

TIP17: To Release:/ A Response/-In The Body

By Brenda Iijima

Categories : Creative Nonfiction / Essay

Date : 20-11-2017

Some Notes on Lara Mimosa Montes that I'm calling Visibility In-Storm

On Saturday November 21st, 2017 as part of the momentous Thinking its Presence Conference in Tucson, Arizona, I attended a panel titled *To Release:/ A Response/-In The Body*, moderated by Samiya Bashir, with Lara Mimosa Montes, Lucas de Lima, and A.M. Whitehead.

After brief opening remarks, Lara set her laptop on "Puerto Rico," a disco-salsa-funk groove from 1982 by [Decoupage](#) and within the rush of lively rhythm she performed the catastrophic aftermath of Hurricane Maria's impact on Puerto Rico. Dire, tumultuous and revelatory, refusing elegy, refusing memorializing gesture Lara transformed herself into the force of the storm. She engaged her body as conduit, drawing us immediately to the site of suffering and abandonment as Puerto Rico experiences a humanitarian crisis of vast proportions. Her dance was a raging love letter to Puerto Rico. As of today (10/24/2017) 3 1?2 million Puerto Ricans are without power, over one million residents lack clean drinking water, food and all provisions are in short supply and the Environmental Protection Agency has not yet inspected five out of 18 of Puerto Rico's [toxic waste sites](#). To compound the misery, the island is 74 billion dollars in debt, ever-presently bullied by vulture capitalists and continually chided, insulted and ignored by the stateside president who enjoys rubbing wounds while maintaining systematic inequity.

Lara danced biopolitical entanglement up against the self. Contingent desires flickered. Pride and defiance wrapped around the subject of transculturation. She swirled, gyrated, and spasmed to the propulsive beat of a song that declares its situatedness. The apex of the choreography involved agitated centrifugal motion that centered her torso as eye of the storm, flushing out power relations in her body, the movement of violent winds and adjacent, the fury of disaster capital all merging as she gyrated. The midriff, the grinding, the unrelenting feeling in the gut. This language from the Weather Channel today relates: "The storm underwent bombogenesis, meaning that it rapidly intensified, increasing the strength of winds near the center." Her body became the collective body of a culture caught in a struggle of sovereignty and ecological disaster. A femme performance of body vulnerability and strength recalls gendered violence of body and *earth*, nature, also being gendered female. What does this really mean that "nature" is "gendered" "female"? It is a core question of eco-cultural concern. Nature and culture have been segregated in the Western imagination. Nature and the feminine are that which are considered resource--that which are to be used, creating the conditions for gendered violence and ecological catastrophe. This perturbed equation rotated in my body in response to Lara's prompting expressions. Received ideas collided with gut certitude that there is no "outside" of ecological reality. The high femme, hard femme performance is about admitting that the body is central to any understanding of epigenetic consequence.

https://entropymag.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/IMG_4370.m4v

(video by Janice Lee)

It was a challenge to sit tight and watch when feisty dance music was pumping through us and Lara's

expressions were so frontal and intense--prohibitions of the body in tight contrast--the audience is trained to remain passive (an allegory relating to social responses to catastrophe was implied). Plus, we were in the whispery space of a university library setting--the first taboo to be broken was to crank up the virtual boom box and create the possibility to hear sonic tensions in a space of organized repose, respectful quietude. The second taboo was to ignite the body to register high femme blow back, insurgent energy in the mode of dance. Giving us temporary permission to enter into a body's grief, we were made to see togetherness anew. The voyeuristic tendency of the audience melted into co-identification. At least, this is how my body registered the shift in apperception. It is a stark reminder just how sanitized, normalized and monetized body strictures are and how space is controlled and defined. The perfectly appointed library, a sanctioned space. Doris Salcedo's work flashed in my memory. Her large scale installations of modified furniture bearing the symbolism of recessed violence weighed gravitationally in my thoughts. Julie Rodrigues Widholm's reading of Salcedo's work echoed within the architecture. "Salcedo's work compels a critical reading of the seemingly familiar, a place at the edge of seeing and knowing, which slowly fades into the unfamiliar, with a constant oscillation between the two."¹ Live movement taken from the club to the library demands a reckoning of its displaced representation. Storms do not have proprietary concerns.

Lara's strategy involved an imperative: to heighten the collective capacity of our national consciousness to be cognizant of racialized trauma in the form of neglect and abandonment after ecological, political and economic disaster struck Puerto Ricans--a compounding phenomenon with historical duration. Hurricane Maria pounded Puerto Rico, as does ongoing economic and social strangulation. The power of somatic expressiveness in the form of dance communicated intimate and wide range implications of the failure of "post"-colonial powers to offer adequate mutual aid at a time of critical need. Her cyclonic gestures spoke to the never-ending grief of subjecthood to an offshore empire. Lara transformed the hushed space of the library (an archive) into a sanctum of live knowledge (a repertoire). I'm using the understandings of "live" to echo Diana Taylor's engagement with repertoire and archive in her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. She differentiates between the repertoire (a live performance) and the archive as follows: "The repertoire contains verbal performances--songs, prayers, speeches--as well as nonverbal practices...The repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expressions, transmits live, embodied actions...It is only because Western culture is wedded to the word, whether written or spoken, that language claims such epistemic and explanatory power."² (p. 24)

Declaratory statements intervened on corporeal movement. Lara halted in the midst of the action to read polemical statements in defiant and stark tones. Flares of sensuous choreography abutted by invective language forced a crucial dialogue between the archive and the repertoire. The jolt of language as punctuated proclamation underscored how language seeks to subsume the body, while also operating as a vehicle for self-representation. As she read, Lara's stance was bold. Lara directed me to [an interview between Bhanu Kapil and Laynie Brown at Jacket 2](#) where Bhanu beautifully iterates the possibilities for syntax. Here's Bhanu: "To track the vector until, as I tell my students, 'it disappears.' Syntax, too, is where this [the] poet — engaging vectors in this other kind of duration — might bring a pressure to bear. A record of forward movement but also a way of investigating the glitches and formal barriers to cultural, global or personal notion of 'progression.'" Syntax has the capacity to be subversive, to be very beautiful, to register an anti-colonial position: in this respect." Lara has taken up the expansiveness of Bhanu's motions for language. The work is improvisatory, in progress-- a score that engages temporal responsiveness. I also learn from Lara backchannel that the panel title, "To Release:/ A Response/-In The Body" is a paraphrasing of a statement made by Bhanu from the interview.

Here is just a single phrasing from her elocutions:

from PERFORMANCE STUDIES

(dance Bigger)

...**Bigger** >> take up more room. You have no integrity. **MOVE** >>>> In my writing, itself, a movement, I was after something else: the unscripted ness of what comes after. . .

Without erotic excess we may not be able to feel what we know. The drama of the erotic signifier is volatile, in this instance, like a hurricane. A way or organizing sensuous energy to break from disciplinary mandates. An erotic performance making a political claim, performing grief, performing outrage, performing love. Clad in a metallic silver bustier, like a superhero, also, right there, super present among us Lara ground down the (in)decipherability of disaster in a column of body intensity with hormones and salty sweat circulating the space. The body demonstrating civic disobedience and subversion reorganized our senses. *Live, alive*. Cellular animation. Historical decomposition/recomposition as tempo--as generative vision.

I am so grateful to share this time amongst us at the Thinking its Presence Conference in deep attention and care.

1. Julie Rodrigues Widholm, "Presenting Absence: The Work of Doris Salcedo", essay in a monograph on Doris Salcedo, The University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 26.

2. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire, Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, 2003, p. 24.