Migrant Bodies, Flowing Rituals: The Performance Art of Violeta Luna

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Violeta Luna is a Mexican theater and performance artist based in San Francisco, California, whose work explores ways of poeticizing, reacting to, and creating awareness of social violence through her body and by engaging audiences as part of her performance pieces. Luna's art has always dealt with contemporary issues marked by urgency. Among the most salient topics she treats are femicide, undocumented immigration, genetically modified crops (e.g. *NK 603: Action for Performer and e-Maíz*, 2009), neocolonialism (*Mapa Corpo*, created with La Pocha Nostra on the Iraq War, 2008), and sex trafficking (*Corpos: migraciones en la oscuridad/Corpos: Migrating in the Dark*, in collaboration with Dos Lunas Teatro and Nomad Teatro, 2014). The ethnic and cultural stereotyping of migrants in the United States is also a prevalent topic, as well as violence in contemporary Mexico, a country whose domestic and foreign policies are deeply intertwined with those of the United States.

In this article I focus on one of Luna's pieces on undocumented migration to the US (*Body Parted/Cuerpo Partido* 2008), as well as two works dealing with Mexico's current state of emergency: *Réquiem por una tierra perdida/ Requiem for a Lost Land* (2010-2014) and *Vírgenes y Diosas/Virgins and Goddesses* (2014-2015). In order to explore these works and what they can tell us about our present, I rely mainly on contemporary expansions of the concept of biopolitics first advanced by Michel Foucault and later defined by Achilles Mmembe as the "domain of life over which power has taken control" (161).[1]

As Foucault stated in the 70's, "the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research" (990). He attributed this concept to the increasing weaknesses and instabilities in totalitarian theories—such as Marxism and Psychoanalysis—in the fifteen years previous to his reflection,

and he may have been thinking mostly of scholars and intellectuals in Western countries at that time. However, his observation is even more palpable in the case of countries with a different cultural history. Regarding forms of criticism that question totalitarian theories pertaining to art and politics in Latin America, specifically to the dictatorship in Argentina in the late 70s and early 80s, cultural historian Ana Longoni disputes the productivity of criticism that automatically assigns the adjective "political" to a certain kind of art, or that views Latin American art as subordinate to politics, a mere ornament for the goals of political activism, which she relates to the epistemologies prevalent in Western art history (Longoni). Rather, she calls for exploring the *in-between* of art and politics, and how it is the urgency of specific historical, political, and social crises that triggers the need for creative political practices. In fact, when state terror dominates life, and/or when people are stripped of civil rights, creativity is often one of the few resources left to express what has been silenced. This is a main trait of Violeta Luna's work to be explored below.

Context is key for discussing the political dimension of performance art, so I will begin with a brief introduction to Violeta Luna's artwork. Her artistic education took place at the Autonomous National University of Mexico (UNAM), which provided her with extensive training in acting. During that time, her penchant for doing theater in rural communities in Mexico (e.g. *Commedia de'll arte*) was early evidence of her interest in less constrained theatrical manifestations. Another significant influence was a performance art workshop offered by La Pocha Nostra in Mexico City, which allowed her to explore interacting with audiences in less formalized spaces.[2] She was particularly intrigued by La Pocha's practice of body intervention. This usually takes the form of quasi-torture devices (ropes, needles, tattoos related to social or racial stigma), along with another practice common in 20th-century body art: the leaving of the performer's body at the mercy of the audience's wishes. The question of power over the other's body is conspicuous in such pieces.

This aspect is related to biopolitics insofar as La Pocha aims to deconstruct hegemonic imaginaries—and power dynamics—behind the notion of the "true" America and its "Others," and thus the interactions between performers or between performers and audiences are meant to serve as metaphors for the social body. The group's pieces usually aim to clash with existing imaginaries and stereotypes related mostly to Mexican culture, but also with American images and conceptions of immigrants from other countries and minorities regarded as the Other in the US. In the end, Luna's collaboration with La

Pocha Nostra, which began with the "trans-border" pieces she developed with them in Mexico, would bring her to the US, and continues even today. Once in San Francisco, Violeta Luna also began working with an interdisciplinary performance collective called Secos y Mojados (The Dry and the Wet, a clear reference to the river or desert that undocumented migrants must cross to get to the US). This collective was composed of artists from El Salvador, Greece, Argentina, and Mexico, including visual artist Victor Cartagena, dramaturg Antigone Trimmis, musician David Molina, and theater director Roberto Gutiérrez Varea. Luna was the sole performer among its members.

Luna collaborated with Secos y Mojados on a three-part performance piece called *Border Trip(tych)*, which deals with the experiences of undocumented migrants and the marks these experiences leave on their body and memory. This was a series of non-linear performance pieces that recreate the experience of an unspecified female persona who leaves everything behind (family, land, personal history). Built through highly layered visual and sound imagery, it includes elements taken from actual Central American migrant stories, the media, and other sources. While La Pocha's work mainly focuses on intentionally grotesque and hybrid aesthetics, Secos y Mojados focuses on the marks left on the migrant's body and memory through more moderate aesthetic choices. While working with this collective, Luna developed an alternative second part of the triptych in collaboration with María Reyna Sánchez, a seamstress and former janitor she met while working with La Colectiva, a migrant women's theater collective in San Francisco. In this alternative piece, titled *Body Parted/ Cuerpo partido* (2008), Roberto Gutiérrez Varea collaborated in the action dramaturgy and David Molina composed the music.

Cuerpo partido/ A Body Parted at Counterpulse (San Francisco, 2008). Photo: Samuel Teer.

Violeta Luna conceived *Body Parted* as a space for creating a counter-discourse to the usual representations of the female migrant's body either as a replaceable "working body," that is, a subaltern incapable of any contribution to society beyond bare work-force, or an unfortunate victim of capitalist society with no agency. Clearly, the first aspect relates to biopower as "the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production," as articulated by Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (45). According to Luna, "Much of the immigrant's work is gendered. Some bodies are seen as fit for hard labor, construction, heavy lifting and others, as most "maquiladora" work requires feminine bodies, which are more 'delicate.' The slender fingers of women are preferred to assemble small pieces in electronics, and also delicate stitching. These jobs also hire children, for the same reasons" ("A Body Parted"). Not surprisingly, the sewing machine was the focus of this piece. On one side of the space, María Reyna Sánchez is sitting at the machine, while Luna enters blindfolded, her torso naked, holding a suitcase on her head in an image fraught with fragility. The uncertainty inherent in crossing a territory where you are not welcome, as expressed by the performer's hesitant movement in the piece, echoes what Rivera-Servera and Young state in their introduction to *Performance in the Borderlands*: "The border exists inasmuch as it is (or has been) imagined as a construct with the capacity to prevent movement. It can be most effectively conceived as a site of tension between an impulse for stasis and a desire for a controlled movement that polices the flow of the bodies and commodities that continuously push against it" (2).

The fragility of the crossing woman is accentuated by her slowly placing her head on the sewing table, to be caressed by Sánchez. It is almost as if Luna as performer were the reflection of the other performer's ghosts and dreams. Said otherwise, the present of this woman (Sánchez) and her past trials (Luna) come together in the performance: "The border alters the ways that bodies carry, and indeed, perform themselves not only in the moment of encounter, but also for years (and even generations) afterwards" (Rivera-Servera and Young 2). For this piece they worked with video-artist Mickey Tachibana to design a background video that consisted of their passports transformed into diaries, on which personal objects are carefully placed little by little. Regarding the creative process, Luna states: "I do have it clear that any aesthetic choice that has to do with Reyna directly or indirectly needs to be studied in detail and consulted with her," which emphasizes the idea of the collaborative nature of this piece ("A Body Parted"). The video also included sewing patterns that evolved into imaginary maps, therefore allud-

ing to the idea of a hopeful future that may or may not be. The performance involved a large piece of white clothing that was gradually transformed into an ephemeral "house" that the audience itself wound up sustaining aloft. In Luna's performances she remains silent, while the audience is always confronted with choices. They may choose to participate or not and these decisions become part of the piece. I consider that this audience involvement fits nicely with Rivera-Servera and Young's conception of performance "as an optic that prioritizes the multi-sensorial experience of embodiment" and that as such, it "is particularly attuned to the ways in which border spatialities and temporalities are formed in/as movement" (3).

Giorgio Agamben's insightful text titled *Biopolitics and the Rights of Men* may also shed light on the in-between situation of the migrant that is the focus of this piece. It may be said that the audience is posed to confront and interact with "the lack of rights" deployed mainly through the performer's body, in this case Luna. Citizenship, which spectators from Euro-American cultures tend to assume as a given, is underscored as a fiction. In sum, this artwork aims not only to manifest "bare life" in Agamben's terms through visual, sensorial, and kinetic modes, but also to defy "bare life," albeit in the non-triumphalist present of the performance.[3]

I was recently struck by the relevance of Rustom Bharucha's thoughts on identity and coexistence to these pieces. He writes of "the inadvertent possibilities of drawing an ethics of the self from the chimeras of colliding identities. Through these moments of recognition, mere glimmers of coexisting with the Other in others and in ourselves, we can learn to imagine a future [...] with the living uncertainties of the present moment" (103). Bharucha's sobering emphasis on the "uncertainties of the present" is poignantly illustrated in *Body Parted* through the difficulties of sewing, the fragility of the performer walking while blinded (Luna), and the ephemeral nature of the house built toward the end. Luna doesn't promote art as salvation, but as a space to allow a glimpse of coexistence vis-à-vis a present steeped in social violence. Thus, her art suggests the urgent need to recognize those migrants, invisible to most in US society except as a workforce, and to coexist with them in a more inclusive way.

While *Body Parted* deals with Latin American women's experience as undocumented migrants to the US, *Requiem for a Lost Land*, focuses on social violence that affects larger collective bodies, in this case Mexico's current drug-related violence. In November 2012, Mexico's attorney general compiled a list showing that more than 25,000 adults and children had gone missing in

the last six years. According to *The Washington Post*, the list was provided "by government bureaucrats frustrated by what they describe as a lack of official transparency and the failure of government agencies to investigate the cases" (Booth). In addition, homicides were estimated at 70,000 over the same time period, though NGOs and civil society organizations claim the number is much larger (see "Hubo abusos en la guerra contra el narco"). The militarization of Mexico and the war on drug cartels began under President Felipe Calderón's administration in December 2006 and continued throughout the presidency of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-18). The claim is often made that the vast majority of victims have been involved somehow in criminal organizations, but this claim does not hold up. What is true is that drug dealers, in alliance with corrupt state authorities, are in control of most of the country's territory. This order of things is related to biopolitics, but not in terms of regulating life through a series of state technologies. Rather, as explained by Achilles Mbembe in *Necropolitics* to describe the situation of several African countries, it is about using dead or injured bodies to exert power. In Mexico, people are often brutally killed or disappeared in order to maintain control and to scare the population in general and/or any rival official or unofficial criminal organization. It is a mechanism used to protect the social, financial, and political control of criminal organizations in collusion with the government and business elites at various levels. Therefore, those in power maintain that power by regulating the physicality of dead bodies and exposing them with specific controlling goals. In addition, official discourse works according to a double standard: a war that cannot be won is implemented through the militarization of the country, while impunity reigns and any effective legal mechanisms to address it are left aside. Not surprisingly, many of the military interventions against Mexican cartels have followed the model implemented by the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan (Luna, "Réquiem para una tierra perdida/ Requiem for a Lost Land: Intervención performativa").

Requiem for a Lost Land was conceived in July 2011, while Luna was a resident artist in Lima, Perú, at El Galpón Art Research Center. The previous year had marked the bicentenary of Mexico's independence from Spain, as well as the 100th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution (the first revolution of the 20th century in the western hemisphere). The Mexican government promoted numerous cultural events, television series on national heroes, and public displays such as military parades to commemorate the event. However, from the perspective of Luna and many other Mexicans, there was little to celebrate. In the report on her creative residency in Perú—a country still

coping with the trying legacy of a deadly internal conflict—Luna questions the portrayal in the Mexican media of dead bodies as either gruesome images or mere data stripped of any meaningful context. One must remember that besides the numerous kidnappings, murders, and mass graves found in the country in recent years, drug cartels have begun to display dismembered and mutilated bodies in public spaces—e.g. alongside roads or hanging from bridges— as warnings to anyone interfering with their activities. Regarding the proliferation of these images on television, the web, cable TV, and so on, we may ask, as does Rustom Bharucha: "Along with the usual charge of the 'deadening impact' of images, can one totally deny the voyeuristic pleasure derived in the compulsive act of 'seeing' terror ad nauseam?" (17). The obvious answer is "no"; this is a situation that is readily exploited by the media. According to Luna in "Réquiem para una tierra perdida/ Requiem for a Lost Land: Intervención performativa," the profusion of decontextualized images and data on casualties "leaves aside the victims' personal histories, and the social dimension we could gather from them," as well as any responsibility by the authorities. Tragically (and even ironically), this proliferation of images goes hand-in-hand with the fact that most journalists investigating drug-dealers' financial and political power in Mexico are summarily assassinated.[4]

While in Peru, Luna exchanged experiences and views with forensic anthropologists, artists, and activists, including Solomón Lerner Febres, president of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In contrast to the memorials and monuments that governments usually build, Luna conceived *Requiem* as a temporary altar, similar in nature to those small altars at the side of the road made for anonymous victims. As such, it could be performed in open spaces as well as in closed venues. The textual dramaturgy of this piece is defined by the sound design of David Molina. It consists of juxtaposed fragments of both President Calderón's discourse before the US Congress on the occasion of Mexico's bicentennial celebration and María Rivera's poem "Los muertos." The countering of official words with poems, protest chants, and images underscores the huge gap between the government's discourse and the materiality of life in a country with such a high index of civilian deaths.

Another key element in the sound design for this performance is a demonstration that took place on 5 May 2011, less than a year after the 2010 celebrations. On that day, renowned poet Javier Sicilia led the March for Peace with Justice and Dignity into Mexico City from the city of Cuernavaca, where hit men belonging to a criminal organization had killed his son and others, allegedly for no other reason than being with young women the criminals liked.

Poet María Rivera read the aforementioned poem as a responsorial chant. This poetry piece, written for the occasion, deals with the sheer number of ordinary people whose violent deaths are quickly forgotten.[5] Other sounds include the voices of protestors participating in Sicilia's March for Peace, as well as explosions that evoke war.

During the performance, the sound comes from the body of the performer, who enters the space clad in a sober black outfit and carrying a paper bag with a logo that reads "Mexico 2010." The bag contains several plastic bottles, some branded with the Mexican seal, others left unmarked, as well as other objects such as a white dress and a metal bowl. The performer marks the space with the bottles and divides the area into two zones with a white powder that clearly alludes to drugs. She then empties a bottle containing green paint (a reference to the Mexican flag and/or US dollars) on the floor. After putting on the white dress (an allusion to funeral rites) and "washing" her hands and arms in white paint, the focus of the action switches to her head. Her violent gestures while combing herself bring to mind torture. Then she kneels, her head resting on the floor. Her long, splayed black hair becomes the stage, where she carefully and delicately proceeds to place various small black-and-white pictures of victims of violence.[6] She then takes two bottles of blood and empties them on the pictures and her hair, creating a scenario that evokes the pictures of decapitated people so common in Mexican media. The action concludes when the performer pulls her head back and moves to the center of the space, leaving bloody tracks. She takes off the stained white dress, places it in the center of the space, and empties onto it a last bottle containing earth. She then exits, leaving behind a temporary altar and a strong feeling of absence. When the piece was presented in Mexico City at the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM) in 2011, it took place in a bare room with no decoration or even chairs; the audience sat on the floor. After the performer left the space, the expressions on the faces of spectators were pensive and moved, like those of people attending a mourning ritual.

Requiem for a Lost Land. UAM Cuajimalpa, Mexico City, February 28, 2011.
Photo: Juan Enrique González.

It must be underscored that the focus of *Requiem* is not the performer's body, but her actions. Still, her presence resonates intensely; women, particularly mothers, are usually the main symbols of mourning. In discussing the ephemeral alter left behind, Roberto Gutiérrez Varea states, "[a]fter 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 aura left behind moves the audience to the visceral realization of the absence of so many fellow beings, thereby becoming as important as the performance itself. Individuals are powerfully evoked so that their absence is powerfully felt. It is in this sense that, in Luna's performances, the body is the social body.

In addition to Mexico, this piece has been performed in Colombia, Brazil, Serbia, Slovenia, and the US (San Francisco). While I focus here on the performance that took place at a Mexico City university in 2011, it is significant that the contemporary history of several of these countries has also been marked by the atrocities resulting from deadly internal conflicts in which government forces have been complicit in human rights abuses. Therefore, in spite of any cultural or historical differences, grief over a massive number of victims of violent deaths is a shared experience to which the title *Requiem* makes reference. Luna describes her piece as an attempt "to dissect, with a forensic knife, the narrative of death that power keeps promoting under the mask of 'protecting citizens'" ("Réquiem para una tierra perdida/ Requiem for a Lost Land: Intervención performativa"). In other words, Luna aims to unsettle the way in which these bodies are being mediatized and, as Mbembe puts it, "inscribed in the order of power" (161).

In his essay "Necropolitics"—a term that he prefers over "biopolitics" to define our contemporary world—Mbembe engages the question of developing a reading of politics, sovereignty, and the subject "different from the one we inherited from the philosophical discourse of modernity" (163). He then asks about the possibility of conceiving the subject not as based on reason, but starting from other foundational categories "that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death" (163). While I will not engage with Mbembe's complex questioning of Hegel's constitution of the subject vis-à-vis death, I will point to the fact that certain types of performance art—such as Luna's *Requiem*—may be a way to reconsider what being human means by dealing with such materiality and thereby to find humanity beyond the modern ratio-

nality that supposedly defines us as modern subjects, even if what surrounds us, both in the North and South, is utter brutality.

While discussing performance art that aims to achieve wider political and cultural significance like Luna's, one must consider it against the background of the contemporary art circuit in which, according to Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, often "the works suffer the fatalism of art's fetishization: they tend to be legitimized in restricted, traditional auratic spaces" (24). This is true, but one must also remember that not all museums or art spaces worldwide are the same (e.g. a major art museum in the US is not the same as a peripheral state-sponsored art venue in Latin America). Art's fetishization varies greatly between highly institutionalized venues and alternative or even peripheral art spaces. It also depends on how art venues interact with their surrounding communities. In short, one must not summarily dismiss political art interventions that take place in "auratic" spaces as elitist; specific contexts must first be examined. *Requiem* has been performed in museums, in front of public buildings, and at public universities, among other venues. *Body Parted* took place in Counterpulse, an experimental performance space in San Francisco that appeals mostly to an avant-garde and progressive audience. Thus, apparently, its political outreach was limited to an "auratic" space. However, I contend that the work itself may have allowed this type of audience to see undocumented migration from a visceral and thought-provoking perspective, as compared to mere data, media accounts, or the realistic renditions most common in cultural circuits.

In 2011, Luna premiered *Requiem II* outside the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco as part of a series of events commemorating the International Day for the Elimination of Violence. The piece was intended as a fleeting memorial to the many women who have been abused and assassinated in Mexico. For Luna, physical violence against women is intertwined with financial violence (women who work up to twelve hours a day in factories or menial jobs and barely make enough money to survive). In addition to living in a patriarchal society, their low social status makes them even more vulnerable to the abuses of organized crime and state corruption.

Luna was invited to perform the second version of *Requiem* in Oaxaca, Mexico, in a non-traditional art space named El Balcón, which was founded by theater artist Saúl López Velarde. The project's name poetically evokes a link between the inside and the outside, between art and daily life. It is located in stall #6 of the city's main open-air market. Almost daily, at a specific time, there is a cultural event, which may be poetry, music, creative writing

Réquiem II. In memory of all murdered women. El Balcón. Central de Abastos de Oaxaca, March 6, 2015. Photo: El Balcón.

workshops, or performances, all open to anybody passing by the stall. As an example of the project's impact, it is significant that the women selling food products nearby have embraced the project and decided to provide food to participants.[7]

It is important to underscore that the performance in Oaxaca took place at the central market, a space where many working-class women make a living either cooking or selling food or other items. Furthermore, open-air markets in Latin America—particularly those like Oaxaca's *central de abastos*—are places where people from all over the city interact and coexist, a "natural" stage of sorts.[8] Announcements of the performance had been previously posted around the market.

In this version of *Requiem*, the silent performer, clad in simple black shirt and pants and holding the kind of grocery bag commonly used by Mexican women when going to the market, arrives at an open space amidst food stands. After staining her hands red inside the bag, and then drawing a white chalk circle, she finds a young woman among the audience members and through her gaze and gestures invites her to the center of it. The performer then takes off the girl's outer shirt and proceeds to slowly make her lay down still on the floor next to it, positioning her as a corpse. The performer then leaves red hand prints on the girl's stomach and moves outside the border of the white circle. She takes several red roses from the bag and begins taping their stems violently to the front of her own face, over her eyes, nose, and mouth. The performer then walks slowly towards the girl's body and carefully takes off the red petals, which fall all over the girl's body and all around the inside of the white circle, thus producing a beautiful image that evokes blood, womanhood, and mourning. The performer then moves out from the circle, takes the tape off her face, and positions herself as another spectator,

therefore allowing for a moment of reflection before getting the girl to stand up to conclude the performance. In her groundbreaking book *Escenarios liminales*, Ileana Diéguez asks:

> ¿Cómo medir y explicar la perturbación que nos causa el arte actual? ¿Cómo hablar de una estética de la violencia sin que evoque o se reduzca a la estetización fascista condenada por Benjamin? Las teorías y filosofías del arte no están para clarificar lo incomprensible ni para salvarnos de la perturbación, porque ninguna obra podría recortarse de su fondo ni desligarse de las circunstancias en que respira para entregarla a los laboratorios de la llamada ciencia humanística. (138)

Diéguez discusses how Latin American contemporary artists tackle the topic of daily, extreme violence in their countries. Luna's *Requiem* deals with a situation that is both ordinary and extreme; in Mexico, the volume of murdered and disappeared women has been on the rise since the early 90s. As a performer, Luna positions herself as both participant and observer in order to shed light on the processes of annihilation that are devastating communities throughout Mexico, yet either ignored or minimized in public discourse. In *Requiem II*, the violence inherent in taping the roses to her face, a sacrificial offering of sorts, aims to produce awareness in the audience. As such, an aesthetic act evolves into an ethical act, and therefore "los espacios de la ficción y la realidad están tejidos, [...] el arte quiere ser, ante todo, una acción por la vida" (Diéguez 166).

Violeta Luna and Rakini Devi in *The Madonnas and the Goddess*. Ex-Teresa Museum, Mexico City, April 4, 2014. Photo: Oliver Ludwing.

Through her ongoing involvement with La Pocha Nostra, Luna met Indian performer Rakini Devi, who currently lives in Australia. They share a deep concern about violence against women in their countries of origin and seek to explore the connections and dislocations in cultural traditions (their own and others') surrounding death, ritual, and the female body. Their desire to construct new identities across diverse cultural traditions may have come from the fact that both artists live in a country other than the one they were raised in, which perhaps helped them distance themselves with regard to the cultural and religious symbolism of their countries of birth. The artists discussed how in the ancient cultures of Mexico and India there are female deities with many faces. While they may incarnate rage and terror, they are also mother figures, protective of their devotees (i.e. Kali and Bhagavathi in India, or Coatlicue and Tlaltecuhtli in the Aztec pantheon). Such was the basis for the iconography of their work in progress entitled *Two Madonnas*, which was presented on 30 April 2014 as part of a visual arts exchange between Brazil and Mexico at the Ex-Teresa contemporary art space in Mexico City.[9] This performative intervention did not aim to recreate deities from an anthropological perspective, or to replicate ancient rituals. Rather, both performers embodied their own version of a female divinity through a visually striking combination of symbols, regalia, and carefully choreographed gestural imagery from various traditions such as Hinduism, Catholicism, and pre-Hispanic cultures. It was not possible for the audience to identify a particular one, but as reproductions of skulls were carefully manipulated, it became clear that a ritual revolving around death was taking place.[10] Echoing María Ruido's description of Ana Mendieta's work, one may say that theirs was an effort "to create intertextual bodies" that would "reinterpret" images starting both "from difference and the articulation of heterogeneous discourses" (23).

In the history of women's performance art, the figure of the goddess/priestess has been used to affirm the role of women as intermediaries between culture and nature, therefore reinforcing and valuing non-patriarchal practices (e.g. 1963's Carole Schneemann's *Eye Body*, a series of body-action pieces). Nonetheless, this role has also been criticized for both reifying a dichotomous model (culture-nature, masculinity-femininity) and reinforcing essentialism by separating women from history and politics (see Ruido's discussion of Ana Mendieta). However, it is precisely the political aspect that makes a difference in Luna's work, as seen in *Virgins and Goddesses*, a performance related to *Two Madonnas*. On January 9 and 10, 2015, Luna presented this recent piece as part of the Fresh Festival (Performance, Practice, Exchange)

taking place in San Francisco. That particular weekend, all performances revolved around the theme of "Re-Visiting Ritual." Luna's piece was based on the figure of earth mother Tlaltecuhtli, who was also her inspiration for the previous work with Devi. This centuries-old Aztec divinity, usually represented in a birth-giving position, is depicted with fangs, claws, and blood streaming from her open mouth. According to archeologist Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, Tlaltecuhtli's main function consisted of devouring corpses in order to later give birth to them according to what fate had in store for each. Due to this double function, Luna takes her as inspiration for a social cleansing performance ritual. Tellingly, life and death, mutually dependent for the Aztecs, are intertwined in Tlaltecuhtli.

During her performance, in which Luna embodies a contemporary version of Tlaltecuhtli, there are clear references to the dead, particularly the presence of hundreds of small black-and-white pictures on an altar of sorts, a leitmotif in Luna's work. However, references to specific events are not obvious, but merely insinuated. For example, at the beginning of the performance, Luna distributes stones among participants, asking them to write on them the name of someone who has died. There are 43 stones, equal to the number of students disappeared by police officers upon orders of the mayor of Ayotzinapa (Iguala, Mexico) on 26 September 2014.[11]

The sombre background video designed by Roberto Gutiérrez Varea includes images of Tlatelcuhtli carved in stone, black-and-white pictures of a young man named José Luis Luna Torres—no relation to Violeta Luna, but rather one of the 43 disappeared students of Ayotzinapa—, and music composed by David Molina. Through the figure and symbolism of Tlaltecuhtli, this piece compels us to reconsider how are we connected to those who died and continue to die daily around us. Luna's powerful stage presence in a white wig with flowers and a baroque-looking skirt decorated with multiple symbols overwhelms the audience. In front of a colorful altar this hybrid "divinity" gives birth to a decorated skull and performs movements and gestures that evoke a mourning ritual. At the end, Luna emerges from the back of the altar as herself, dressed in simple black sweat pants and shirt, stripped of all elaborate make-up and clothing, just one more person like any other in the audience. This final stage of the performance, along with previous references to the contemporary situation of death and violence in both Mexico and the US, further distances the performance from the reification of the woman/goddess in an ahistorical vacuum. Luna is not trying to carry the audience away into "another person's utopia or 'secular sacrum,' to use Grotowski's

phrase" (Turner 497). On the contrary, along with Rustom Bharucha, one could say that in Luna's performance, the recreation of myths of the past may help us see the present "not because they are being re-lived in an 'eternal present,' but because they acquire new significances and altered meanings in a simulacrum of what has already passed. It is only by puncturing the counterfeit of similitude that the reality of dissimilitude becomes visible" (13). In this sense, Luna's piece makes present the gap between past and present violence. This gap is a space for mourning and reflecting upon the latter along with fellow human beings, in a space that has not been coopted by the power structures that normalize violence; said otherwise, it works against the dominating necropolitics. This ritual for the dead is a non-naïf way of showing that the living have always had a responsibility towards the dead, and that life is a continuum.

At the beginning of this article, I referred to Ana Longoni's contention about the futility of assuming art to be subordinate to politics or vice versa, or of considering art as mere ornament for enhancing political activism in the context of state-sponsored terror in Latin America. In fact, throughout her practice as a cultural historian, Longoni has confirmed the power that certain events have to foster the creative dimension of political practice. Put another way, vis-à-vis the lack of actual human rights, creative practices are often the only resource for manifesting dissent. As seen in this article, Violeta Luna's body of work has been sparked by such events, straddling both sides of the Mexico-US border. A contemporary *necropower*, Luna focuses on human bodies that are being excluded or directly discarded in massive quantities by supposedly "democratic" states.

In essence, this artist's work arises from a careful consideration of context, conscientious research, and solidarity across borders with human tragedies that directly appeal to her. It also underscores the need to recognize victims not as numbers or casualties of a senseless world or malign external powers, but as individuals made of a complex enmeshment of life and politics, flesh and culture. Just like us.

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Notes

[1] While I reference biopolitics as discussed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in my discussion of one of Luna's pieces, which was created to be performed mainly in the US, I am aware that scholars outside Europe have built upon Foucault's ideas—such as the Cameroonian Achille Mbembe—and thus may provide perspectives related more closely to the Latin American context of several of her pieces. For example, Mbembe's ideas will be the focus of my discussion of *Requiem for a Lost Land*. I am certainly not implying that the writing of so-called Third World scholars is *per se* the most appropriate theoretical framework to discuss Latin American art. However, I do consider that including viewpoints closer to the artists' context allows us to better understand its complexity.

[2] La Pocha Nostra is a trans-disciplinary arts organization founded in 1993 by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Roberto Sifuentes, and Nola Mariano in California. Projects range from performance solos and duets to large-scale performance installations including video, photography, audio, and cyber-art. La Pocha collaborates across national borders, race, gender and generations. (Adapted from "Guillermo Gomez-Peña & La Pocha Nostra").

[3] Giorgio Agamben acted on his own beliefs on resisting biopolitics when in the wake of the September 11 attacks he refused to submit to the biometric technology required by the United States Immigration Department for entering the U.S (see *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

[4] In 2014 Mexico ranked as the deadliest country for journalists in the Americas (See "Year Starts Badly for Mexican Journalists").

[5] "Allá vienen los descabezados/ los mancos,/ los descuartizados,/ a las que les partieron el coxis,/ a los que les aplastaron la cabeza,/ los pequeñitos llorando/entre paredes oscuras de minerales y arena..."

[6] Luna obtained copies of these pictures from Mexican government archives upon directly requesting permission from the victims' families. Even if the public may not know who they are, Luna made sure she did.

[7] They now have a prominent place in El Balcón's Facebook page.

[8] Those familiar with Latin American theater probably remember Ana Correa's performance titled *Rosa Cuchillo*, which was conceived to be performed at open market stands throughout Peru. The piece was intended as a healing ritual vis-à-vis the atrocities of Peruvian contemporary history. It was conceived by Correa to accompany the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (see Cohen, Gutiérrez Varea, and Walker 2001).

[9] The artist kindly provided me with images documenting the performance.

[10] A significant example of Mexico's state of emergency—not the only one by a long shot—are the 43 students killed by order of the mayor of Ayotzinapa, Iguala Municipality, on September 26, 2014. Almost two years later, the remains of only one student had been identified, while 192 bodies unrelated to this case were found in mass graves around Iguala (See Pablo de Llano).

[11] In September 2015, the Inter-American Human Rights Commission released a report by independent experts. It stated that the situation of the 43 Ayotzinapa students is not an exception, but a generalized practice consisting of Mexican state agents participating in the forced disappearance of civilians. The report also determined that Mexican official investigators wrongly stated that the students' bodies had been incinerated at the Cocula trash dump. This statement was deemed as patently false, and even scientifically impossible. The independent experts also concluded that the official investigation was plagued with errors, lies, destruction of evidence, and the likely use of torture to obtain testimony (See Lewis and Gallagher).

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