one of the photograph-based paintings and in the other that paints the ocean that borders with the land. These paintings possess a narrative force that generates a simultaneous and multi-layered storytelling, which concomitantly evades an eloquent enunciation or a logical organization. One can witness this unutterable narrative dynamism in the oxymoronic co-existence of stillness and a force that disrupts that stillness, as if it were indicating the presence of a suppressed message. This paradoxical movement within immobility is one that Rodiles purposely communicates through the inscription of human silhouettes with a marker over lithography or with a sheet of acetate engravings placed over the pigmented canvas. Notably, the human silhouettes are always expressed through mixed media. In these two paintings, the use of mixed media suggests that what is represented with one medium is only a part of reality and there is more to be added. The hint of such partiality and absence is what links these two paintings with ekphrasis—the incompleteness of both the visible and the verbal and their deficiency in the production of an autonomously comprehensive revelation of reality. Thus, the human

figures inscribed through mixed media represent another part of reality, one relegated to the invisible realm, yet attached to the visible one. Furthermore, both the use of a marker over lithography and acetate engravings border on drawing and writing from which emerges a verbality, despite the absence of words.

Rodiles's ekphrastic paintings do not privilege one medium over another, or force over stillness. Instead, they maintain their essential deficiency intact, allowing the viewer to be cognizant of the partiality of one's perception. As Margo Persin observes in her *Getting the Picture: The Ekphrastic Principle in Twentieth-Century Spanish Poetry*, ekphrasis's fundamental mission resides in underlining a resistance to closure through an intended incompleteness:

From my perspective there is a basic and overriding indeterminacy in the reading of an ekphrastic poem, a skepticism in regard to the power of the text to signify as an organic whole, a stubborn refusal to closure.
(29)

This textual openness is what Rodiles pursues through repeating ghostly human figures. In the film of acetate engraving placed over a pigmented canvas, she deploys eleven replicated figures standing aside in four echelons of semi-circular motion. Rodiles's organization of the silhouettes sets the image in motion, pointing to a foreseen continuity. In another painting in which the human figures are superimposed over lithography, contrary to the abovementioned piece, they are not precisely measured or spatially arranged. Some are larger than others. The loosely drawn figures interrupt the pictorial space in a disorderly manner, offering a contrast to the photographed immigrants:

while the photographed images portray mostly the profiles of immigrants, visually communicating their bewilderment, the figures drawn with a marker delineate the frontal view of four immigrants walking forward with a small bag of belongings. Although the silhouettes consist of firm strokes of thick and curvy lines, they do not dispel the presence of the photographed immigrants. Rather, these human figures overlaid on the photographic image are transparent. This transparency enables the viewer to see them and see through them to the canvas below. They are both in the picture and not in the picture.

The sense of continuity and openness, reinforced through human silhouettes, serves various purposes. First, the silhouettes coalesce different temporalities: the past of the immigrants who had embarked on a death-defying journey, as well as the future departure of another group of immigrants who will cross the sea in the most wretched of conditions. In this way, both the past and future temporalities conjoin in a nebulous present in which they need to remain as a memory and remind the viewer of the presence of their deaths. Second, the non-conclusive vision produced through the repetition of silhouettes is important since it establishes a sense of fluidity necessary to defy any boundary that may exist between the viewer and the painting, the viewing subject and the painted immigrants and, by extension, self and others. The fluidity across the frame is made possible because a sense of ghostliness evoked through silhouettes challenges a clear demarcation between the pictorial space and the viewer's perception and, furthermore, this effect brings forth the message that there is a string of attachment between the painted immigrants and the viewer. This, however, does not

mean that the repetition of human figures operates only as a centrifugal departure from or an extension of the painted context. The replication creates a visual echoing that always returns to the encapsulated scene/seen—the sea or the spectators stand in these cases—demanding the viewer's contemplation of the depth of the problem. The viewer is called into the pictorial frame by those human silhouettes with no particular facial features that reach out and invite in. In other words, the repeated human figures represent an easily identifiable situation beyond the pictorial boundary—the living-dead condition of numerous immigrants—and demand the viewer's eventual identification with them (a point to which I will later return). In this way, the rhetoric of repetition ultimately stresses the pertinence and indivisibility between immigration and our reality.

The overriding sensation triggered by repetition and by the use of mixed media is ghostliness—an ambiguous quality that simultaneously produces a feeling of presence and absence. As I indicated above, the repetitiveness of the silhouettes defies the paintings' frames and boundaries. It is difficult to perceive a beginning and end. There is an ineffable and auratic force that pulls the viewer's attention into the paintings from outside. Particularly, in the abstract painting that represents the ocean, ghostliness is reinforced through the ambivalent spatial belonging of the human figures etched on a sheet of acetate. One rhetorical interpretation is that Rodiles attempts to construct memory for those who drowned at sea and prolong their existence in absence by drawing their ghosts. A rather methodological reading of ghostliness is one that considers the practice of pictorial rendition. The shimmering sheet of acetate engraving

underlines the status of ethereality through its very simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Depending on the reflection of light, the images become either clear or imperceptible. The acetate sheet debunks the unifying notion of space because while the etching is separated from the abstract image of the sea by material distinction as well as by its alternative language—that of precision and sharpness—to the roughness expressed on the canvas, it has yet to be considered as part of the entire painting in order to produce a meaning. The importance of this duality lies in the viewer's obligation to incorporate the realm of invisibility and extrication that haunts the visible domain. In other words, the meaning is located in the border between the visible and the invisible—a ghostly area.

The resistance to closure of ekphrasis goes beyond its structural or metaphorical openness. According to W. J. T. Mitchell, the construction of ekphrasis implies more than the presence of an otherness that is not translatable or exchangeable. Mitchell states, in his *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, that there is a silenced act of addressing and the desire to implicate the beholder of the image in the image:

So far I have been treating the social structure of ekphrasis mainly as an affair between a speaking/seeing subject and a seen object. But there is another dimension to the ekphrastic encounter that must be taken into account, the relation of the speaker and the audience or addressee of the ekphrasis. (164)

In other words, the addressee of otherness is a crucial component in an ekphrastic composition. Based on her own realization that points to the importance of self-revision as a being susceptible to others, Rodiles

seeks a dialogue with and extends her ethical sense to the viewer by creating a method through which the viewer can share her vision. Her selection of an iridescent and transparent material onto which one can be reflected literally to paint the ghostly images of immigrants is a manifestation of her ambition that the viewer indirectly experiences the painter's self-disposition to embrace and commemorate foreign others who fail to reach the land of opportunity.

What is implicit in this anticipated self-reflection of the viewer is that one sees him or herself reflected along with the etched human figures, leading to a possible identification with others and a self-identification as an other. The viewer is an accomplice in the production of meaning. As the viewer rests a gaze upon the painting and is bound to be projected both as a viewer and an object—another ghostly image included in the painting by means of reflection—he or she comes to identify with the ghostly figures that incarnate the self's awareness and recognition of the other, thereby blurring the distinctions between the viewer, the painting and the painted, and between self and the other. Ultimately, the viewer is lured into the painting through an enticing identification with the ghostly figures, which results in the self's experiencing its relation to others. Consequently, the painting offers an intersubjective, dialogical encounter with an object—the group of ghostly figures on a sheet of acetate—that is itself dialectically constructed. Through this dialogical encounter, the viewer glimpses how Rodiles extends and addresses to the viewer her unreserved hospitality to others—her “maternal touch.”

Rodiles's three paintings we have analyzed bring to the fore the role of the self in the consideration of immigration. Rodiles formulates her stance on the issue through

the self's emotional surrender to the photographed immigrants who look astray. Her susceptibility is captured in an anarchic movement from the source of the self to the addressee through techniques such as scratching and staining parts of the photographs. The feelings evoked here are of a selfless concern and responsibility for others, and I have denominated throughout this essay such emotion as a "maternal touch." In Rodiles's paintings, a sense of self is traceable only through a chaotic movement formed through abrasions and discolorations. This vestige of altruism that roots the sense of the self resonates with Levinas's theory of subjectivity, while human silhouettes etched over a sheet of acetate call for the viewer's self-reflection, both literally and rhetorically. Through an iridescent material, the viewer becomes an object of seeing alongside the figures of immigrants, which allows for a convergence of self and others. The viewer is reflected adjacent to ghostly figures of immigrants, identifies with them, and fuses with them. Through those ghostly figures of immigrants reverberate undeniable faces that demand our ethical response.

Notes

¹ I am referring to various NGOs from traditional organizations such as SOS Racism, Asociación Pro-Derechos Humanos and Cruz Roja that are working toward the goal of universal equality, to new organizations taking the Internet as their primary instrument to educate the Spanish public on immigration such as Imsero and Nexos, the Asociación Pateras de la vida (Larache, Marruecos)—a Moroccan organization created to cope with the death of immigrants in "pateras" with the collaboration of Spanish counterparts, and to immigrant organizations that serve their communities such as Asociación de Trabajadores Inmigrantes Marroquíes en España (ATIME), Asociación de inmigrantes ecuatorianos en España (Rumi-

ñahui) and Asociación de inmigrantes guineanos en Aragón (ASOEGUIA).

² My list is not complete because a growing number of artists attempt to examine different challenges immigrants face and changes they bring to Spanish society. I refer to the following works when I mention the names included in the list: Goytisoló's *El peaje de la vida*, co-authored with Sami Naïr, Muñoz Lorente's *Ramito de Hierbabuena*, Hernández Lafuente's *Aguas de cristal, costas de ébano*, Mendicutti's *Novios búlgaros*, and García Benito's *Por la vía de Tarifa*; Armendáriz's *Cartas de Alou*, Bollaín's *Flores de otro mundo*, Uribe's *Bwana*, Gutiérrez Aragón's *Cosas que dejé en la Habana*, Gutiérrez's *El poniente* and Molinero's *Salvajes*; Andreu's *Trencant Fronteres* and Dávila's *Inmigrantes, El Ejido*.

³ In an interview given to me in April 2003, Rodiles stated that the title of her collection signifies "undocumented" or "without proper identity" in a Saudi Arabian vernacular and she borrowed the word from Tahar Ben-Jelloun's novel, *Los naufragos del amor* (2000). Ben-Jelloun is a Moroccan writer who resides in Paris and writes for *Le Monde*—a French newspaper that represents the perspective of liberal intellectualism. His works *Sacred Nights* and *Racism Explained to My Daughter* are translated into English.

⁴ For this argument, see Domna Stanton's "Difference on Trial: A Critique of the Maternal Metaphor in Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva" in *The Poetics of Gender*. For a feminist take on Levinas's theories, see the volume edited by Tina Chanter, *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas*.

⁵ For the history of Canarian art, see Fernando Castro Borrego's *Antología crítica del arte en Canarias*. With respect to contemporary Canarian art, see the pamphlet for the *Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno*. It stresses the awareness of the Canary Islands' instrumental role in bringing together Latin America, Africa, and Europe given its geographic condition and the history of immigration and its art, a demonstration of mutual cultural influences.

⁶ In one painting Rodiles did prior to *Bidún*, she draws on her memory of seeing the Moroc-

can custom of men carrying the bride in a box on her wedding day. She criticizes marriage for Arab women by comparing the box with a coffin. In another, a completely veiled woman smokes a cigarette to represent a moment of liberation for the woman who lives under a repressive patriarchal society. In her other paintings that do not make a clear reference to Morocco, she uses fabrics and colors that evoke North African influences.

⁷ Mieke Bal differentiates these two concepts:

Iconographic analysis generally avoids making statements about the meaning of borrowed motifs, since visual artists may borrow motifs without borrowing meaning [...]. By contrast, the concept of intertextuality, indifferent as it is to authorial intention, implies that the adopted sign necessarily comes imbued with meaning. This meaning may have been changed, but the new meaning that replaces it will carry the trace of its predecessor. (*Looking In* 68-69)

⁸ I note that other paintings Rodiles has done prior to the *Bidún* show a contrasting vision. They are rather geometrical paintings and comprise a flawless composition of collages of fabrics and colors. See her collections of *Mirar el cielo*, *mirar al suelo* and *Estrellas del Viento*, produced in 2000 and 2001 respectively.

⁹ For a detailed explanation of the effects water produces in painting, see Ralph Mayer's *Artist's Handbook on Materials and Techniques* (481).

¹⁰ For further study on the notion, see Murray Krieger's *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.

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