

Interview with Maya Goded

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Maya Goded is a documentary photographer and filmmaker born in Mexico City in 1967. Her documentary work is focused on people and communities with little or no visual presence, most often representing the lives of marginalised women. In compelling and intimate documentary images and films, Goded deals with issues such as prostitution/sex-work, feminicide, race, and traditional healing. She has received numerous international awards for her photographic work, including the Guggenheim fellowship, the W. Eugene Smith Award and the Mexican National Council for Culture and the Arts award (mayagoded.net). In May 2017, her feature-length documentary *Plaza de la soledad* was released in movie theatres across Mexico and earned praise at the Sundance film festival (Smith 2017). I interviewed Maya Goded in Mexico City in 2013, when she was finishing filming the documentary and I was finishing my PhD thesis on her work, parts of which will be published this year in a monograph entitled *Photographing the Unseen Mexico: Maya Goded's Socially Engaged Documentaries* (forthcoming, Legenda). In wide-ranging conversations spanning nearly a week, Goded was very generous in sharing her thoughts on the physical, emotional and symbolic violence suffered by the people in front of her camera.

Dominika Gasiorowski: You have an enviable ease in approaching people living in precarious situations, and convincing them to open up their lives. How do you achieve that closeness?

Maya Goded: I think my interest in telling stories through images is rooted in my childhood. My father was involved in clandestine political activity, which was discussed a lot at home. However, I could not speak about this at school so from an early age I was conscious of living in two parallel realities—one at home and another one outside of it. My background is a little unusual in Mexico, because my mother came from the US—I had a sense she came from another world. From childhood, I had this awareness of different realities and different lives being lived all around me, which fascinated me. I still want to be part of different worlds and learn about how others live their lives, learn about other people's reality. I also love being an intermediary in bringing people together and seeing what happens. This is what I try to do in my visual work.

DG: What ethical issues do you encounter in your work?

MG: I think that with the kind of work I do, the question of ethics is one that crops up every day. It is not just about whether I have the right to photograph the people I want to photograph. Documentary practice is full of everyday ethical dilemmas, which require attention and thoughtfulness. I still struggle with photographing people in desperate situations, who are perhaps looking for a way out of their despair. I had to acknowledge a long time ago that I could not save anybody, but that being there to listen to their story and show it to others is of value in and of itself. In the kind of work I do with marginalised and invisible communities, ethical decisions cannot always be taken in advance. They have to be lived, negotiated and collaboratively explored between the two sides of the documentary encounter.

DG: Has your methodology changed throughout your career?

MG: My way of approaching people has evolved. I find that I now build rapport much more quickly. The biggest learning curve was my work on *Tierra negra*, because traveling as a lone woman on the Costa Chica was very unusual at the time. People would think I was either a prostitute or looking for a man. I decided the best thing to do would be to introduce myself and honestly present my project, but I needed a way to get to know the community. In each community, I would approach the mayor or the president of the municipality and they would hold a meeting with other members of the community, where I would introduce myself and talk about my project. This was a beautifully honest way of going about it, because different people in the community would want to get involved after a meeting like that. I would immediately receive invitations to other people's houses, because they wanted to share their way of life with me. We would quickly build a relationship and start working together, trying different things in front of the camera. This way, the relationship with my subjects develops alongside the photos.

DG: How do you photograph people who are clearly vulnerable?

MG: When I take photographs in a difficult situation, it is the relationship that is as important as the photography. I am not there to take advantage of people; what they are living through is important to me as well. This rapport between the two sides of the photographic or documentary encounter is very important, because it sustains the understanding between us outside of the visual. In terms of my own position, I try to move less, but instead deepen my bond with others and my understanding of my subjects. Such a way of working is very hard when you are employed by a magazine, but then that advice would still stand—move less and instead be in the moment and appreciate the connection between you and the other person. It is a very subtle and fleeting connection, but it is crucial in the photographic encounter, even if it is not always possible to achieve. It is even more important in dealing with difficult situations, when people often think that nobody would want to be seen in those circumstances. I have learnt that it is better not to assume what other people may want you to see, because there is always someone with a desire to tell their story. This is a foundation of building the connection between the person in front of the camera, who wants to be looked at, and the photographer behind the camera who wants to look. It is a form of communication—they want to share their story and do it through my work.

DG: How does that approach manifest itself in documentary practice?

MG: Photography is a form of agreement. This is why I like for others to see my camera straight away, because it is important to me that I am honest about my intentions. This honesty elicits responses from people who want to tell their story, to show their lives to others. I think we all share this desire of wanting to project an image, to represent ourselves to others in a certain way, which says a lot about our self-image, our yearnings, and our fantasies. Even in the documentary filming process, people's desires and dreams suddenly come out. For example, Carlos (a pimp and long-term partner of Carmen - one of the women prominently features in Goded's photographic work and her documentary film *Plaza de la soledad*) had a dream of becoming a singer. His father was a pimp, so he always saw men surrounded by lots of women in this very specific context, but he also always wanted to sing. He wanted to sing a song to his partner, who has been with him for many years. They split up and the song was a way for Carlos to say goodbye to her, a farewell. I wanted to help him make this dream a reality. We contacted a singer called 'El Puma' (José Luis Rodríguez) and he coached Carlos for three weeks to enable him to sing the song. I rang my friends in the film industry and very quickly they put together a set and did Carlos' make-up and bought him clothes to wear onstage. Then we invited Carmen to watch him, so they could say goodbye. I relished the experience of making his dream a reality. I do this in photography as well and try to mediate what others want to show me. That is why I feel very uncomfortable taking clandestine images or taking photos very quickly. I always seek an agreement and a level of cooperation, which means that the photographic encounter is a play between the people who want to be captured and me.

Within that cooperation, I also bring in all my baggage with the way I see them and their situation. I try not to have preconceptions and prejudices, but they are unavoidable, because I come from a specific social, cultural and educational background. I am always aware of that baggage and the way it influences my vision and try to remain open to having my preconceptions challenged. The visual collaboration always involves two actors. On one side, there is me with all my baggage, however much I may want to leave it behind, and on the side, it is the people I photograph who want to show a specific image of themselves. An important part of any such negotiation is how far we want to take a given image. This is also often a question of ethics. Photographing challenging themes is particularly tricky because the camera allows you to enter many different situations, which often happens very fast and at the spur of a moment, but in those moments I need to decide how far I want to go and what I want to show. This is always a very complex question when it comes to photography; it becomes even harder when making video documentaries.

DG: Even though none of your projects deal with easy themes, you mentioned in previous interviews that some are harder than others.

MG: Yes, it is true. For example, I never finished my project on the Ciudad Juárez murders with the NGO Justicia para Nuestras Hijas. It still feels like an open chapter, because I left it undone. What is more, I find it hard to even look at the photographs because of what is left unseen. It is a hugely frustrating feeling because I lost an opportunity to show events and people that will now remain unseen. Yet the most important aspect of that project for me was confronting this brutal reality of everyday life in Mexico, where so many women are killed every day for being women. In addition to the violence, I wanted to confront the impunity and the constant undercurrent of blaming the women for being

victims of murders. It is perverse, because the murder itself becomes an excuse to attack the woman's decency, since she must have deserved it. The murdered women are judged for wearing short skirts or going out at night, as though it was reasonable to pay with one's life for these everyday actions. This is not just a quiet prejudice—the police and the government will openly question murdered women's decency before asking any questions of the perpetrators, or even trying to find them.

Instead of listening to men's opinions about the victims, I wanted to focus on them and find out who they were. I wanted to know about their interests, where they went to school or to work and see the things they left behind, but I also found out where their bodies were found or how mutilated they were. It is a very difficult subject to approach visually and without words without further victimising the victims. It was very hard to take those pictures. The whole experience also gave me a tremendous fear of what human beings are capable of. I never before experienced such a deep-seated, visceral dread of the things other people do. For the longest time, I could not develop any distance to the project because it felt so immediate—other people were doing these unspeakable things and I had to confront the fact that they were human just like you and me. It never made any sense to me how another person can rape, abuse and taken another person's life in such a horrific way. Adding insult to injury, this shocking, gruesome violence is regularly committed with impunity. In that sense, this project was very different from my other work. Naturally, prostitution or other hard themes I worked on are also not easy to witness, but they never felt hopeless to me. Lots of women I photograph experience violence committed with impunity, but the abuse they suffer is matched by the strongest will to live and to survive, a brutally powerful vital force. Despite all the physical and symbolic violence they suffered, these women are survivors and they are alive. In Ciudad Juárez, the landscape is different. The girls and women are dead and there is nothing left apart from a deep sense of injustice and desolation. Their mothers are so anguished in their grief; a part of them had died with their child and they carry on in agony without hope or respite. I had to confront the fact that it was too much and that I could not finish the project. The fear which I experienced when working on this project never went away and I needed therapy to cope with the aftermath of it in my own life.

DG: How did you start working on you first photographic project *Tierra Negra*, which deals with issues of race?

MG: When I was working for the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, I worked with indigenous communities in Jamiltepec in Oaxaca on the Mexican coast. This was in conjunction with various programmes of support, which provided funding for indigenous communities. My great-uncle died in that part of Mexico. My father had a special affinity to the place of his death and for many years worked on the border of Oaxaca and Guerrero. What is more, my mother, who is an anthropologist and an archaeologist, used to be an activist in the US civil rights movement before she came to Mexico to study. She had a couple of books at home about the Afro-Mexican population along the coast. My great uncle's death and my mother interest in how race affects your rights were a foundation of my interest in the Afro-descendant communities in Mexico. Like most of my projects, this one also started with a personal interest of mine, firmly rooted in my family history. When I initially started working for the Instituto Nacional Indigenista, I realised nobody

was photographing these communities. I approached the Director for Popular Cultures at the Institute, José del Val, and discussed my ideas with him. He liked the project and supported it. When I first started taking these pictures and showing them to others, I found that people thought they were taken in Cuba—they did not think these communities were part of their country. That was because there really was not a public narrative about Afro-descendants in Mexico and how the colonial slave trade affected the south of the country. Even within those communities, there is very little awareness of that particular heritage, but quite a lot of ethnic conflict between the indigenous and the Afro-descendant population.

DG: What is the root of that conflict?

MG: Sometimes it is hard to judge in Mexico, where there is a lot of violence generally. However, I think the root of the problem is the ownership of the land, which used to belong to the indigenous people. The Spanish conquest obviously dispossessed them and the Spaniards then imported slaves from Africa, because they could work the land without laying a proprietary claim to it. The root of the conflict is the conquest and it was fascinating to me how something that happened so many centuries ago results in violence suffered by people to this day. I also witnessed a lot of prejudice and discrimination against indigenous communities.

DG: How did the Afro-descendant communities view their own heritage?

MG: This is a very curious issue, because the people in the communities I met never recognised their specific Afro-heritage, always instead emphasising their claim to the mestizo identity. However, I heard lots of jokes about Afro-descendants crossing the US border and being mistaken for US citizens, because they do not look the way others expect Mexicans to look. Even though this racial issue is not acknowledged openly, those jokes provide a tacit understanding of difference. In those communities, much like in the rest of the country, there is not a huge amount of interest in studying the African heritage in Mexico. During the project, I was consciously looking for these historical links. I knew these communities used a specific type of construction called *casa redonda*, which anthropologists linked to their heritage, but I found nobody was building houses that way anymore. Within the healing rituals I observed and photographed, I could see more of the Afro-mestizo heritage. Having said all that, I never actually set out to use my camera for anthropology. I was interested in what my great-uncle and father had seen in their days in Guerrero and Oaxaca and how the area has changed. I also wanted to show that these communities are part of today's Mexico.

DG: How did you negotiate your position within these communities?

MG: After seeking support from community leaders and presenting my project to the communities at the meetings I described, I would follow local rules. Because of the violence suffered by women and traditional expectations of each gender, people advised me never to walk around the village alone and to always be in company of other women. I generally follow local rules, because as an outsider I want to be respectful of other people's customs. My adherence to the local way of life also helped the communities to accept me. Women invited me into their homes and soon began protecting me. One of the women I lived with could not trust her sons not to harm me, so she gave me her bed and offered to share it with me. I quickly became enmeshed in their everyday lives and felt very

comfortable with that proximity and intimacy. These embodied restrictions quickly started to shape my work and my focus shifted to women, even though this was not my initial interest. In that sense, my experience shaped my work.

DG: Talking about racism and discrimination in Mexico is difficult. Many researchers (Moreno Figueroa 2010: 388) point to the difficulty in addressing discrimination in a country where racism is not openly discussed as an issue.

MG: Yet there is constant, everyday discrimination, particularly against indigenous people. This is hard to talk about because the prejudices that exist are systemic, but they also subsist in everyday language and commonplace attitudes, yet nobody likes to be called out for saying something racist. In Mexico, everyday language is very racist. That is why I think everyone has to accept the responsibility for the language they use, which everyone needs to be careful with in order not to perpetuate harmful attitudes. The violence and racism creeps into everything we say and do, which is why it is so important to be aware of it.

DG: What do you find most difficult about your work?

MG: My main preoccupation is the fact that in my work I am always touching other people's lives. These are intimate, private moments for the person in front of the camera and for me, which is why in revealing their intimacy I am also revealing my own. It is my choice of theme, my frame, my decision for when to start and stop shooting. I am vulnerable and powerful at the same time. More importantly, in that moment the other person decides they feel comfortable with me and want to share with me a part of themselves, want to show me an aspect of their lives. It may be that they come to regret it or that this moment then influences their lives or even my own in ways that we cannot predict. This is especially true at the time when the photographs are published, either in print or on the Internet. Whatever feeling of control I might have had, at the moment of publication this intimate moment I shared with the other opens up to the world. This is the scary part of taking photographs and with each image I capture I poke that fear a little. What is more, all the themes I worked on, be it race, prostitution or witchcraft, are challenging in their own ways. They are surrounded by prejudices, misconceptions, and misrecognitions, revealing more about the people I photograph and myself with every frame. It is not easy to be confronted with sexuality or poverty in this way, so these images always risk being cast aside and rejected. They always provoke strong reactions.

DG: Can you expand on how you see your own role as a photographer and documentary filmmaker?

MG: I am aware that in every situation I enter, I immediately change the dynamic. My presence and interest is a form of intrusion, which is why I always want to be open with the people I film and photograph. I am not interested in pretending to be an invisible observer who mediates the reality as it is. I need to acknowledge my presence and my influence to the people I work with, but also to my audiences. I am obviously complicit in what I show, and I like to directly acknowledge that complicity. I provoke a performance, because people in front of the camera have an idea of how I am seeing them. Therefore, what I capture is often a performance of how they see themselves, which I find very moving and beautiful. This issue of performance within documentary is complex because it touches upon the notion of documentary truth or reliability. In the process of filming

Plaza de la soledad, I found that sometimes the people I knew well presented themselves differently in front of the camera to the way they would be when I was not filming. The change in them was interesting as a manifestation of desire to be seen in a certain way, but also as a record of how the camera changes the dynamic of every encounter, even if it is an encounter with oneself. This performance is always socially charged with the country's racism, classism and violent attitudes toward women. What makes this even more complex is that when the people I am filming are going to see themselves on screen, they will not see their performance in the way they had envisaged it. They will come to see themselves momentarily through my lens. Every time I show people their photos—because they belong to them as well—an aspect of themselves surprises them because they had not noticed or not considered it before.

DG: Your relationships with the subjects of your photographs are often very lasting and sustained, some of them spanning decades. How do you manage the personal and the visual?

MG: This is another huge challenge. They let me in on an aspect of their lives, and I am in a position of choosing a small piece of what I witness to share with a much bigger audience. On the one hand, I have a duty of care and feel protective towards the people I film and photograph, and on the other hand I can only work with what I witness. A lot of the time the people I photograph will show me so much of themselves and their lives. Occasionally, editorial decisions are easy, for example when I do not want to cause trouble for the person who trusted me with their story. However, they are more complex when I become aware that what people think they are showing me is radically different from how I am seeing them. This is particularly important to my style of working, because I mostly work in my country and in my city. When I first exhibited my photographic work that was later published in the album *Plaza de la soledad* (2006) in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, the women I photographed came to the opening night. Although I consider how others would like to be seen and what they want to show, ultimately my work is my vision.

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