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Oral History and Performance as Research (PAR): “Undocumented” Narratives Documenting Lived Experience

Cover Page Footnote

Article: Oral History and Performance as Research (PAR): Embodying Territories of Resistance in Undocumented Narratives Daniel Brittany Chávez PhD Candidate, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Communication Studies Visiting PhD Student Center for Advanced Studies of México and Central America bchavez@live.unc.edu 001-52-967-136-9645 This article is dedicated to Dr. Shannon Rose Riley, a lifelong mentor, sister, friend, ally, and comadre. I am who I am today for having met you. Also, to GGP and my chosen family and loves of La Pocha Nostra. To David Kahn at SJSU for pushing my MA work forward. To Della Pollock, for being brilliance in the flesh always. May we live and learn in legacy.

Oral History and Performance as Research: “Undocumented” Narratives Documenting Lived Experience

Daniel B. Chàvez

The following article contends with what began as a Master’s Thesis project and performance that used an experimental and bi-methodological approach of “critical oral history performance” and “performance as research” in order to produce and analyze the oral histories of two Latina women who migrated via México during pregnancy as “undocumented” subjects. This method was then again used for another oral history performance project that centered on the narrative of an undocumented queer (lesbian) woman from Guatemala. Here, however, I explicate, in-depth, the experience of performing oral history work, focusing on my initial performance in 2011. By taking the time to explain the “why” of this work in its methodological and ethical force, I gesture towards the methodological possibility of oral history performance through performance art.

Performance has tremendous capacity to unearth, trouble, and rewrite the ways in which we see and operate in our social action sites. As artists, our work requires that we create from a place of agency in order to self-reflexively engage our work and what we wish to do with it and then archive it on our own terms. We are theorizing all the time. Performance studies as a field would be at a total loss if the only people who ever wrote about performance were those who do not do performance themselves. Granted, there are endless forays in which I could take up what the *doing* of performance is; however, for these purposes, I am invested in *live events*, staged or durational. Increasingly, artists are emerging who dare to speak about their own performance work, as many of us have pursued advanced degrees as a way to support our life projects/artistic practices. Reading performance as *doing* theoretically rigorous work is a task we must continue to make space for at the confluence of our artistic, intellectual, and activist practices. In what follows, I pursue this task in the development of a mixed-methods option for embodied performance practice.

This essay considers the first performance experiment I undertook in 2011 that considered oral history’s potential as ethical and social justice-centered embodied performance work in a project entitled *Embodied Borderlands. Embodied*

I’d like to acknowledge, from the depths of my heart, three of my greatest *teachers*/mentors/friends: Shannon Rose Riley, Della Pollock, and Guillermo Gómez-Peña for always guiding me with roots and wings. Shannon, thank you for being the light that saw me through and taught me to believe in the light that my own wick put out. This is for you. Thank you to my comadres, without whom this work would have no soul. ¡Ningún ser humano es ilegal!

Borderlands was an oral history Performance as Research (PAR) project that was based on two oral history narratives conducted with a Guatemalan and a Mexican woman who had immigrated undocumented to the United States during pregnancy. The PAR component of this project is indebted to the performance strategies of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and *La Pocha Nostra* and the PAR and performance installation strategies of Shannon Rose Riley.¹ I engaged with these two women (given the pseudonyms Ángela and Claudia) as *comadres* (close friends of confidence) as opposed to *informants*, which served to culturally break the more distanced social-scientific paradigm of the interview encounter and I draw more from Della Pollock's notion of the politics of oral history performance being "critical, intimate, and felt" ("Introduction" 8).

In the performance, my intention was to theoretically embody and contend with a harsh dialectic of the undocumented female Latina body who migrates during pregnancy: the woman, carrying the child within her *vientre* (womb), travels without documents and upon arriving to the U. S., at the expulsion of the child from her body, the child then comes into "documented" status, while the woman/mother remains in a state of legal limbo and physical precarity. What I argued theoretically and through the performance is the following:

Ángela's initial migration is tied up in a sexual economy of migration that is heterosexually driven by giving a future to the child in her womb. However, after the child leaves her womb and receives documents once under the governmental auspices of the hospital space, the "undocumented" womb she is left with is tied up in a queered sexual economy of a future that is precarious, seen as less-than-human (without- documents), and based in a future potentiality, not a present reality. This is an offer towards a critical hermeneutics of queer temporality that is deeply intertwined in the sexual economy of "undocumented" Latina migration. By entering into this hermeneutical space, a new ontology of "undocumented" migration can be discovered, critical of future, but not as a separatist or antirelational cause from queer futurity. (Chávez 53)

1 Shannon Rose Riley has had a major impact on my work—as mentor, friend, scholar and artist. Her work is a model for what the artist-scholar *does* and *is* (not to mention *contributes*) to the field of performance studies and the artistic and academic worlds of scholarship. She has done a range of solo performance art works since the 1970s and works in a range of media including performance, video, sound, and installation. Her questions about the way I held the camera, about the video placement of the installation were crucial to my thinking about immersing the audience in the experience, and so on. The book she co-authored with Lynette Hunter, *Mapping Landscapes for Performance as Research: Scholarly Acts and Creative Cartographies* (2009) served as a theoretical basis from which to articulate the purpose of a performance component to the project and laid the groundwork for the methodology of imbricating oral history and "performance as research."

Given this, how can we humanize the lives of women who carry out migration during pregnancy by understanding the implications of this transit?

The central question that drives the following essay, and the evolving process of this work over the last few years, is: what potentials are unlocked when we turn away from traditional narrative re-performance of oral history (e.g., Anna Deveare Smith, *Laramie Project*, among multiple other examples) and turn *towards* embodied performance art work as another method of re-performance as “an expression of devoted reception” (Pollock, “Introduction” 4)? In the act of deep listening involved in the oral history encounter, how does the body-in-performance become a social body and then create the conditions for *sintonía*, as opposed to empathy (affect in-relation rather than distancing and feeling)?² While answering these questions in full is far beyond my intention and capacities, they drive my analysis in the desire for a more explicit praxiological conversation in oral history performance within the PAR context.

In what follows, I will first briefly explain the role of embodied oral history work through the development of a mixed-method for doing, making, and theorizing socially engaged performance work. I will then explain, in further depth, performance art’s potential for embodying oral history work as a method through audience-as-witness from specific genealogies. I will then elaborate upon the creative process to paint a picture of the performance, *Embodied Borderlands*. I then detail my response, as the performer, to the process by explaining performative ethnography. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on affective responses to the piece as an incentive to pursue oral history as a PAR method. This essay, then, insists on providing continuity to a theoretical insistence on turning oral history into embodied performance work as another of oral history’s potentials *as* performance, while also crafting an archival landscape of my shifting body archive and practices as my life project and work come into finer tune.

Coming to Oral History as an Embodied Act

Certainly, all oral history is an embodied act of listening. When oral history is re-performed as textual, it is also still embodied. There are threads that run through all oral history performance (meaning the oral history encounter as-performance and the re-performance of oral history). Pollock says, “The performance of oral history is itself a transformational process. At the very least, it translates subjectively remembered events into embodied memory acts, moving memory into re-remembering. That passage not only risks but endows the emerging history/narratives with change” (“Introduction” 2). This then creates a different kind of charge when oral history is taken to staged performance work. Pollock

2 *Sintonía*, I would freely translate to “tuning in with,” is a term I have taken up from the transfeminist thinkers of Barcelona, Spain. Helena Torres defines *sintonización* as subjects that are mutually constructed by being together, whereas empathy is a subject that is transformed by occupying an object (248). I find the political power of accompanying by *sintonización* with others to have much stronger ethical force than empathy.

continues, “Staged performance or ‘re-performance’ appreciates the magnitude of the primary interview encounter by expanding it to include other listeners; rallying its pedagogical force; and trying—in some small measure—to convey the particular beauty of two people meeting over history” (“Introduction” 3). Given this conception of oral history, which I share with Pollock, it is crucial to understand oral history as always-already an embodied encounter. What I wish to elaborate here, then, is performance art’s potential as a method of re-performing oral history as yet another possibility—one that can have concrete social implications for particular social causes, like undocumented Latina/o immigration.

Towards a Method of Oral History & Performance As Research

Combining the techniques, dynamism, training, and theoretical approaches of Riley and Gómez-Peña, this essay can be understood as *fronterizo*, where a few elements are not to be expunged: the body as *materia prima*, a “buffer zone” for alternate realities to exist, active engagement of the audience, the transformation of artist and audience through the visceral performance experience, and the performance of the doing itself. In this sense, there is nothing particularly new or unique about this work.³ The emphasis is the use of the body to explore the oral histories of the *comadres* in a way that asks audiences to engage in realities quite distinct from their own.⁴ In order to illustrate my argument for a methods-based construction, I elaborate on the work in depth in a later section. I will first explain just a few of the different performance genealogies methods I pull from. Gómez-Peña understands performance art as embodied in performance artists themselves:

For me performance art is a conceptual ‘territory’ with fluctuating weather and borders; a place where contradiction, ambiguity and paradox are not only tolerated, but also encouraged. Every territory a performance artist stakes is slightly different from that of his/her neighbour. We converge in the overlapping terrain precisely because it grants us special freedoms often denied to us in other realms where we’re mere temporary outsiders. In a sense, we’re hard-core dropouts from orthodoxy, embarked on a permanent quest to develop a more inclusive system of political thought and aesthetic praxis . . . We’re interstitial creatures and border citizens by nature—insiders/outsideers at the same time—and we rejoice in this paradoxical condition. In the act of crossing a border we find temporary emancipation. (“In Defense” 78)

3 *Fronterizo* translates to “on the border.”

4 I consider the two women I interviewed as my *comadres* (an intimate name for female friend), as opposed to field partners or “subjects,” which are more traditional of social science work.

Gómez-Peña goes to bat in defense of performance art—implicating its position as a border space within the traditional field of the performing arts—and welcomes performance artists and even challenges us (them) to create spaces we (they) would otherwise not have. In this quest to develop more inclusive systems of thought, politics, and action, we are charged by Gómez-Peña to live in the *zona fronteriza* in order to create performances that emancipate those who participate in their creation (*The New World Border*).

In particular, what happens when a social justice imperative is part and parcel of oral history and radical performance artwork? Pollock provides writing as a discursive space for this to happen:

As live representation, performance may in effect bring imagined worlds into being and becoming, moving performers and audiences alike into palpable recognition of possibilities for change. Through the incorporation of oral histories into public memory, it may most fundamentally ensure that “those who have given up their time to talk, know that their words have been taken seriously. (“Introduction” 1)

Pollock expresses that live performance brings stories into being and moves through performers and audiences to instigate change. It is through performance, for Pollock, that oral history becomes a part of public memory and that interviewees’ words are honored. Using a *Pocha* aesthetic of performance art that is not spoken, oral history becomes embodied performance work while retaining/creating a space in public memory.

Embodied Borderlands had the intention of merging the radical aesthetics of Gómez-Peña with the ethical oral history performance and social justice imperatives of Pollock, through PAR. Given this reality, the audience members are not passive participants in a contrived event, but rather active witnesses in a process of performing *together*.

This is what performance *as* research *is* and *does*. Lynette Hunter articulates her own work within the PAR paradigm in the following way:

The performance art that I have developed simply extends the logic of this situation by foregrounding the difficult to articulate theoretical engagements and materializing them in an embodied way through performance or installation. Responses to these performances lead me to deduce that people at the very least have more fun with theory this way, possibly because they are suddenly given license to give themselves up to the energy of the moment rather than pin themselves into a pen of decontextualized logic, what Lorraine Code calls “s knows that p.” (“Theory/Practice” 231)

Like Hunter, the use of the body and video/sound installation in *Embodied Borderlands* introduces the audience to theory in a way that is felt and lived during the performance event itself. Hunter speaks about her audiences having more “fun” with theory in this way. As an extension of this, audiences come into theory in ways that were, arguably, previously inaccessible to them. When this happens, an intense interest is ignited in the subject matter and, in this case, oral histories

create an active engagement and interest in, at the very least, seeing the world in a different light. This PAR paradigm is the community involvement and social justice imperative behind the work.

Exegesis of the Creative Process

The first component of the creative process was the collecting of video images filmed along the border of California and México, as well as images in the sand, California desert, and waterfall/beach locations. Given the task of producing a traditional “Master’s” thesis in a theoretically-driven Theatre Arts program, I decided (under the guidance of Shannon Rose Riley) to create a full-scale performance art installation piece based on two narratives as a way of challenging institutionalized expectations of performing arts degrees, that can omit practice. I also desired to challenge the notion of being granted “mastery” of anything and instead followed the path of those who came before me in destabilizing the institutionalization of art practice more than ever before. In the end, the performance event used seven video installations of scenes from the U. S.-México border and California desert that I had captured. The performance also included a series of performative tasks that I pursued using my body, inspired by specific metaphorical moments from each of the interviews, followed by a talk-back with the witnesses.

The video images, filmed with a simple hand-held camera, were designed to create perspective on crossing the border while carrying extra weight. The lens of the camera was meant to be an extension of the eye, of the moving body, so that the viewer was thrown into a visceral understanding of the journey and was invited into the potentiality of a physical reaction.

In total, seven video projections ran throughout the performance/womb space: two nature videos were repeated but alternated visually (encompassing four of the videos being projected), the third nature video was then put in a separate part of the space as a fifth video projection, and the fourth video of the fetus in utero was projected onto the ceiling to run for the duration of the performance piece. In an attempt to break the sense of theatrical proscenium space, the videos were offset on a visual scale: two projected at different levels on two of the corners, one projected very large on the west wall, one projected diagonally and smaller on the east wall, and the final projected diagonally, skewed by a hanging piece of muslin that served as a shadow screen for the video work.

The final component of the creative process was the body art component. This section could not be over-rehearsed, as it was meant to happen in the moment, as a physical intervention into the space. The piece was thematically designed according to tasks. The tasks included: 1) wrapping and cutting of industrial rope and teddy bear as child, 2) fall and recovery while vomiting blood, 3) washing of self/water breaking, 4) acupuncture border on body, and 5) a Virgin Mary image. The tasks required a few physical additions to the space and/or prop items including: twenty feet of industrial rope with pliers to cut through it, a muslin curtain to hang, colored lights to create shadows on the muslin curtain, a teddy bear, a three-foot deep

flower pot, five gallons of water, a sand box with enough sand in it to lay on, blood capsules, a body roller spray painted brown, acupuncture needles with United States and Mexican flags attached to the heads, a cloak of the Virgin Mary, and simple blue jeans and white t-shirt with guaraches as a costume. This was the final component of putting the piece together for an audience.

In addition to considering pre-performance labor, aside from making sure the correct materials were purchased, ready to go, and set up in the space properly, the second consideration were the symbolic intentions I had as the performance artist.⁵ The five tasks were each meant to be symbolic discoveries in constant process and progress. In this sense, no two performances would be exactly the same and what was to happen with each task occurred in real time during the first performance process. No task was “rehearsed” in the classical sense of repetitive practice before the performance. Each symbolic element was meditated upon beforehand and the symbolic intention internalized, while also allowing for fluidity of change in intention.

The first task of wrapping industrial rope around the artist’s body was intended as a symbolic act of a border being literally placed upon the body, which strangled the limbs. This border also served as a life-sized umbilical chord floating within the dark recesses of amniotic fluid in the performance *fronterizo* space. The border would force and entangle itself upon the body and then have to be cut off in some fashion and used to line the space with remnants of the border, troubling the stability of what can even be defined as border.

While crossing behind the muslin to the second task, a teddy bear served as a child, in whichever fashion it resonated in that performance moment. The second task of falling using a Styrofoam® log while biting into blood capsules to simulate vomiting (taking into consideration the written permissions that would have been required to use real blood in a university-setting performance), was a symbolic representation of Ángela’s story of falling in the truck during her crossing.

The third task of ritual cleansing was to happen behind the muslin, set up with lighting so that, depending on where the audience chose to stand or sit, they would see shadows, a body, or a combination of the two. I undressed my body (down to undergarments) and moved into the water of the womb breaking, cleansed myself of the “blood,” and created a ritual cleansing space within *la frontera*. Realistically, the washing would have taken place while removing all clothing down to the nude body, but no part of the performance was intended to offend the initial interviewees, so clothing was used. In the first performance, the pot was not supposed to release water, but the plug at the bottom came out, spilling out

5 Task-based or activity-based work was developed by Allan Kaprow in the 1960s. Task oriented performance art has been a strategy of performance art that intends to bypass questions of acting. It is concerned with actions rather than acting. I am grateful to Riley for sharing much of this history of performance art with me in an embodied manner in the performance art studio. In this regard, the critique and feedback in the performance studio were a kind of embodied knowledge transfer, like a theatrical workshop, wherein I learned performance art technologies—some decades old—through *doing* rather than through *reading*.

onto the floor. Because this was not a planned event, the chords had not been set up to be away from water. Luckily, no one was injured, but the space was reworked before the second night's performance to include a purposeful water spill, without the risk of electrocution. Performance art oftentimes, whether intentionally or unintentionally, includes tangible risks.

The fourth task, after washing, was to acupuncture my own abdomen/uterus/upper legs with a combination of Mexican, Guatemalan, and United States flags. The idea was to create a border that penetrated the body as a symbolic decolonization of the modern-day conquest that is our current immigration policy—neo-colonization installed in the flesh, as lived today. This task occurred while sitting inside the sandbox (representing where sand comes from—desert crossing—that then goes into the innocence of child play, while the mother's body is still violated). On the side of the sand box, baby Nike® shoes were positioned, taken from Ángela's story of finding shoes in the desert. The second performance used only Mexican and United States flags after receiving feedback that the clear dichotomy would resonate more with audiences. The final task, seen as an image, included the acupuncture Virgin Mary, where I used a classical teal drape to represent her iconicity.

The audience members were told by an usher that they could engage with the space in whichever way felt "right" to them: whether that meant walking around, standing, leaning, sitting, lying on the floor, or a combination of all of the above. I waited behind the muslin curtain throughout the installation piece as well and, after about thirty minutes, had peers turn off all of the videos except for the two that broadcast yellow light and the fetus footage. All of the sound was turned off as well. Then the light behind the muslin was turned on and the sound for the body piece increased in volume. At this point, I came out from behind the muslin curtain to begin the first task.

Towards a Performative Ethnography: Testimony from the Performance Zone

At the core of a method that considers how performance is research, I find performative ethnography to be particularly useful. While performative ethnography does not desire objectivity of analysis, it *does* intend to approach the reflexivity of the performance-research in a way that provides a platform for analysis. Artist-scholar Riley has articulated performative ethnography in the following way:

I suggest that a performance as research approach to ethnography would draw more substantially from Butler's theory of performativity and alienate the role of the researcher in a Brechtian sense. This alienation would not be aimed toward others, but toward the researcher herself, highlighting her role as outsider-performer. Above all, she must never rely uncritically upon a naturalized (personal, authentic, autobiographical, affective, emotive) position in the research situation. ("Miss Translation" 219)

Riley came to understand “performative ethnography” through a combination of written theory and performance art (see “Miss-Translation goes to Cuba”). In what follows, I engage in the practice of performative ethnography by explicating the physical experience of the performance.⁶

I, with the help of four assistants, start the projections and sound one at a time, as quickly as possible. As this is happening, two of my other assistants discuss with the audience what the requirements of the performance are and that they are encouraged to sit, stand, walk around or lie down in the space—whatever resonates with them. My heart is beating quickly as blood pulsates violently through my veins, hearing the shuffle of footsteps coming into the performance. I am installed behind the muslin curtain, sitting on the ground with my eyes downcast. Every five minutes I change my position. I can feel people filling the performance space and see the shadows spilling over the muslin curtain. I no longer feel in this space. I let the reverberations of the subwoofer course through my body and into my bone marrow. I have entered into performance meditation.

In this altered temporal zone, I have no notion of speed or slowness, just hearts, feet, and energy circulating the room. When the energy reaches an intermediate level of settling in, I turn the light on behind the muslin, signaling my helpers to turn off the appropriate projections and sounds. I turn the sound next to the muslin to the appropriate volume. I pull myself to my feet and step out from behind the scrim. I feel people shirk back, not expecting my first move. Some had not realized I was there the entire time. I move to the corner where my rope is—my first task. I start by wrapping it around my neck and feel my throat seize; I feel intense sensations of pleasure and pain as the rope splinters enter my neck. I wrap the rope down my body, moving through the space, no longer aware of who has to move as I maneuver through the bodies. There is no need to create expression on my face: my face shows how the rope makes my body feel. I read the other side and pull the rope tighter, strangling my abdomen. I attempt to bite the rope off, one piece at a time, eating and swallowing the splinters that break off. Once my jaw and tongue have become sore, I reach for the cutters and start to chop away at the rope. It takes the strength of my entire body to break the fibers apart. After cutting the rope into roughly six small pieces with one large piece left, I start to create a border space on the floor. I feel nostalgic about the pain and pleasure of this rope and gently caress it as I leave each piece on the floor weaving throughout the audience.

I stand up and walk towards the other corner, picking the teddy bear up and placing the blood pills in my mouth. I feel like a girl again with the teddy bear in my arms and I bite down on the pills with the warm liquid gushing into my mouth. I push the bittersweet liquid out with my tongue and walk behind the muslin with the bear cradled tightly in my arms. I slip the bear up under my shirt and stand

6 The only distinction to be made here from oral history in the naming of performative ethnography is the event of post-performance reflexion as-lived. This is not to take reflexivity nor self-reflexivity away from oral history, quite the opposite. Rather, it is to name a method of thinking through performance work as part of this PAR method.

sideways, using the shadow as a reflection. The bear slips between my fingers and onto the floor. Then I walk towards the Styrofoam® and pick it up. I toss it on the floor and throw my body over it, contorting and holding positions that are both uncomfortable and pleasurable, while I let more red liquid spill out of my mouth and down onto my shirt. Swallowing has become difficult at this point. I take my time, returning to caress the floor and letting the roller work on my body as I move through the space. Once my limbs feel exhausted, I stand up, leaving a trail of blood where I move.

I then go behind the muslin again and wash the pills out of my mouth and into the water. I feel the water trickle down my throat and feel relieved at the cool opening of my esophagus. I then proceed to run water over my face, once more using the shadow as a mirror. I run the silky wetness through my hair and let it drip down my back. I then remove my shirt and place it on the floor, followed by my pants. I cup the water in my hands and let it run down my arms and push trails of water down my legs. I feel my body temperature lowering and my heart rhythm sync with the tonality of the sounds in the space. I release the plug in the flowerpot and let the water bleed everywhere. I feel my insides clench and release with the outpouring of the water and exhale through every pore of my body. I then slowly, physically spent, move to the front of the muslin and play in the water, letting my fingertips graze its coolness and then make my way to the sandbox.

When I reach the sandbox, I lower myself into it, until I am sitting. I glance up at the fetus images every now and again, remembering child and sacrifice. I reach over and pick up the needles one at a time. They are sharp like cement as they penetrate the meridians of my stomach, uterus, and upper thighs. The longer I work at the insertions, the number I become. At this point, I am no longer aware of where my body is. My ears hear tears, slowly becoming louder as they escape out of some of the throats in the room. I feel the space become smaller as bodies come closer to mine. I feel energies penetrating my spirit as I meditate on the task and what it means to colonize-decolonize my body in this way.

When all of the needles are inserted, I take one last look up at the video of the fetus and reach behind me to pull the Virgin Mary veil over my head. Every move is unbearably painful as the needles make their way around my skin insertions. I wrap the veil over my head and pull myself to standing without clenching my stomach so that the needles do not move too much. Standing with the flags protruding from my body, I feel shooting pain down my legs and into my uterus. At this point, I am unaware of sound. I make eye contact with a few of the witnesses and slowly walk away from the sandbox. Before my last retreat behind the muslin curtain, I take one final glance back to the audience. I feel intense physical and emotional sensations, knowing that I will never be the same again.

I recognize and acknowledge not only the deep physical connection to the words of my *comadres* and their resonance in the conduit/vessel of my body, but also the intensified embodied transfer from one artist to another in my work with Riley. *This* moment of embodied transfer will forever be marked indelibly in my psyche. *This* is the legacy of performance art with a unique historical trajectory

happening in flesh. *All* art is created in community and in dialogue. I have entered into a sort of *comadre*-hood in two distinct instances: with the artist Riley and with my *comadre*-interviewees. Through sharing embodied knowledge, we are participants in community built together, inextricably linked through embodied memory and emotion. This is one example of the work of PAR. Our multiple stakes in this work overlap in the performance event itself through our presence in the *nepantla* space together. I know that without having been taught the techniques that allowed this performance space to be created, *Embodied Borderlands* would not have existed. I also acknowledge that without the words of my *comadres*, this work would have no reason to exist. All of a sudden, as the lights turn back on, I recognize the insignificance of my body as anything other than a conduit towards a shared experience.

Responses to Oral History as PAR and Concluding Thoughts

Responses to the performance were deeply personal and individual—often triggering recollections and memories of deeply specific events in the lives of audience members. The common thread was an expression of deep disorientation and vertigo. In this sense, the performance achieved its ultimate ends: that everyone involved would come out different, somehow, after having entered into the performance *fronterizo* zone. Also, they would never look at “undocumented” immigration the same way again, whichever side of the spectrum they had been on, in favor or against migration prior to experiencing the work. What spoke most to the intentions of the PAR project was the response of the interviewee Ángela, who attended the second night, saying, “I was nervous because I thought I was coming to see theatre. I was really relieved to see that it was not. What really struck me were the images of the fetus on the ceiling. Tonight, I got to relive my experience.” In another conversation, Ángela thanked me, saying that she felt her story had been honored through the performance. This response validates the imperative of this work to use performance art as embodied oral history. None of these responses can be planned; at best, they can only be hoped for.

Though performance art risks throwing off the boundaries of what is seen as traditional and even acceptable, there is a way to create an ethical space for reciprocity, where the interviewees’ (*comadres*’) words are honored through embodiment and where witnesses are called to respond. The artist’s body and mind become conduits and channels. Everyone is held response-able. It is at this point in the PAR project where dialogic performance is performed. The talk-back is the part of the performance project where dialogic performance occurs. This space, held with others, provides an opportunity for expanding upon what is typically viewed as “oral history performance,” or how oral history performance has been historically understood. Pollock says, “Oral history performance as a form of witnessing is one way of practicing the interdependence of human selves and of seeing through the past into an as-yet unspoken (must less written) future” (“Introduction” 5). Pollock frames oral history performance as an entry point for others who should engage in the oral history process. Responding to Pollock’s

call, oral history turned into performance art is a memorable act of witnessing. What happens in the witnessing of oral history performance is an acknowledged interdependence where the initial story remains important, but becomes much more than those one or two stories.

Histories are not ever “owned” by one individual, as every story is bound up in the historicity of the story’s occurrence, of the tellers and listeners, and of the embodied remembering, among other factors that greatly shape telling and re-telling. One of Oliver’s formulations is that history cannot be held privately. Oliver writes,

No one person “owns” a story. Any one story is embedded in layers of remembering and storying. Remembering is necessarily a public act whose politics are bound up with the refusal to be isolated, insulated, inoculated against both complicity with and contest over claims to ownership. (Oliver quoted in Pollock, “Introduction” 5)

PAR as performed in *Embodied Borderlands* creates a bracketed performance *fronterizo* space where new realities are imagined in a dialogical performance setting.⁷ As witnesses begin to process what it was like to exist for the hour in this *frontera*, they begin to understand what it is to be in any social-cultural-historical space that causes the human body to feel this way. The stories of “undocumented” *comadres* are internalized in all of our bodies and owned by each and every one of us—remnants to be taken with us forever resonating (*sintonizando*) in hearts, souls, and minds. Performance art for social justice is not about changing the world, but it is about changing communities that we live in by finding *other ways of walking*. My work with Catherine Walsh, in particular, has taught me that the creation of other paths and other ways of being in the world is another option to shift the paradigm and often-utopic goal of “changing the world.” Rather, we should seek after the construction of *otros caminos* and other ways of moving in the world, from the bottom, up.

Another way of seeing oral history through embodiment and performance response is a method I have continued to pursue as an *other way of being with*.⁸ “Why this insistence on the body? Because it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied” (Taylor 86). As I continue to grow as a solo artist and collective member of *La Pocha Nostra*, as a scholar, as a social actor, and as a pedagogue, my aesthetic and physical choices become more refined and take greater risks. As I continue to pursue oral history work as a way of resituating

7 It is important to note that looking at two oral histories is a *very modest* example of what such a project can offer. It is also important to not make sweeping generalizations, but only point to the possibilities within oral history work. Pollock calls these “modest but hard-won intimacies” (Pollock, “Performing Writing” 88).

8 You can see an example of my continued performance work here: <https://vimeo.com/121577529>.

historical narratives of erasure, I never speak for others, but rather, let their words move in and through me. As an artist-theorist, I continue to insist on the process of reflection that comes from putting body, mind, and soul into these processes and daring to ask others and ourselves to bear witness. These small memory-making acts are the ways in which we document our lives. They are our greatest modes of resistance.

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