

## New Choreographies with/in the Land: On Spider Woman's Embrace

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*It is often in our experiences with nature that we seek a context for identity through memory. For many traditional peoples the homeland is marked by where our dead are buried. Then the topography is naturally demarcated with our lived experience. Land is the site of ceremonies, the abundance of agriculture and feasting, the place of popular spectacle and the site of loss.<sup>1</sup>*

Amalia Mesa-Bains



Koyoltzintli Mirandarivadencira, *Spider Woman Embrace*, (2019).

Archival pigment print from a large format paper negative, 24 × 30 inches.

Edition of 7 plus 2 artist's proofs. Series: *MEDA*.

Artist [Koyoltzintli](#)'s photographic series titled *MEDA* made between (2018-19) began with a question directed to her collaborators. The question "how do you think your first ancestor engaged with the land when they first encountered it with their body?" was posed to the artist's close friends, all of whom are women and femmes she had met throughout New Mexico at the time. The artist then photographed their enacted responses. The photographs of nude figures and land, I argue, provide a cartography of new embodied creation stories that animate the landscape of New Mexico. While the series honors the different ancestors and creation stories across Indigenous cultures, from

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<sup>1</sup>Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Land and Spirituality and the Descansos," in *Saber es Poder/Interventions Urban Revisions: Current Projects for the Public Realm*, exh. cat. (ADOBE LA, 1994), 16.

the woman who fell from the sky to mud woman to the mariposa woman, this essay focuses on a close visual reading of one of the images in the series titled *Spider Woman Embrace* (2019).

Responding to Koyoltzintli's prompt, the individual in the image choreographs their body in response to the landscape. In *Spider Woman Embrace* two hands in the foreground hold onto a large stone, sitting still within a vast encrusted landscape of minerals. Spread apart, her hands and fingers tactically grip over. In the background, monoliths, volcanic ash, dust, eroded into sedimented layers shaping space and offering a depth to the image. Histories of stone are accounted for in layers suggesting a history of earth, and the long passage of time. The image exudes a certain stillness, perhaps a quietness, and a sense of mutual contemplation between the photographer and individual that might be also shared by the viewer. In the image, Koyoltzintli creates a space for knowledge exchange that stretches across time, constituting a vital act of transfer between the living forms that come into contact with one another.

Without seeing the person's face we understand there to be a meaningful connection happening as they hold onto the rock. While other images within the *MEDA* series show figures, faces, and full body representations, *Spider Woman Embrace* is particularly weighty and contemplative. Without a face or eyes to focus on, the viewer's attention is oriented to not only the hands but to the huge stone and all that surrounds it. The vastness within the image encourages a type of wandering that signals towards interiority. Keeping in mind the question posed by Koyoltzintli to her collaborators, I also wonder what the stone tells us about the histories of the landscape and our ancestors.

The gesture of the embrace allows for the individual to extend themselves into the landscape, and even for a temporary moment become both a body and landscape enriched with encoded history. While we do not see the entirety of the body, we see how the hands become an extension of the landscape further animating a close synchronized relationship between individual and land. The figure's pose suggests they see themselves within the stone and the stone within them. Their choice to hold the rock in this manner brings to mind philosopher Gaston Bachelard's notion of "elsewhere," a feeling when everything begins to merge, including one's interiority; he uses the forest as an example.<sup>2</sup> We can understand this elsewhere as a moment to pause and reflect on the emergent haptic relationships that we can take part in within the web of life. Perhaps the photograph itself becomes another arm inviting us to hold onto the haptic possibilities of knowing.<sup>3</sup> It invites the viewer to tap into their surroundings through the sensorial and the sensuous, allowing the same desire that draws us into the photograph to drive our curiosity and attention towards what orbits around us, and perhaps towards other objects and material life that we inhabit. It is in the haptic resonance that *Spider Woman Embrace* acknowledges the many histories that shape us and invites us to question the realities that we have previously embraced.

Within the "elsewhere" invoked by this photograph, there are possible worlds that also honor the knowledge and oral traditions that exist in the land and its inhabitants. The endlessness suggested by the scales of the stones invite the viewer to see connections between hands, fingers, nails, dust, pebbles, rocks, mountains, sky and so on. Each is suspended in the immensity and vastness of the desert landscape between the two, three, four, five, present bodies even if one or more are not visually depicted. By turning towards the elemental—in this case the desert rock, dust,

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<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard describes the sensation of being in a forest, its boundlessness and disorientation, as a form of "intimate immensity." He writes, "When this *elsewhere* is in natural surroundings, that is, when it is not lodged in the house of the past, it is immense." Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon Press, 1994), 184.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 98. Referencing Black Shadow's "Are You Feelin' the Feelin'," they describe "a way of feeling through others, a feel for feeling others feeling you," a sensation that exceeds containment.



rain, air, clouds of the U.S. Southwest—Koyoltzintli creates a web that radiates an ancestral knowledge key to her upbringing from the Pacific Coast and from the Andean mountains of Ecuador and teacher Mama Matilde.<sup>4</sup>

In *Spider Woman Embrace*, Koyoltzintli demonstrates how a photograph can be imbued with haptic transmissions of information. These transmissions are possible through imagination and memory. How might Koyoltzintli's practice help viewers retrieve their own ancestral wisdom? What might responding to this prompt now do for future generations? One can imagine sitting within the immediate quietness of the desert, touching or walking across the textures of the rocks and simultaneously recalling memories of that same land. Cultural critic and artist Amalia Mesa-Bains writes, "Land acts as a subject and text continually reclaimed through the imagination."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Koyoltzintli's question is an invitation to join her in a collective sense of embodied making that imagines one's bodily actions in response. By allowing for our minds to wander and develop free associative moments with the environments around us, Koyoltzintli reminds us that it is possible to form new choreographies with the land apart from extractivist hypercapitalist logic. Instead, one can imagine and create new modes of being and doing. Taking this invitation seriously, we can create collective rituals rooted in our bodies' capacities to sense the psychic and physical landscapes we inhabit.

It may be then that the sacred exists in acts of extending ourselves within the web of life. Koyoltzintli starts with a question inviting us to tap into something we all may have access to: our dead. While traditions may have been lost, we can call upon our ancestors through ritual, the artist suggests. In his book *The Disappearance of Rituals*, Byung-Chul Han writes, "Rituals contain aspects of the world, and they produce in us a strong relationship to the world."<sup>6</sup> Rituals allow imaginative modalities to exist, and in adopting practices of play, ceremonies, offerings, and forms of remembrance, we can tap into haptic knowledge that can create meaning for each other and the world. Perhaps then we must reorient towards rituals to invite each other back into the ceremonies of life and establish timely connections with the natural world. As Koyoltzintli notes, "...many ancestral teachings we have lost through colonization."<sup>7</sup>

Through the series *MEDA* we see examples of meaningfully connecting bodies and the landscape, inviting viewers to look outside the frame and reorient themselves towards their surroundings. In *Spider Woman Embrace* Koyoltzintli shows us the possibilities of relationality and what happens when we wander outside into the periphery where we eventually may come back to ourselves via a meaningful connection to the land. Koyoltzintli orients us towards a naming, a practice of prayer and ritual, the sensorial and the carnal within the landscape. Ultimately, as audience members, we inextricably become part of the web, reorienting and tapping into an awareness of what has been passed down from our own lineage of ancestors.

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<sup>4</sup> Mama Matilde was Koyoltzintli's long time friend, mentor, and guide with whom she lived on and off in a rural area off the Andean Mountains in Ecuador. She helped shape and influence her practice as a healer, artist, and maker of life. Her teachings have now been passed down to Koyoltzintli. Whether it be via photography, dance, ceramics, or sound; across her practice she transmutes this passing of information with her collaborators. Such exchange and openness is a way to help her collaborator feel seen and heard as they process some of their own stories with the land. Koyoltzintli Mirandarivadeneira, interview by Strange Fire Collective, "Q&A: Koyoltzintli Mirandarivadeneira," accessed April 29, 2026, <https://www.strangefirecollective.com/qa-koyoltzintli-mirandarivadeneira>.

<sup>5</sup> Mesa-Bains, "Land and Spirituality and the Descansos," 13. In this essay, Mesa-Bains describes the troubled relationship Chicanos have to the land through histories of separation and recalls a Nahuatl spiritual worldview that reminds us that we ought "not to remain on earth forever, only a short while."

<sup>6</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Disappearance of Rituals: A Topology of the Present*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Polity Press, 2020), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Strange Fire Collective, "Q&A: Koyoltzintli Mirandarivadeneira."

