

Body and Space as Sites of Transfer: Violeta Luna's *Requiem for a Lost Land*

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...There they come / the dead, so lonely, so silent, so ours, / set like a precious stone under the huge sky of the Anáhuac, / they walk, / they crawl, / with their cup of horror held between their hands, / with their hair-raising tenderness.

María Rivera, "Los muertos"¹

Requiem For a Lost Land / *Réquiem para una tierra perdida*, a performance intervention by Mexican artist Violeta Luna, is a ritualized memorial for the victims of the "War on Drugs" implemented by the administration of Felipe Calderón in Mexico. As in the Requiem Mass, the performance consists of a series of actions underscored by a sound composition by long-time collaborator, David Molina. Part painful act of mourning, part forensic pathology, *Requiem* attempts to crack open the deadly discourse of "national security" broadcast by the mouthpieces of power. Inside its rotten entrails, we find the dismembered remains of victims—in the performance their mangled corpses are heard of, though never seen—with which Luna delicately composes, on her own body, the larger picture of a fragmented state.

The site and its transformation are central to the experience of *Requiem*. As the sound score begins, Luna enters, setting the stage by drawing a long line with white powder. The performance can take place anywhere but in an actual theatre: this is an intervention whose situational randomness runs parallel to the staging of the killings in Mexico. The line of cocaine, eventually blurred by the elements or her actions, creates a porous border, and ordering principle, a "here and there," rich with significance and allusions both to the transnational reality of the narco-economy and the oppositional binaries favored by power. The "other side" begins to take the shape of a crime scene, as Luna places white bottles as if they were corpses as well as the ubiquitous "police tags" on the floor, marked with printed numbers that point to a death toll counting in the tens of thousands. The performer clearly states her relationship to the space by staying inside this crime scene—the side of the white line where the violence will be re-presented so that meaning and relationships could be restored.

The score is composed by two speeches, sometimes consecutive, sometimes simultaneous, put into meaningful conversation by Luna's actions. On one channel, we hear the voice of President Calderón speaking in English in front of the American congress as part of his visit to mark the Bicentennial of his country's independence. As the Mexican president explains the *raison d'état* informing his war against the drug cartels and highlights the need for closer American cooperation and partnership, we begin to hear on the other channel the voices of the

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thousands who joined in the march for peace organized by Mexican writer Javier Sicilia; they chant: "¡ni un muerto más, no más sangre!" (not one more death, no more blood!).² Emerging from these, the voice of Mexican poet María Rivera becomes clear, as she recites her poem "Los Muertos" (The Dead), a moving call to make specific the individual stories obscured by the statistical abstraction represented by the estimated fifty thousand dead.

In her insightful essay on the performative dimension to the horrifying staging of violence in Mexico, Ileana Diéguez calls attention to the excesses that characterize it. She refers to the violence as a "hyperbolization of horror," likening it to a kind of neo-baroque grammar in which body parts are used to write the urban and rural landscape.³ In his analysis of the baroque in society, José Antonio Maravall writes of its conflictive nature, its obsession with the human cadaver as a theme, and its preoccupation with modification and security. Quoting playwright Gabriel de Bocángel, he writes: "while everything becomes modified the threatening incertitude of the end was extended or, rather, became an extension of the no less disquieting insecurity of things in daily experience, precisely because the baroque human being [...] was concerned with the theme of security."⁴ Excesses become the affirmation of power precisely when those in power operate in a state of constant institutional insecurity.

In 2006, Felipe Calderón assumed the presidency in an uncertain political climate, under a dark cloud of controversy following an election process riddled with accusations of fraud; his inauguration recalled the similarly irregular rise of George W. Bush, as did his ensuing strategies to remain in office. After taking his oath, Calderón set out to legitimize his power through the construction of a "hard on crime" image typical of the political right. However, in the absence of an all-out "war on terror," he further aligned his administration with that of his NAFTA associate through his very own war of choice, taking on the drug cartels. The objective was to craft a Mexican version of the American security state; but the Mexican experiment featured critical differences. Specifically, Calderón embarked on a massive militarization of his own country, which resulted in an exponentially larger number of deaths; these were killings of perverse methods and with great attention to detail.⁵ The re-organization of body parts and corpses with the intent of sending a terrifying message to one's rivals is imbued with an instructional dimension, as the perpetrators aim to "teach a lesson."⁶ The brutal nature of this violence, unimaginable to Mexicans as recently as five years ago, as Diéguez points out, has become the new "normal."

If violence, as Salomón Lerner-Febrés, president of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, puts it, "has a thousand faces and all of them relate to the breaking of the bonds that give us both humanity and meaning,"⁷ *Requiem* takes on the difficult task of restoring and re-signifying these bonds within the larger story, a task facilitated by the Mexican Bicentennial (of Independence) and Centennial (of the Revolution) celebrations taking place in 2010. Luna takes on the aforementioned baroque complexity with an antidotal disarming simplicity, setting out to restore the broken bonds by putting us in meaningful relationship both with each other and the violence itself. The focus on Calderón's discourse in antiphonal relationship with the

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humanizing text by Rivera (delivered in her own voice), points to the State as the main culprit, both in starting this "war" and in legitimizing its pathological normalcy. This has also been the case with the State's apparent complicity in the killings that have plagued Ciudad Juarez, a sort of experimental lab for what was to come for Mexico as a whole.

As the performance progresses, Luna puts on a white dress. In a gesture that embodies not only a country torn by self-inflicted violence, but also the torn sense of self of the populace, she washes her hands and arms with white paint—it is both a Pontius Pilate moment and a kind of midwife's ritual, cleansing as she is about to cradle the images of the dead. As she bows down, her forehead touching the ground, she carefully places dozens of photographs of her *paisanos* (countryman) in her hair. The common folk represented by the black and white identification photographs, which have become iconic of the disappeared, are then covered in the blood, green paint and soil kept inside the white bottles, which bear the seal of the Mexican state. The effect of the blood streaming over her hair covered with photographs is stunning: it transforms the setting from a scene of crimes past into a site of crimes present. As Luna rises and wrings her hair with the white dress, the photographs fall on the ground. The dress follows. This is a single person, and yet the Motherland itself is bleeding. Her sons are intent on killing one another with great cruelty and brutality; she is birthing death. Following this action, Luna exits.

After witnessing the performance in three different countries, I've noticed that at the end, the audience behaves in similar ways. They stand in silence for what seems a long while, looking at what was left behind and then walk quietly towards the blood-soaked earth that cradles the soiled dress and the photographs. The resulting impromptu installation is drenched in *aftermath-ness*.

The performance has ritualized the space, transforming it into a multi-layered site of transfer: the scene of a crime, an altar for the victims, and a memorial to hold us in relationship with an ongoing unnecessary slaughter from where there is no return to what ever was, even in a nation with an imaginary where violence is no stranger.

Roberto Gutiérrez Varea began his career in theater in his native city of Córdoba, Argentina. In the U.S., he has directed numerous productions and workshops associated with new play development, particularly with Latin@ and Chican@ artists. Roberto is the founding artistic director of Soapstone Theatre Company, a collective of male ex-offenders and female survivors of violent crime, El Teatro Jornalero!, a performance company that brings the voice of Latin American immigrant workers to the stage, and the San Francisco performance collective Secos & Mojados, where he collaborates with Violeta Luna and David Molina, among others. He is also the director of the Center for Latino Studies in the Americas (CELASA) at the University of San Francisco. Roberto is Associate Editor of *Peace Review* (Routledge, U.S.) as well as a guest editor of *e-misférica* (NYU, U.S.) and *Contemporary Theater Review* (Routledge, U.K.). His co-authored and

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co-edited, two-volume anthology *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict* was just published by New Village Press.

Notes

¹ Fragment from María Rivera's poem "Los Muertos" (The Dead): "...Allá vienen los muertos tan solitos, tan mudos, tan nuestros, engarzados bajo el cielo enorme del Anáhuac, caminan, se arrastran, con su cuenco de horror entre las manos, su espeluznante ternura..." (translated by RGV).

² The recording was done during the march that took place in Mexico City on the 16th of April of 2011.

³ Diéguez, Ileana. 2011. "Gramáticas neobarrocas: Performance y Teatralidades. Primera parte." *Karpa* 4.1-4.2

<http://www.calstatela.edu/misc/karpa//Karpa4.1/Site%20Folder/ileana.html>.

⁴ Maravall, José Antonio. 1986. *Culture of the Baroque: Analysis of a Historical Structure*. Trans. by Terry Cochran. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

⁵ There are deep connections between the U.S. and Mexico that contribute greatly to the catastrophic human cost. Besides the drug-related supply-demand chain between both countries, the flow of arms into Mexico and money laundering activities (both conducted by the DEA itself) have been abundantly documented. The "Merida Initiative," drafted by the U.S. with Mexican and Central American counterparts, draws on the "Plan Colombia" implemented in the land of that other staunch ally of the U.S. on the continent, which also happens to be the second largest Latin American country deeply affected by never-ending violence.

⁶ There is a school at the heart of these lessons. The most telling connection is that of the training provided by the U.S. to its allies in the contemporary incarnation of its "School of the Americas" at Fort Benning, Georgia. The Zetas cartel, responsible for the escalation of violence and the brutality of the killings, is made up of deserter personnel from elite Mexican Army commandos trained in Georgia. There are also documented connections between them and the Kaibilies, elite commandos of Guatemala. See the *New York Times* article by Ginger Thompson, "Mexico Fears Its Drug Traffickers Get Help From Guatemalans;" the *New York Times*, September 30, 2005 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/30/international/americas/30mexico.html>).

⁷ Cohen, Cynthia, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea and Polly Walker (eds). 2011. Foreword. In *Acting Together: Performance and the Creative Transformation of Conflict*. Volume 2. Oakland: New Village Press.