

WHO, WHEN, WHAT, WHY

As a child growing up in a small mining town in the north of Mexico, I learned that the Americas were one, that we shared a hemisphere. Many years later, when I arrived in the United States to do my doctorate, I heard that “America” meant the United States. There were two hemispheres, north and south, and although Mexico technically belonged to the northern hemisphere, people usually relegated it to the south—part of “Latin America.” Years later, I observed in my daughter’s Rand McNally *Picture Atlas of the World* (1993 edition) that the Americas had been divided in three, and Mexico and Central America were called “Middle America,” a term that accomplished the linguistic distantiation that the land formation refused to justify. I never accepted this steady attempt at deterritorialization. I claim my identity as an “American” in the hemispheric sense. That means I have lived comfortably, or perhaps uncomfortably, in various overlapping worlds.

My academic career began in a one-room schoolhouse in Parral, Chihuahua, a dusty little town whose only claim to fame was that the great revolutionary leader Pancho Villa had been shot to death there. This was a poor little classroom with a corrugated metal roof reserved for the children of the miners. My father, who ran away from Canada at the age of twenty-one, was a mining engineer. My mother, a student of Northrop Frye whose life’s calling was to read who-done-its, would drive me up the crooked dirt road

to school. We never knew what grade we were in. Magically, it seemed, we passed from first to second, from second to third. We never got grades; there were no parent-teacher conferences, no progress reports. Just as magically, we graduated. I was nine years old.

I loved my little town. I considered everyone in it my friend. Don Luis owned the pharmacy and lived in the apartment above it with his beautiful wife, who invited me to tea; they were rumored to be rich, owning miles and miles of splendid poppy fields and all sorts of refining machinery that stirred local imaginations. Their assistant, my school friend's father, was found dead one morning, cut up into tiny pieces and hanging in a sack from a tree branch—a message of sorts, though indecipherable to me then. Don Jacinto was the garbage collector who rescued precious items for us kids, like soda bottle caps that hid prizes behind the cork liners. Doña Esperanza, a homeless woman, carried a small metal suitcase full of rocks to throw at her many enemies. She trusted me; we'd sit, legs dangling from the bridge over the dry riverbed, and she'd open her metal case to show me her rocks. In turn, I pulled out the tiny pebbles I saved for her in my pockets. Twice a year, the Tarahumara (the indigenous group Artaud so admired) would come down from the mountains to buy staples. Our worlds didn't touch; I never knew why. We didn't speak their language. We knew little about their way of life. We'd just watch them come and go—another lesson in indecipherability.

If I was going to study, my parents insisted, I had to go away. "You'll go to boarding school in Toronto," my mother said. "You'll like it there. You'll be close to Gramma. But you have to learn English." This meant learning more than the one word I had already perfected, though the way I pronounced it stretched over so many syllables I thought it was a complete sentence: sonofabitché. I remember standing there, in my cowboy boots, my plaid skirt with antigravity suspenders, my brown suede jacket with the fringe, and the pebbles in my pockets. My braids were pulled back so tight I couldn't close my eyes. My little gold scissor earrings that opened and shut dangled from my ears. I promised: "Sí mamá. I learna da inglish." So off I went to Canada, announced back then as my extended home, part of my Américas.

My Gramma stiffened in disapproval. She hated the boots, the jacket, the pigtails, and reminded me that only savages pierced their body. My education, she warned, was about to begin. I tried to change the subject and make polite conversation. "Gramma, how's your cancer?"

During my four years in boarding school, I had to learn new languages—not just the English, French, and Latin that were required. Twice daily, I had to participate in the ritual incantations of High Anglicanism. In response to the demands for weekly offerings, I stuffed buttons in the collection box, holding my skirt and blazer together with safety pins. I hid my plastic Virgen de Guadalupe in a box behind the chest of drawers. I also had to learn a new body language. Off went the Wild West outfit; on came the blazer and tie, the gray skirt, the button-down white shirt, the oxford shoes and knee-highs. I learned to eat sitting up straight, with a book on my head and a newspaper tucked under each arm. They cut my hair; gone forever were my beloved gold scissor earrings that opened and closed. My body, my head, my heart, and my tongue were in training. My small acts of resistance, inspired by my hero Pancho Villa, ran up against the disciplinary machine. My punishments were so regular that they became part of my weekly schedule: I had to run around the school twenty times at 6 A.M. on weekend mornings, while the rest of the girls slept. My teachers smacked me with hairbrushes, made me chew aspirins, and tried teaching me to spin wool so that I'd stop fidgeting. The goal, the headmistress informed me, was that I should become a respectable Anglo gentlewoman, a worthy companion for Canada's brightest and best.

I am delighted to report that, for me at least, the training failed miserably. Yet, when I returned home—now Mexico City—at fourteen, I knew I wasn't Canadian, but I no longer felt completely Mexican. While a citizen of the Américas, I was/am not a happy NAFTA subject, a product of "free" markets and cultural zones. In a world set up in terms of "First World" and "Third World," "white" and "brown," "us" and "them," I wasn't them but I wasn't us either. I wasn't Anglican, but I wasn't Catholic. Ironically, perhaps, that led me to identify with everything, rather than nothing. Identifying with everything rather than nothing may amount to the same thing, but the spirit behind it was far from nihilistic: I overflowed with identifications, white and brown, English- and Spanish-speaking, Anglican and Catholic, us and them. Mine felt like an entangled surplus subjectivity, full of tugs, pressures, and pleasures. I continue to embody these tugs through a series of conflicting practices and tensions.

Because it's been impossible for me to separate my scholarly and political commitments and conundrums from who I am, the essays in this book

reflect a range of tone and personal intervention in the discussions. The first three chapters particularly map out the theoretical questions that inform the chapters that follow: How does expressive behavior (performance) transmit cultural memory and identity? Would a hemispheric perspective expand the restrictive scenarios and paradigms set in motion by centuries of colonialism? Although the theoretical implications are no less pressing, the tone in the remaining chapters becomes increasingly personal. As my reflections come out of my own role as participant in or witness to the events I describe, I feel compelled to acknowledge my own involvement and sense of urgency. And, as I argue throughout, we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices. Performance, for me, functions as an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis. By situating myself as one more social actor in the scenarios I analyze, I hope to position my personal and theoretical investment in the arguments. I chose not to smooth out the differences in tone, but rather let them speak to the tensions between who I am and what I do.

I wrote this book during the five years that I served as chair of performance studies at NYU, and it reflects many of the conversations that we had around the department's odd, wobbly, crescent-shaped table in the room composed of windows we call the fish bowl. How would we define performance? What would we include in an Introduction to Performance Studies course? Should performance studies—defined by some of us as postdisciplinary, others as interdisciplinary, others as antidisiplinary, others as predisciplinary—have a canon? Who would define it? How can we think about performance in historical terms, when the archive cannot capture and store the live event? I still hear those voices and debates: Fred Moten resisting canons of all kinds, while Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett tried to organize the area exam lists. Richard Schechner and Peggy Phelan would debate whether we could even speak of an “ontology” of performance, while Barbara Browning, José Muñoz, and André Lepecki joined the fray on different sides of the lines. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, always a calming presence, and I spoke of teaching a course on the politics of public space, or perhaps on language rights. All of us sitting there, faculty and often students, came from different academic and personal backgrounds and brought different takes on each issue. One of the things I like most about our conversations is that we never really agreed, and we still haven't succeeded in formulating a clear party, or even depart-

mental, line. The open-endedness and multivocality of performance studies is an administrative challenge (How to devise a meaningful curriculum, or reading exam lists?), but they prove, I believe, the field's greatest promise. However we position ourselves in relation to other disciplines, we have been wary of disciplinary boundaries that preclude certain connections and areas of analysis. So we've kept talking, and even as the individuals around the table change, the conversations keep going. Inevitably, these debates linger throughout the book, not because my colleagues and students are my ideal audience, but because they have been close interlocutors as I wrote.

Some of the questions took on a special urgency for me as a "Latin/o Americanist." Is performance that which disappears, or that which persists, transmitted through a nonarchival system of transfer that I came to call the *repertoire*? My book *Disappearing Acts* had already engaged with the politics of disappearance: the forced absencing of individuals by Argentina's military forces and the paradoxical omnipresence of the disappeared. My scholarly and political commitment to these issues continued through the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, a consortium that I organized and directed during this same period (<http://hemi.nyu.edu>). Scholars, artists, and activists throughout the Americas work together in annual *encuentros* (two-week festivals/work groups) through graduate-level, interdisciplinary courses and online work groups to explore how performance transmits memories, makes political claims, and manifests a group's sense of identity. For all of us, the political implications of the project were clear. If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity.

This book, then, constitutes my personal intervention in two fields: performance studies and Latin/o American (hemispheric) studies. Here, I try to put these fields in conversation. How does each expand what we can think in the other? How can performance studies' nervousness about disciplinary boundaries help us destabilize the ways in which the field of "Latin American" studies has been constituted in the United States? Like other area studies, Latin American studies emerged as a result of cold war efforts by the U.S. government to advance "intelligence," language competence, and influence in countries to the south. Consequently, it tends to maintain a unidirectional north-to-south focus, with the U.S. analyst posited as the unseen, unexamined see-er. Hemispheric studies could potentially counter the Latin

American studies of the mid-twentieth century and the NAFTAism of the late twentieth century by exploring histories of the north and south as profoundly intertwined. It allows us to connect histories of conquest, colonialism, slavery, indigenous rights, imperialism, migration, and globalization (to name some issues) throughout the Americas. Circulation in the Americas includes the military traffic in peoples, weapons, drugs, “intelligence,” and expertise. It includes the culture industries: television, film, music. It includes practices associated with languages, religious practices, food, style, and embodied performances. If, however, we were to reorient the ways social memory and cultural identity in the Americas have traditionally been studied, with the disciplinary emphasis on literary and historical documents, and look through the lens of performed, embodied behaviors, what would we know that we do not know now? Whose stories, memories, and struggles might become visible? What tensions might performance behaviors show that would not be recognized in texts and documents?

Conversely, “Latin American” studies (like other area studies) has much to offer performance studies. The historical debates concerning the nature and role of performance in the transmission of social knowledge and memory, which I trace to sixteenth-century Mesoamerica, allow us to think about embodied practice in a broader framework that complicates prevalent understandings. Performance studies, due to its historical development, reflects the 1960s conjunction of anthropology, theatre studies, and the visual arts. It also reflects a predominantly English-speaking, First World positioning; most of the scholarship in the field has been produced in the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. But there is nothing inherently “Western” or necessarily avant-garde about the field. The methodology we associate with performance studies can and should be revised constantly through engagement with other regional, political, and linguistic realities. So, although I contest the parochialism of some performance studies scholarship, I am not suggesting that we merely *extend* our analytic practice to other “non-Western” areas. Rather, what I propose here is a real engagement between two fields that helps us rethink both.

Embodied performances have always played a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities in literate, semiliterate, and digital societies. Not everyone comes to “culture” or modernity through writing. I believe it is imperative to keep reexamining the relationships between em-

bodied performance and the production of knowledge. We might look to past practices considered by some to have disappeared. We might look to contemporary practices by populations usually dismissed as “backward” (indigenous and marginalized communities). Or we might explore the relationship of embodied practice to knowledge by studying how young people today learn through digital technologies. If people without writing are said to have vanished without a trace, how can we think about the invisibilized body online? It is difficult to think about embodied practice within the epistemic systems developed in Western thought, where writing has become the guarantor of existence itself.

The book is intensely personal in another way as well. On January 27, 2001, my closest friends, Susana and Half Zantop, were brutally murdered by two teenage boys in their home in New Hampshire. It was a Saturday afternoon; Susana was making lunch, Half was puttering around, doing chores. Out of the blue . . . Later that year, as I was walking out of the gym, I saw the World Trade Center down the street, on fire. A plane had hit it, someone on the street told me, out of the blue. The terror of those events affected us profoundly. The world has changed for me and for those I love during the time I wrote this book. I dedicate this book to Susana and Half, who did not survive the horror. But I also dedicate it to those who did: their daughters, Veronika and Mariana, my husband, Eric Manheimer, and our children, Alexei and Marina, and my sister, Susan. We are still struggling to learn how to live in this very strange new world.

I want to thank the close friends who have sustained me with their love and conversations during this period and over the past few years. Some are my daily interlocutors, whether in the steam room, the gym, the sushi bar, or the coffee shop. I feel their presence throughout this work: Marianne Hirsch, Richard Schechner, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Leo Spitzer, Sylvia Molloy, Lorie Novak, Faye Ginsburg, José Muñoz, Una Chaudhuri, Mary Louise Pratt, and Fred Myers. Others I see less often, but they remain such a close presence that I can hear their comments before I speak with them: Doris Sommer, Agnes Lugo-Ortíz, Mary C. Kelley, Silvia Spitta, Rebecca Schneider, Jill Lane, Leda Martins, Diana Raznovich, Luis Peirano, Annelise Orleck, Alexis Jetter, and Roxana Verona. What would I do without my family and friends? That’s one question I never want to explore.

I also want to thank those who have helped me in other ways. David

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As figure 2 of this study indicates, the production of knowledge is always a collective effort, a series of back-and-forth conversations that produce multiple results. The Náhuatl-speaking informant tells his story to the Náhuatl-speaking scribe, who in turn passes it to the translator, who transmits it to the Spanish-speaking scribe, who tells the Spanish friar, the official recipient, organizer, and transmitter of the written document. He in turn gives his version, which will make its way back to the Nahua informant. The document also finds its way into the public arena, where it is met with debates ranging from censorious disapproval to profound gratitude. Back and forth. The versions change with each transmission, and each creates slips, misses, and new interpretations that result in a somewhat new original. In this study too, I build on what I have received from others and attempt to contribute to the debate and pass it back into the public arena for more discussion. The slips and misses are, of course, my own.