

Prologue

Jumping the Fence

An undisciplined student, impatient with my high school classes at the British high school in Mexico City, I used to jump over the fence a few times a week after roll call and walk home. The pounds, shillings, and pence of my math class gave way to the pesos I'd spend on jicama with lime and chile to eat on the way. I'd throw off the outward signs of colonial discipline—the tie, blazer, knee-high socks, Oxford shoes—that I'd been forced to wear since I was a nine-year-old in the Canadian boarding school and now back home in Mexico. I set about to learn in my own haphazard fashion. I loved Shakespeare, Marlowe, and the Russian novelists, but also the Mexican comic and philosopher Cantinflas, who taught me, “Ah! There's the catch: it's neither this nor that, but completely the opposite.”¹ In my life, every day was opposite day. If I graduated from high school it was because *Dios es grande* (God is great), as people say in Mexico, and probably more important, because students in the British system had to pass the General Certificate of Education administered out of the University of London. The exams were devised and graded in London, where no one cared if I had jumped over the fence to escape school in Mexico. I passed. Five Ordinary levels and two Advanced levels in literature and history. Not brilliant, but not bad for someone who refused school. And it got me into college, another haphazard adventure beyond the purviews of this prologue. Yet the irony is not lost to me that it was the “neutral” and “institutional” positioning of the authorized reader in London who got me through, outweighing the years of experience my local teachers had endured with the unruly child they deemed unfit for further study.

I have spent much of my professional life finding ways to work beyond the fence. I have never really belonged to (or in) any one field or academic

department, so I tried to create other spaces for thinking and interacting with others. In my earlier years at Dartmouth, historian Annelise Orleck, journalist Alexis Jetter, and I started the Institute for Women and Social Change, bringing female artists, activists, and scholars from throughout the world. What, we wondered, did people do to sustain themselves and their communities exposed to dehumanizing and oppressive conditions when it seemed that very little could be done? We invited thinkers such as Wangari Maathai, Winona LaDuke, Dorothy Allison, and Cherríe Moraga to Hanover, New Hampshire, to imagine more life-sustaining ways of making worlds, making politics. Soon after, I started the Institute of Performance and Politics with my friend and colleague Doris Sommer at Harvard to create spaces of performance interaction and activism that exceeded departmental and even university limits. We launched the Mexican political masked performer SuperBarrio for president in 1996, and in early 1997 worked with Bread and Puppet to fill the Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth with images and cardboard figures we made of people from ethnic groups from throughout the Americas who would never be asked to enter that building. After moving to NYU in 1997, I worked with two of my doctoral students—Zeca Ligiéro, a professor from UNI-RIO in Brazil, and Javier Serna, a professor in the Autonomous University of Nuevo León in Mexico—to begin the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in 1998. Hemi was conceived back then as a cultural corridor throughout the Americas, creating physical, digital, and archival spaces of interaction where scholars, artists, and activists could collaborate on performance-based transdisciplinary, transborder projects and topics. At our first Encuentro in Rio de Janeiro, entitled *Performance* (as we tried to socialize the word as a theory as well as praxis), it was hard to convince people that we had anything to talk about. What, some artists asked, did they have to say to scholars? Activists, maybe. Not sure. But scholars? I noted that many focused their work on “the body”: The body as front and center in performance art. The body on the line in activism. Who, I asked, problematized thinking about the body as gendered, raced, sexed, aged, with different kinds of aptitudes and abilities? Okay, okay, you can stay. Money from the U.S.? The empire? This must be another form of cultural and artistic extractivism. Every conversation was like that, negotiating how people who lived in different countries, communities, conditions, languages, and so on could talk in spite of the brutal economic, social, and political divides that separate us. Now, twenty years later, with some sixty academic and cultural organizations as institutional members, the conversations have changed. They’re certainly no easier or less painful (as chapter 6 makes clear), but the debates and points of conflict continually shift.

This book, an *amoxohtoca* or “journey of the book” in Nahuatl, traces my meandering journey through the Americas, around, back, and back again as I’ve engaged in an unsettled and undisciplined approach to scholarship that prioritizes relational and embodied forms of knowledge production and transmission that take us beyond the colonizing and restrictive epistemic grids that some of our Eurocentric disciplines and practices impose on us. Yet transgressing those grids also invites all sorts of tensions and misunderstandings, some more productive than others. One of the most generative for me came in a conversation with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who was explaining an Aymara concept of inter-relatedness. I understood her to say that *jaqxam sar* meant “to be me, I have to walk and talk with others.” To be me, someone else has to name me, acknowledge me. These words guided much of my thinking as I reexamined colonialist and decolonial notions of subjectivity. When a year or so later I checked back with her to make sure I had used *jaqxam sar* appropriately, she did not remember our conversation and, more disorienting, said that *jaqxam sar* actually meant something else altogether. The concept “to be me, I have to walk and talk with others” made sense, she said, but not the term. So I claim both the misunderstanding and the concept, with the epistemic and political demand it makes on us, as I negotiate my way through these spaces and chapters.

To be me, I’ve learned along the way, I have to talk and walk with others. The artists, activists, and scholars who have walked and talked beside me on this journey have taught and sustained me in ways I cannot properly credit. This book is an attempt to continue some of the conversations we’ve started.

My conversations with Juan López Intzin (or Xuno López) added “en-hearting” to the walking and talking. The Mayan, specifically Tzeltal, worldview situates the heart at the center of knowing and being with others. He calls this “epistemologies of the heart.” Sometimes, like Stefano Harney, I’ve come to think of myself as an “idea thief.” What might pass as a conversation beyond the fence still falls under the codes governing ownership in Academia. For years, I’ve lived with the regret of not starting *The Archive and the Repertoire* by acknowledging that one of the initial thoughts I had about repertoires as systems contiguous but independent from archives came during a conversation with Rebecca Schneider in a gas station in Wales on the way from PSi to London. On the table, she mapped out how the archive or library had always been physically separate from the theatre in ancient Greek and Roman cities. She was interested in what falls out of the archival, the remains, and cited my example of the missing finger from Evita’s corpse in *Disappearing Acts*. For years, I had worried about the “other” of the archival,

what I finally came to call the “repertoire” of embodied practices that survived the erasure wrought by the colonial archive. My interests came not from ancient Greece but out of recognition of the colonial dispossession created by the privileging of archival knowledge. So who owns what? I’d rather think of it as owing instead of owning. I owe Rebecca. I owe Xuno. I owe Silvia, I owe many people many things, even, as Moten and Harney put it, everything. I am deeply in debt. Encumbered. It makes me happy to know it and acknowledge it.

Some people, like Jesusa Rodríguez, have participated directly in much of my meandering. She is a companion and protagonist in much of this *amoxhtoca*. Lorie Novak, as many photographs in this volume attest, has often been a cotraveler, extending vision to places where my eyes could not see. Marianne Hirsch, Richard Schechner, Fred Moten, Marcial Godoy-Anatívia, Toby Volkman, Juan López Intzín, Rebecca Schneider, Faye Ginsburg, Leda Martins, and Jacques Servin have been essential to my way of thinking and acting in the world. David Brooks of *La Jornada*, Diana Raznovich, Catherine Lord, Kim Tomsen, Julio Pantoja, Ricardo Dominguez, Benjamin Ardití, Peter Kulchyski, Reverend Billy, and Savitri D. have accompanied and inspired me, each in their own way. Some thinkers, such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Judith Butler, and Greg Grandin, come up again and again in my travels. Thanks to Manuel R. Cuellar and David Jesus Arreola Gutiérrez for their help with Nahuatl! And to Alexei Taylor, who can draw what I can only imagine. I have learned a considerable amount from Grace McLaughlin and Anthony Sansonetti, the two best research assistants imaginable. I thank you all. The voices of many of my colleagues, students, and Hemi collaborators and co-conspirators accompany me wherever I go. ¡Presentes! ¡Gracias!

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