This essay is drawn from brief remarks I offered at a teach-in at New York University, “Critical Interventions: The War in Iraq,” which was sponsored by NYU’s Trauma and Violence Transdisciplinary Studies Program and coorganized by Patrick Deer and Shireen Patel. The event was timed to coincide with the first Iraq War Moratorium Day (21 September 2007), a national project designed to focus critical attention on the war through monthly actions and educational forums. For more information, go to http://iraqmoratorium.org.

“Hurry up. Quiet. I have to finish talking.” Leave it to television’s Flying Nun to shake things up. Accepting her Emmy award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for her role in ABC’s Brothers and Sisters as a mother whose son is about to be deployed to Iraq, Sally Field took her few minutes at the microphone at the 2007 Emmy Awards to call attention to the women across the world who wait at home for their loved ones to return from war. Field rushed to finish her acceptance speech before the music came up and the Fox Network censors came down. “Let’s face it,” she closed, “if the mothers ruled the world there would be no goddamned wars in the first place.” Whatever one thinks of Fields’s maternal politics (and the leading role US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has played in the Iraq debacle, not to mention the past pugilism of other female heads of state, such as Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir, argues against the sentimental notion that women, mothers or not, would necessarily be slower to go to war), it was nonetheless a rare moment of political criticism voiced at the defanged Emmy Awards. Voiced but not heard. Making use of a seven-second delay, Fox producers cut the sound and pulled back to a wide shot. It was yet another un-made for TV moment in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Perpetual detention without charge. Extraordinary rendition. Secret surveillance courts. Saturated with the image, we nonetheless live in a profound moment of not seeing, even, of un-seeing.

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1. Some of the ideas developed in this essay germinated during a Fulbright residency at the Sigmund Freud Museum in Vienna, in spring 2007. I am grateful to the Austrian Fulbright Commission and the Sigmund Freud Foundation for their research support.

2. To view an uncensored video of Sally Field’s acceptance speech, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImoMGyWk.

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Embedded reporters take us to the heart of battle; bombings take on the aspect of a video game as we follow a missile to its point of contact, cans of soda in one hand, the remote control in the other. In the United States, the President sends young men and women off to fight and die for “freedom.” A pivotal American freedom is freedom of the press. And yet, this same President has banned the photographing of the returning coffins of American service members killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The official reason for this ban is respect for the “privacy” of the surviving family members, who, we are told, need to mourn in their own way. However, the ban on just seeing the coffins of American war dead actually effects a ban on public mourning. The construction of a nation—of a public—ready and willing to fight and die for freedom (or at least ready and willing to send someone else’s sons and daughters off to war) requires this segregation, this privatization, of loss. We must not know what we will not see. This is not mourning but mania. Unable or unwilling to mourn, the nation at war acts out its losses without knowing their meaning or value, without making itself accountable to who and what have been lost. These losses include not just the people who have died—each of whom is singular and particular to the families and friends who loved that person—but also the precious self-images a nation has built up of itself, but before which it so often falls short (see Freud [1917] 1957:243). In this context, it is worth recalling another war, the “Great War,” and Freud’s still timely 1915 essay “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1957), which he composed in the heady early months of World War I, when his sons were fighting for the “Fatherland” and when he found himself surprised by his own identification with the Austro-Hungarian cause. Despite his initial burst of patriotic enthusiasm—perhaps, even, in light of it—Freud yet stepped back critically to interrogate the relationship between death denial, by which he meant our incapacity to imagine our own deaths, and our tendency to project the inevitability and finality of death outward onto others.

Ordinarily, Freud says, we respond to death as if it is an accident that happens to other people. When the accident hits home, through the death of a loved one, we will not be consoled; however, our grief is not necessarily the same thing as a reconciliation to loss or an acknowledgment of death. To recover something of life’s drama, our own vulnerability to death, we must turn to literature and theatre, Freud argues, to behold from a safe distance the risk of life and the finality of death.

During war, however, “death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in it” with a force that the vicarious witnessing afforded by theatre or literature cannot command. Freud continues:

People really die; and no longer one by one, but many, often tens of thousands, in a single day. And death is no longer a chance event. To be sure, it still seems a matter of chance whether a bullet hits this man or that; but a second bullet may well hit the survivor; and the accumulation of deaths puts an end to the impression of chance. Life has, indeed, become interesting again; it has recovered its full content. (291)

Freud is here describing a discovery, a rediscovering, really, of our vulnerability to loss. In the face of so much killing, we are no longer able to maintain our former attitude towards death, but we have also not yet found a new one.

This shared vulnerability could be the grounds for a different kind of politics and a different way of relating to others. For, as Judith Butler suggests:

Mindfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for nonmilitary political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war. We cannot, however, will away this

3. For more on this point, see David L. Eng’s important discussion of the US rush to war after 9/11 as an instance of a refusal to mourn, “The Value of Silence” (2002).

4. For Freud’s initial response to the outbreak of the war, see Ernest Jones’s biography of Freud (1961: esp. 336–37).
vulnerability. We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others. (2004:29)

Needless to say, the corporeal vulnerability laid bare by 9/11 has not lent itself to “nonmilitary solutions.” The suppression of images of American war dead thus points to a much more profound problem in post-9/11 United States. Although there has been much talk of loss there has been little space to mourn even “our own,” never mind any space in which seriously to regard the pain and loss experienced by non-Americans.

But, here, too, a return to Freud’s “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” is instructive. In times of war, Freud writes, we can see what otherwise remains concealed, though no less potent for this concealment: namely, the state’s monopoly over violence and terror ([1915] 1957:279). In wartime, the state practices its violence in the open and enlists its citizens in the project of killing, but all in the name of patriotism, self-defense, and “freedom” (280). These abstractions are personified, given form in the blood and flesh of our own losses, actual or anticipated. “We” are under attack; “we” must defend ourselves. The state thus takes advantage of our love for our kin, for our nearest and dearest, to bind us to acts of fatal violence against an objectified and dehumanized “enemy.”

We need to take seriously the semantic shift that happened soon after 9/11, when President Bush started speaking of an endless War on Terror, rather than a War on Terrorism. It would be simple to dismiss this as one of the many examples of President Bush’s “gift” for language. But I think it is important to take him at his word and hear in “War on Terror” a strategic attempt to restructure public feeling. We must ask, what does it mean to declare war on a feeling? How is this declaration related to the question of permissible and impermissible public feelings? How do public feelings connect to what we can and cannot give ourselves to know and see?

On Wednesday, 19 September 2007, the US Senate failed, on a procedural vote, to restore the right of habeas corpus to the hundreds of foreign so-called “unlawful enemy combatants” who languish in the legal shadowland of detention without charge, jailed without the ability to challenge, let alone see, the evidence against them. Habeas corpus. This is a subjunctive formulation that means: “you may have the body.” Let us think about the many bodies counted and uncounted during this endless war. As of this writing (17 October 2007): 3,829 US service members have been killed in Iraq; a conservative estimate puts Iraqi civilian deaths at more than 81,000. This figure is likely a gross undercounting.

Habeas corpus, indeed. Given the intense secreting of the human costs of war that the Bush administration has enacted, we may need theatre—and its charge to witness—more than ever as a way to bring death and our implication in the violence of war back into view. Seizing every representational means possible, we must give death its due, acknowledge our shared vulnerability to loss, and refuse to shut up or shut down until we have put an end to the madness of endless war.

5. “Bushisms” have become the stuff of late-night comic rifts by the likes of Jon Stewart and Jay Leno; have filled novelty books, such as Mark Crispin Miller’s The Bush Dyslexicon (2001); and provided fodder for day-to-day calendars featuring George W. Bushisms: The Accidental Wit and Wisdom of Our 43rd President. (The calendars were edited by Slate magazine’s Jacob Weisberg.) The “War on Terror” is one Bushism that crossed over from neologism to common usage. One that did not is “women of cover,” a term the President apparently coined and used in two public addresses—one to State Department employees on 4 October 2001 and the other in a televised news conference on 11 October 2001—to describe American Muslim women who wear the veil. For a discussion of the neologism “women of cover,” see Safire (2001).

6. There is by now a huge literature on public feelings. For starters, see the recommended readings included as a link in Cvetkovich and Pellegrini (2003), at http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ps/reading.htm.

On Recent Performances of Luigi Nono’s The Forest Is Young and Full of Life

Judy Lochhead

The Italian composer Luigi Nono (1924–1990) became well known in the late 1950s and 1960s for works that championed various antiwar, anti-Fascist, pro-Communist, and pro-labor positions within the world’s political arena. The work that thrust Nono into international prominence, Il canto sospeso (The Suspended Song; 1955/56) for solo voices, chorus, and orchestra, sets to music excerpts of letters written by captured European resistance fighters before their execution.1 This work was a natural extension of Nono’s growing political and social concerns, which took an explicit form when he joined the Communist Party in 1952. Nono’s musical sensibilities were never cut off from his sense of what the world should be.

A series of explicitly political works followed in the 1960s and early ’70s, such as Intolleranza

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1960 (Intolerance 1960; 1961), La fabbrica illuminata (The Illuminated Factory; 1964), Ricorda così ti hanno fatto in Auschwitz (Remember What They Did to You in Auschwitz; 1965), A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida (The Forest Is Young and Full of Life; 1965/66), and Al gran sole carico d’amore (In the Bright Sunshine Heavy with Love; 1972/74). And although Nono’s commitment to social concerns never faded, the music from roughly 1955 to 1975 was most intensely targeted toward issues of the time. The repercussions of World War II, the ensuing tensions of the cold war and its threats of nuclear annihilation, the violent turbulence of the 1960s and early ’70s, including the war in Vietnam—all established the context that focused Nono’s social and political concerns on his artistic vision.

World events in the early years of the new millennium—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the genocide in Darfur, the escalating violence in Palestine and Israel, the nuclear posturing of Iran and North Korea—have generated anew a pressing sense of unease about the future of humanity. And once again, those in the arts turn to their craft as a way of focusing thought and feeling on the whole range of issues that attend war and violence, some creating new works, others turning to those of the past. Here, I address a recent performance by the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE) of Nono’s A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida (hereafter, The Forest Is Young) from the mid-1960s, revisiting the issues surrounding art that addresses social and political concerns and reflecting on how ICE’s performance of Nono’s 40-year-old work might focus our anxieties about today’s events.

ICE is an active consortium of performers and composers dedicated to the promotion of recently composed music (see www.iceorg.org for more information). With guest artists, ICE performed The Forest Is Young in three places: Chicago (13 December 2006), New York City (22–23 May 2007), and Morelia, Mexico (11 June 2007). I attended a New York performance at P.S. 122 and while it will be my focus here, I address issues that extend to the other ICE performances as well.

The Forest Is Young is scored for soprano, B-flat clarinet, five copper sheets played by five percussionists, three reciters, eight-track tape, ten loudspeakers, and a sound engineer. The performers were: Tony Arnold, soprano; Joshua Rubin, clarinet; Katey Parker, Wendy Richman, Peter Tsantsitsis, reciters; David Schotzko, Kivie Cahn-Lipman, David Bowlin, Russell Greenberg, Jacob Greenberg, percussionists; and Ryan Streber, sound engineer. The ICE performance was directed by Habib Azar, fulfilling a function that Nono did not explicitly specify in his working notes but had employed. The inclusion of a director realizes the intrinsic theatricality of The Forest Is Young; at the same time, Azar’s particular shaping of the performance enhances those features that make its political and social focus effective. Before considering ICE’s performance, Azar’s directorial choices, and the specifics of how The Forest Is Young attains effectiveness as music-political theatre, some information on Nono’s design of and intentions for the work are necessary.

The Forest Is Young was first performed in 1966 after Nono worked for nearly a year with the clarinetist William O. Smith, the soprano Liliana Poli, and members of the Living Theatre. Nono interacted with the performers

1. The letters were collected in a book edited by Piero Malvezzi and Giovanni Pirelli and published by Giulio Einaudi (see Malvezzi and Pirelli 1954). Pirelli later became the librettist for A floresta. See Nielinger (2006) for an account of the historical and musical details of Il canto sospeso.

2. Azar is a composer, producer of a glam-rock band, and a director of both soap operas on television (As the World Turns, for which he, in 2007, won a Daytime Emmy) and contemporary operas. Nono employed the theatrical director Virginio Puecher for the first performances of the work (Nono 1998).

3. Knowledge about these works was greatly enhanced with the 1998 opening of the Luigi Nono Archive in Venice (see Archivia Luigi Nono 2003). Shortly after the score was published, a CD of The Forest Is Young was released by Vox Nova with Carol Robinson, Gerarde Pape, and Gaston Sylvestre (see Nono 2000).

4. Nono’s decision to engage the Living Theatre in the project is itself indicative of the inherent theatricality of Nono’s musical goals for this work. See www.livingtheatre.org for more information about the Living Theatre.
in two differing ways. First, he worked with them on recording instrumental sounds and text, either sung or spoken, onto tape, which he then used as the basis for the eight-track tape that plays during almost the entire piece. Second, he collaborated with the performers on the overall design of the piece and in particular on the specific ways that the performers would respond to the taped sounds during performance. While the piece was performed several times over a 10-year period and was recorded in 1967, no score was made; but all of the participants, especially Nono himself, took copious notes and compiled schematic drawings and other documents that detailed the succession of events in ways similar to a score. From these diverse materials, a score was prepared by Maurizio Pisati and Veniero Rizzardi and published in 1998. The extant working materials indicate clearly that Nono intended to engage performers in the creation of the work and to allow them some freedom in interacting with the sounds on the tape part. So, while the tape part is fixed and unchangeable, Nono conceived an improvisational relation between the live performers and the tape.

To create the eight-channel tape part in the mid-1960s, Nono used the latest in sound generation, recording, and manipulation then available to him at the Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI) Phonology Studio in Milan. He created two distinct four-track tapes designed to play

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5. That no score was produced could indicate that Nono had no intention of mounting future performances not involving him and the original creators, but the copious working notes of all the participants are strong indicators of the desire at least to preserve a trace of the creative process and quite possibly to enable future performances.

6. The production of the score is linked to the opening in 1998 of the Luigi Nono Archive in Venice, which houses all of the working materials for *The Forest is Young* (Archivio Luigi Nono 2003). The score gives detailed information about the sources for its production (Nono 1998).

*Figure 1. Luigi Nono's A floresta é jovem e cheja de vida (The Forest is Young and Full of Life; 1965/66), performed by the International Contemporary Ensemble (ICE). From left: Joshua Rubin, Tony Arnold, Katey Parker, Wendy Richman, and Peter Tantsits. PS. 122, New York City, 22–23 May 2007 (Photo by Rachel Roberts)*
through eight loudspeakers that would surround the audience. Working with the original performers, Nono recorded their instrumental and vocal sounds and transformed those sounds using a variety of sound-editing techniques, adding these to other electronically generated sounds. While the sounds occurring on the tape have a dated character for listeners in the new millennium, the surround-sound effect achieved in performance by the loudspeakers plays an important role in the dramatic design.

The Forest Is Young score includes text to be declaimed in five languages by both the live performers and the voices on tape. The texts, gathered and compiled for the piece by Giovanni Pirelli, are taken from various "testimonies, diaries, letters, speeches, interviews, despositions at trials, [and] work documents..." (Pirelli [1967] 1998). Texts for the live performers include statements from Fidel Castro, Franz Fanon, guerrilla fighters from Venezuela and Angola, an injured South Vietnamese partisan, factory workers from Detroit and Italy, and a student at the University of California–Berkeley. Texts on the tape include passages from a 1965 appeal by a group calling itself "The American Committee for the Suspension of the Vietnam War" and from an article in Fortune magazine by a military expert in the US Defense Department titled "Escalation." While The Forest Is Young is sometimes understood as an antiaircraft piece, specifically the Vietnamese War, Pirelli conceived the compilation of texts in broader Marxian terms, as an expression of the struggles of workers in the "developed [...] and third-world countries" (Pirelli [1967] 1998).

The specific anti–Vietnam War sentiment, far from pacifist, is contextualized by references to revolutionary and often violent struggles around the world. The title of the piece itself alludes to conflict, as the phrase was taken from a statement of an Angolan guerilla fighter: "They can’t burn down the forest because it is young and full of life." In its revolutionary context, the forest serves as the site not of idyllic reverie but of combat and bloodshed. The textural collage compiled by Pirelli has a clear political meaning when considered in literary terms; the role of such semantic meaning in Nono’s work is complicated by the other strands of expressive content: musical sound, gesture, lighting, staging, and the like.

The May 2007 performances by ICE adhered relatively closely to the directions provided in the 1998 score of The Forest Is Young. First, the vocalists and instrumentalists were superb, rendering the musical sounds with passion and conviction. The ensemble both understood and projected the music in all its aspects—from its variety of tonal colors and clashes to its dramatic timings. And the sound engineer, working unseen but not unheard, assured the appropriate dynamic balances between tape and live sounds.

The director, Habib Azar, determined four major aspects of the performance. First, contrary to Nono’s specification in the score, Azar arranged the performers into four distinct sound groups (percussion, soprano, reciters, clarinet) and placed each in a distinct place in the performing space, as illustrated in figure 2. The work’s score specifies placing the percussionists at the back of the stage and the clarinetist and vocalists together in a line at the front of the stage, as in figure 3.

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7. Two additional speakers are specified in the score for the amplified live voices and clarinet, making a total of 10. In conjunction with creating the score, Nono’s publisher Casa Ricordi arranged for the tapes to be restored by RAI for use in performances using contemporary equipment.

8. In a review of the concert, New York Times critic Steve Smith points out that some of the electronic sounds “have become the lingua franca of horror-movie soundtracks, an association that certainly affects apprehension of Nono’s music by at least some of today’s listeners (Smith 2007).

9. For instance, Kyle Gann writes “Nono’s A floresta e jovem e cheja de vida [...] is an anti–Vietnam War protest” (Gann 2003).

In a critical note to the 1967 recording of *The Forest Is Young*, Luigi Pestalozza wrote that the forward grouping of the clarinet and vocalists draws attention to their “musical act” (1998: xxxviii). Azar's organization of the stage takes a different tack, one that relates more directly to the semantic meanings of the textual collage. In the ICE performance, the spatial and hence sonic separation of the performers fostered a sense of physical isolation that underscores the sense of social fragmentation and upheaval suggested by the texts. Furthermore, the separation into four distinct sound groups (percussion, soprano, clarinet, reciters) enhanced the association of each live group with its pair on the tape.

Second, Azar had the performers remain motionless throughout the piece, moving only when necessary to produce the sounds. Dressed in black, the performers stood or sat almost passively, in stark contrast to the often wild, chaotic, and violent sounds that they created or that swirled around them in the hall. This contrast between the gestural actions of the performers and the sonic environment creates a dramatic effect that verges toward an emotional devastation.

Third, lighting was spare and simple. Azar chose to light more brightly those performers who were playing at any particular time, but always kept some light on all of the performers. This pragmatic and straightforward choice provided subtle support to the music without distracting from it.

Azar's fourth decision departs significantly from Nono's intentions and provides an important interpretive layer to the work. As figure 2 shows, the back of the stage includes a screen onto which a video was projected during the performance. In order to lead audience members toward the present and away from the work's past, from its idealistic goals of 1960s politics and its dated sounds of early tape technique, Azar chose to include a video compilation of other recent performances by

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11. Luigi Pestalozza also mentions that the director for at least some of the first performances, Virginio Puelcher, placed the clarinetist and vocalists on a platform “protruding toward the audience” (1998:xxxix). This detail does not appear in the score directions.
ICE of *The Forest Is Young*. The video shows both the performers and audience members, often with those images subjected to a variety of video-editing techniques that made them unrecognizable. Azar intends the video to situate audience members in the temporal present—that is, to make each person aware of the historical specificity of “this performance now” (Azar 2007). Such an awareness would then allow listeners to conjure up not only the historical specificity of the first performances 40 years ago but also the possibility of performances 40 years into the future.

Azar’s wish to bracket the pastness of Nono’s *The Forest Is Young* in order to make it more than a kind of musical documentary about a past moment of world history suggests a deep sympathy with music that attends to the world as a place of political and social contest. And his decision to overcome the pastness that is inscribed into the timbres and political sentiments of *The Forest Is Young* by using visual images that make audience members aware of themselves in the present historical moment seems just right to me. But as Azar himself has agreed, the video was only partially successful, partly because the video images did not make a direct address to the specific audience viewing the video. Seeing other audiences does not necessarily make one think about oneself as an audience member and hence as a historically situated being.

These observations might be understood to suggest that music of the past taking a specific stance toward world events of its time should not be performed in the present. But a wholesale dismissal of such works from the past would be a mistake. Azar’s video encourages audience members to think through the past, to understand a self and a society of the present in relation to the past. The real trick is to avoid letting a dated piece like *The Forest Is Young* become pedantically pedagogical. While Azar’s video assisted in this task, it could have done more to place listeners into the present with a bit more specificity. For instance, if images of the audience attending a specific performance could be included in the video along with past performances, then individual listeners might be more likely to understand their own role as historical actors.

Recent reception of Nono’s work, and especially of ICE’s performances, has been positive, but critical accounts in the 1960s were not. Writing in 1967 soon after the first performances, Reginald Smith Brindle posits that *The Forest Is Young* is “contaminated” with an “ideological pollution” (1967:95). And while he praises Nono’s music for its “undisputable unity” and its “continuous sense of expectancy,” he notes that in performance it is “virtually impossible to distinguish” the text. Thus for Smith Brindle, the text amounts to nothing more than “a personal manifesto, concrete enough on the printed page, but intangible in


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12. In a written communication, Azar confided that he felt the video worked only sometimes (Azar 2007).

actual sound" (97–98). While time has given us some perspective on what Smith Brindle saw as a “pollution,” his comments about the text raise some valid questions. As a work of music about how power is wielded in social institutions, *The Forest Is Young* depends on its texts as the glue keeping all the musical parts together; despite their disparate sources, these texts provide a web of semantic referents that serve a binding function. But comprehension of the semantic meaning of the texts is obscured by several factors: the multiple languages; the practicalities of performance, including diction of sung language; and the often thick textures of musical design. Thus, following out Smith Brindle’s logic, if comprehension of semantic meaning serves as a primary measure of musical value, then *The Forest Is Young* surely falls short.

But for Nono comprehensibility of vocal text was not necessary for effective musical communication of its semantic content, a position that he shared with the composer Arnold Schoenberg (who became Nono’s father-in-law in 1955). In a 1912 article about some Schubert songs, Schoenberg wrote that he understood perfectly the semantic meaning of the songs and their poetry “from the music itself” ([1912] 1975:xx). Thus for Schoenberg, since musical sound projects the essence of semantic meaning, comprehensibility of the text is not a primary musical value. While his notion of textual essence is of little conceptual value today, Schoenberg's demotion of semantic meaning is useful for an understanding of Nono’s *The Forest Is Young*. Specifically, the work is best approached through the multidimensionality of meaning in musical theatre.

While the music of some forms of musical theatre, like opera, operates well as “music” without a staged, dramatic context, the musical sounds of *The Forest Is Young* have none of their persuasive force outside of a staged performance. The sense of Nono’s piece fully depends on the interactions of the sounds from the 10 loudspeakers, the physicality of the live performers, the members of the audience, the lighting, the video projection (in the ICE performances), and the semantic references of the various texts. As one strand of musical meaning, the textual references should register for listeners in some way, but full comprehension of semantic meanings is not necessary. In performance, audience members typically have access to texts and program notes of some sort, and even a cursory knowledge of the textual referents can provide sufficient acquaintance. Like a plot synopsis of an opera or musical, the texts of *The Forest Is Young* constitute only one semantic piece of the multimedia whole.

As a complete work comprising stage placement, performance gesture, lighting, textual reference, loudspeaker placement, and musical sound, *The Forest Is Young* addresses the world in its social and political dimensions. Such an encounter of the aesthetic with the realities of everyday life is often strained since from its 18th-century invention, aesthetic experience promised transport from the mundane. And in the case of Nono’s work, the realities addressed are not those we face directly today in 2007. All of these issues lead eventually to the question alluded to earlier: How might performance of a 40-year-old work such as Nono’s focus our anxieties about the world in the early years of the new millenium?

As much as I find Nono’s specific political message dated or the timbral aspects of his musical language hackneyed, *The Forest Is Young* still has dramatic force. Its goal is not to focus attention on the feelings of individual emotion but to generate empathy for and perhaps outrage about the situation of others. Azar’s directorial decision to include the video in the ICE performances certainly goes some distance toward revitalizing this goal for contemporary audiences. There is one moment in *The Forest Is Young*, however, when the personal overwhelms the collective. Near the end of the work, the three reciters pose the question: “Is this all we can do?” Ascribed to an anonymous student at UC–Berkeley, this text turns attention back to the individual and sets up a reflection between the individual and the social. If performances of sociopolitical works

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14. Smith Brindle echoes here a comment made by Stockhausen about Nono’s *Il canto sospeso*, in which Stockhausen points out that Nono “composed the text as if to withdraw it from the public eye where it has no place” ([1960] 1964).
of the past can avoid the temptation to aestheticize and idealize, can renew the encounter between the aesthetic and the worldly realities of the present, then they can indeed help to focus anxieties about our world.

The ICE performance brought out well the sense of outrage that Nono certainly felt about the ills of his world and that we as citizens of a world torn apart by various wars and strife should feel about ours. And one might ask, “Is feeling enough?” If feeling can focus attention and lead eventually and perhaps incrementally to change, then it is enough.

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Lakeviews
A Bus Tour As a Vehicle for Regrowth in New Orleans

William Bowling and Rachel Carrico

Since the 2005 Katrina disaster in New Orleans, not many people frequent West End. A bustling row of seafood restaurants once lined the seawall on Lake Pontchartrain's south shore; now all that remains are a few scarred foundations and a clear view of the water. Although West End and its encompassing Lakeview neighborhood are not the only parts of New Orleans still struggling to jumpstart reconstruction, Lakeview's proximity to Lake Pontchartrain rendered it particularly devastated when the levees collapsed.

However, on 1–3 June 2007, West End showed peculiar signs of life. Two idling school buses and dozens of cars filled the weed-choked lot. A few people ordered plastic cups of wine and bottled beer from a makeshift bar. The rubble of a former dining room framed a simple scene: a single table flanked by two chairs, draped with a white tablecloth and topped with two place settings. Since it was wiped out by the aftermath of Katrina, this is all that's left of Bruning's Seafood Restaurant, family owned and operated since 1859. For a weekend its crumbling foundation was the starting point for Lakeviews, A Sunset Bus Tour: Performance, Art, Music, and Food. The tour also concluded here at sunset. For the two hours in between, the audience took part in a set of site-specific performances and installations at four other neighborhood locations, and afterward shared a meal with the artists at the former restaurant.

Lakeviews was produced in affiliation with the community-based arts network HOME, New Orleans?—a collective of multidisciplinary artists, students, local residents, universities, colleges, and neighborhood and cultural institutions. Unlike the numerous “disaster tours” that highlight post-Katrina devastation, Lakeviews was “intended as a rejuvenation ritual: to infuse the energy of art and audience into this decimated area” (HOME, New Orleans? 2007). Instead of merely mourning the ruin of Lakeview, the project worked to enliven the neighborhood by invoking its pre-Katrina life. While HOME, New Orleans? consists of diverse projects in three other neighborhoods—Central City, the Seventh Ward, and the Ninth Ward—the Lakeview team’s bus tour/performance, with its focus on pre-Katrina life, most closely resembles the original Home, New Orleans? idea as devised by Richard Schechner, in dialogue with The VESTIGES Project: Think Tank: to remember and revitalize devastated neighborhoods by performing “the vast range of human experience” that was lived in these spaces (Schechner 2006).

The very concept of a bus tour radically alters the normally sendentary artgoing experience by requiring viewers to be on the move. Spectators become passengers, visitors, pedestrians (daresay tourists?), and more. Not only are people bused between several sites; once in those spaces, they are invited to move

1. These projects include a visual arts project with elementary school students in the Ninth Ward, a mixed-media quilt installation in Central City, youth theatre workshops in the Seventh Ward, and a Bridging Group focused on photographic and video documentation of all projects. See http://ny2no.net/homeneworleans for more information.

2. Founded in 1984, The VESTIGES Project is a collective of New Orleans artists and writers. “THINK TANK is an UMBRELLA project—a conceptual BUCKET within which to brainSTORM ways to explore New Orleans’ future and to present multidisciplinary actions and installations in dialogue with the viewing audiences” (www.thevestigesproject.org 2006).

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through, in, and around them, to smell, touch, and taste them.

At 6:00 pm sharp, two packed school buses lurch out of the West End parking lot and lumber onto Robert E. Lee Boulevard. Passengers leaf through the program while enjoying wine or beer. Soon, however, the buzz of audience chatter dulls with four slow, swinging quarter notes and Fats Domino singing “Walking to New Orleans.” Eventually the song fades into the recorded voices of several Lakeview residents telling stories about life in the neighborhood. This mix of casual storytelling and relevant musical selections continues as the buses turn onto Canal Boulevard and roll past a string of homes and businesses in varying states of decay and/or reconstruction. Past, present, and future conflate as architectural rot and barely emerging futures scroll past the windows. Recorded recollections stream out of the speakers as the passengers’ own memories mingle with it all— for many who attend Lakeviews are neighborhood residents. According to visual artist Jan Gilbert, one of Lakeviews’ key collaborators, “It found its way deeper into the community” (MacCash 2007).³

Meanwhile, a mysterious copilot crouches near the bus driver. Conspicuously silent and draped in black, local performance artist Kathy Randels’s recurring presence weaves a narrative thread between most tour stops. Randels plays the Black Lady, a character that, according to the program notes, she discovered while performing in Serbia shortly before the 1999 NATO bombings. Because Randels is a white performer, the character’s name causes a few eyebrows to raise. But it is black humor and a dark mood, not race consciousness, that Randels brings to Lakeviews.

After 15 minutes, the buses park at their first stop, Holt Cemetery. Here the Black Lady joins}

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3. Passenger Sharon Jacques commented that riding on the school bus resonated with “so many shared experiences and histories in New Orleans, from personal to political,” which kept her “going in and out of time—the past became the present, the present the past” (Jacques 2007).

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Figure 1. Maritza Mercado-Narcisse (left) as The Suited Man and Kathy Randels as The Black Lady at Holt Cemetery (2007). In Lakeviews, A Sunset Bus Tour: Performance, Art, Music, and Food, New Orleans, LA, 1–3 June 2007. (Photo by Judy Cooper)
the Suited Man, played by dancer/performer Maritza Mercado-Narcisse, a dark-skinned woman in a gray suit, with a chalky white cross drawn from her forehead to chin and across her eyes. Choosing not to overtly problematize the overwhelmingly white population of Lakeview—and its relationship to blacker and poorer neighborhoods also ravaged by Katrina—Lakeviews instead reveals Holt Cemetery, a black space in a white suburb unknown to many of its residents.

The Suited Man stands in the cemetery’s gravel path and awaits the mostly white audience, escorted into the macabre performance site by the Black Lady. In a short monologue, the Suited Man speaks to his visitors about the trials of fatherhood in three earthly manifestations—a “toothless and strung out” Vietnam vet, an “excellent father […] given the gift of youth,” and finally, in the present, a witness to his descendents’ inevitable mortality (Mercado-Narcisse 2007).

While most crowd around the Suited Man, attempting to hear his unamplified delivery over the din of the traffic, others wander the gravesites. Founded in 1879 and long known as Potter’s Field, Holt Cemetery, the designated burial site for unclaimed, mostly black bodies from Charity Hospital since the mid-1900s, is a jumbled array of handcrafted headstones. Plots are still available from the city for the cost of burial, and many who cannot afford otherwise lay their dead to rest here. Mercado-Narcisse, the only African American artist in the collective, warmly and gently welcomes her audience to the other side, the other side of the tracks, literally, and the other side of Lakeview. Her performance at Holt, What Would My Father Have Said?, echoes Lakeviews’ play between themes of generations and renewal while acknowledging the ever-present question of race made manifest by kicking off the tour at Holt. Joseph Roach identifies a binary of timelessness and timeliness as a hallmark of New Orleanian culture. Of Mardi Gras floats he notes, “[t]hen as now the imagery oscillates between timelessness, the supposedly innocent realm of fantasy and fairy story, and timeliness, direct interventions in local and national politics, including the denigration of African Americans and their claims for equal protection under the law” (1996:265). Like the floats, the Lakeviews performance at Holt addresses timely sociopolitical concerns with a timeless trope of ghostly omniscience, yet it also points out how timeless—that is, perpetual—the political relevance of “timely” race concerns really is.

Back on the buses, the passengers are swiftly transported to Lakeview Baptist Church. Kathy Randels, who coordinated the performance and installations here, knows this space well. Her father, Reverend Dick Randels, was the pastor from 1954 to 1989, and returned after Katrina. Once inside, the audience wanders about the half-rehabilitated, modernist structure. Very few chairs are provided. The Black Lady plays loud dissonant chords on the piano. Tea lights dot the gutted front wall on a vast grid of two-by-fours spanning the width and height of the...
sanctuary. Randels had collected oral histories from church members, which she then wrote on the concrete subfloor in permanent marker prior to the performance. An installation called Heroes: Ages 1–91 hangs on fresh drywall and from the new dropped ceiling—portraits of church and local AARP members photographed and sketched by student artists from the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and Metairie Park Country Day School.\(^5\)

As spectators explore the space, Coming Forward begins in the sanctuary’s center. This performance of personal narratives, conceived and directed by Randels, features eight congregants. Each walks toward the pulpit, holding a personal possession and telling the audience about a formative experience as a Lakeview Baptist. One woman carries a tray of coffee and doughnuts and speaks of hosting services in her home for months after Katrina. Another explains how she became Reverend Randels’s secretary and carries the plaque commemorating her 22 years of service. Meanwhile, the Suited Man reappears, crouching below, leaning against, or encircling the speakers at the pulpit.

The pieces at Lakeview Baptist embody the fundamental tenets of community-based art: to sponsor a creative process that is educative and inclusive; to include oral history as the primary material of the creation; and to take practical steps toward community growth or regrowth.

The stop at Lakeview Baptist enjoys a positive reception, which is hugely aided by the presence of the Black Lady and the Suited Man, who gracefully usher the event away from the evangelism of Reverend Randels’s brief sermon. As the two figures circle each speaker at the pulpit, and later join hands in the prayer circle, they endorse the ritual-like qualities of the event even as they lead the audience away from religiosity, assuring all that they are not expected to become congregants or converts. The Suited Man affirms this when he invites saints and sinners alike to look at “all they’ve left behind”: the gallery of portraits, the floor full of stories, the personal objects placed in the gutted wall.

By the time the passengers board again, the sun has nearly set. As the buses roll down Canal Boulevard, Rosemary Clooney’s “Come on-a My House” is the anthem of the next two residential destinations, only a block apart. One bus stops at the childhood home of Jan Gilbert, the other at the pastorium of Lakeview Baptist Church where Randels spent her formative years. Here, the Black Lady is waiting.

Randels begins her performance, Spaces in Between, in the backyard, telling her visitors about a little girl who would run into the dark yard when she sensed a summer storm coming, who would tear off her shirt and dance in the rain though she was perhaps a “little too old to be doing such things” (Randels 2007). Randels then leads the audience through a busted

\(^5\) The student art installation was coordinated by Jan Villarrubia. Participating student artists included those from Michel Varisco’s New Orleans Center for Creative Arts/Riverfront and Pam Eveline’s students at Metairie Park Country Day School.
sliding door into what was once the living room. The house is a gutted skeleton of wall studs and rot, bits of falling insulation, and rusted chandeliers, smelling faintly of mold. Some refuse to enter because the mold smell warns them of a health risk; some because the odor reminds them too painfully of their own loss. The wrecked rooms have been dressed to display a trace of what life was like here without erasing what it has become: a pristine white roll of toilet paper in a filthy bathroom, a bowl of fruit on the decaying remnant of a counter top, a brightly polished rectangle of linoleum once occupied by a couch.

The Black Lady leads from rotten room to rotten room, explaining that the Green Room is so named because of boogers wiped on the wall, or how the girl, when older, hid cigarettes behind the bed in the Blue Room and snuck out its window at night. With a story of a rare New Orleans snowstorm, the Black Lady runs dancing and singing from the house and vanishes. Through a big picture window the Suited Man is seen walking slowly down the sidewalk, paying no attention at all to the 50 out-of-place audience members inside the destroyed pastorium. The impulse to follow the Black Lady is immediate, yet when the visitors round the corner, she is gone. Instead, the group from the other bus ambles toward them, directing them down the block toward another house and another story.

Here Gilbert has installed Biography of a House along the outside of her childhood home. Gilbert began her installation with hundreds of old photographs, then added many heavy coats of polymer, giving the images a third dimension that she could mold. The 300 feet of photographic panels, attached to the brick at the lowest point of the flood line, wrap the entire outside of the house. Thus, Biography of a House requires a viewer’s negotiation of space to experience its full effect. Each panel, individually between 8 and 12 feet long and about 12 inches high, tightly hugs the brick and is seamed to the following panel, creating the impression that the structure has been adorned with a single, shining ribbon, a sculptural history of the Gilberts’s 50-year relationship with their home. The photos are from the Gilbert family archive: baby pictures, family portraits, birthdays, holidays, and such. Connected one after the other, the images form a continuous narrative. From the open windows behind the panels the viewers hear a young man being awakened by his father, little girls playing in the kitchen, and television and telephone chatter. Gilbert’s nephew, composer William Gilbert, pulled this audio from home recordings made by his late grandfather. The sounds bring the home to life, animating the images of the four Gilbert generations who once inhabited it. More so than earlier stops, Randels’s and Gilbert’s homes require visitors to move in, around, through, and between, smelling the mold and rot and feeling the sandy ground underfoot.

The tour ends with a return to Bruning’s restaurant, where the site has been transformed in the meantime. The previously lone dining table is now surrounded by many others, all lined with chairs and topped with white tablecloths. The final performance is already in progress: at the original table sits a middle-aged couple, gnawing on crawfish. As a backdrop to the scene, the
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orange Louisiana sun slowly sinks into Lake Pontchartrain. When the passengers disembark for the last time, perhaps physically and emotionally weary, they are encircled by seven musicians playing a composition by Chris Trapani, the cousin of the final piece’s writer and director, Andrew Larimer. His short play, Generations, underlines Lakeviews’ overall theme of rejuvenation. Larimer, the youngest member of the HOME, New Orleans? collective, is one of a wave of young people either moving back to the city or arriving as pioneers.

Generations samples three slices of life, all set during an evening at Bruning’s. Outside the dining room, a young couple quarrels about their future while an older couple eats and bickers with the absent figures of their daughter and grandchildren. Larimer and actor James Bartelle appear over the seawall costumed as a crawfish and a crab. The two chart their new destiny in the great Crescent City, driven onshore by the glorious descriptions they’ve read in soggy, discarded tour books. Meanwhile, the ghostly silhouettes of the Black Lady and the Suited Man gaze from their lakeside perch. At the play’s conclusion, Larimer thanks everyone for coming and Randels invites all to the Finale Feast. Seated in the twilight, gazing across the now placid lake, everyone—visitors, residents, and performers—share a meal of gumbo.

Sitting at the feast with friends, family, and colleagues, Ron Bechet, Xavier art professor and coordinator of the Ninth Ward HOME, New Orleans? project, reflects on the organization’s impact and its ability to take sustainable steps toward rebuilding the city. He says that Lakeviews and other artistic endeavors contribute to New Orleans’ regrowth no less substantially than do structural efforts. Art is fundamental to healing a wounded community: “What art forms do is that they communicate.” Of course, some of the social ills that have long plagued New Orleans—pre- and post-Katrina—may never be healed, “but if we’re not talking about them, we can’t make improvement” (Bechet 2007).

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Figure 5. James Bartalle (left) and Andrew Larimer as Crawfish and Crab in Generations from Lakeviews (2007). (Photo by Jan Gilbert)
Border Hysteria and the War against Difference

Guillermo Gómez-Peña

“Watch out loco! Godzilla in a mariachi hat could be an Al-Qaeda operative.”

In this piece, performance artist and writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña articulates a passionate defense of “undocumented” immigrants, post-national identity, and a multiracial USA. This text-in-progress is part of the borderless movement of citizen journalism circulating in cyberspace.

I

In October 2006, King George signed a bill authorizing the construction of an additional “border security” wall spanning one-third of the US-Mexican border. The plan was to build a concrete wall replete with floodlights, surveillance cameras, and motion detectors. On the front-page photo of Mexico’s daily La Jornada, George W. and a group of opportunistic governors and políticos from the southwestern states stand posed before a postcard-perfect Arizona landscape. The President sat at a table signing the bill, his sycophantic groupies fanned about him, gawking and gaping like backstage groupies. It was pure performance art for electoral purposes. The photo was published throughout Latin America and caused general outrage.

I asked myself: “Who is going to build that pinche wall—undocumented migrants hired by Halliburton?”

A month later, Congress approved the proposal—the same week they squashed habeas corpus. Una mera coincidencia?

Outside this country of the US everyone asks: “Why does the US need more walls and more isolationistic politics? Aren’t they isolated enough already?” But within our borders Washington incessantly chants: “National security! Homeland security!” More walls, laws, and border patrols!

The master narrative of US national security (as written by the neocons in collaboration with the mainstream media) reads: “Muslim radicals are out to get ‘us’; ‘illegal aliens’ are out to take ‘our’ jobs. We, victims of the wrath of history, are merely innocent bystanders. Our only crime is our belief in freedom and democracy.” This strategic deployment of the rhetoric of victimization and of heroism and of moral panic clearly justifies both the tightening of our

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borders and the militarization of our international policies.

II

This is the new brand of immigration hysteria: bigger, better, whiter.

As the years have passed and the US has nurtured its citizens’ convalescence from post-9/11 shock, nativist newscasters, opportunistic politicians, right-wing think-tanks (FAIR), and citizen groups continue to portray Latino immigrants as the source of all our social and cultural ills and of our financial tribulations—even, at times, as distant relatives of Arab extremists.

Since 9/11, the semiotic territory encompassed by the word “terrorist” has expanded considerably. First it referred strictly to Al Qaeda and the Taliban, then to Muslim “fundamentalists,” eventually it engulfed all Muslims, and then finally all Arabs and Arab-looking people. In 2003, when a Palestinian friend told me: “We (Arabs) are the new Mexicans, and by extension you are all Arabs,” I realized how easily the demon mythologies of the brown body transfer from race to race, from country to country. Memories, like attention spans, are short and mutable. Color, like disease, is contagious…

Former Attorney General John Ashcroft forged the missing link between the War on Terror and Latin America. During his reign a Puerto Rican Muslim named Padilla was detained as he returned to the US from a “suspicious” visit to Pakistan. On several other occasions Mexican migrants were detained for an indefinite period of time without explanation or legal counsel. Their crimes? One of them wore a tattoo with the image of Bin Laden. Another one, a Mexican ice cream vendor, was seized while videotaping a government building in Fresno. He wanted to send a tape to his family back home “to show them the beautiful buildings of his host city.” These cases are heartbreaking and reveal a frightening political reality: the scattered US War on Terror has definite second front line, the US-Mexico border.

During a CNN “town meeting” on border issues conducted by anti-immigrant pundit Lou Dobbs, Republican Michael McCaul explained: “You know, after 9/11 the border is really a national security issue. We simply do not know who is coming into this country.” The implication of his warning was clear: How can we tell the difference between a migrant worker and an Arab Terrorist? Watch out locos! Godzilla in a mariachi hat could be an Al-Qaeda operative.

III

It’s “zero tolerance” for brown-skinned immigrants.

The militarization of the border began in the early ’90s with the transparently obvious name “Operation Gatekeeper.” When the Border Patrol officially “lit up the border,” migrants were forced to travel through more treacherous desert terrain. More than 5,000 migrants have died while crossing or attempting to cross since then.

The Bush administration has taken this project to a new height of absurdity. The number of combined law enforcement personnel and the scope of the high-tech military apparatus that monitors the border have increased exponentially since 9/11. This increase in devices of border surveillance is matched by the increase in the number of right-wing vigilante groups like the infamous “Minuteman Project,” who feel that their patriotic efforts to defend our borders are validated by the political mainstream and protected by the Patriot Act. Their frequent human rights violations are rarely prosecuted or even reported by the media.

Racist anti-immigration legislation is being implemented in small towns all across the country. It is now illegal in certain cities for landlords to rent rooms or apartments to “illegals.” The sanctions against employers who hire “illegals” have become much tougher and more frequently imposed. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) increasingly conducts raids (with overtly cruel names such as “Operation Predator”) in stores, bus and train stations, Home Depots, meat-packing plants, restaurants, and nightclubs. “Concerned” citizens are also doing their part. Despite the fact that citizenship is not required for students of public schools in the US, some schoolteachers persist in asking Mexican children for proof of
their parents’ citizenship. One state assemblyman has requested that school districts in his area provide him with the number of “illegal” immigrants in their classrooms. Certain banks are reporting to Homeland Security when a Latino who wishes to open an account does not have proper documentation. It is no exaggeration to assert that Homeland Security now runs the largest neighborhood watch program on planet earth.

What is the logical outcome of all this hysteria? The economy of these communities collapses as migrants are forced out of town. The state of Colorado has been so successful in expelling the migrants that sustain its economy that the governor is now considering replacing them with prisoners. Good luck keeping them in line, pendejo!

But this economic revelation does not discourage the likes of Lou Dobbs, Bill O’Reilly, Pat Buchanan, and Samuel Huntington. Obsessed with a mythical “war of civilizations” in which the US is losing control of its borders and rapidly becoming “Mexicanized,” they rejoice in the following metanarrative: White identity, protestant Anglo culture, and the English language are under serious threat and the country must remove all external influences, close its borders entirely, and begin massive deportations of “aliens.” It’s now or never.

The restoration of the fabled monolingual White America that never was (but wishes it had been) is not only a crackpot project, it is, in fact, a genius plot for a sci-fi movie! One wonders if it is possible to imagine a US without Native American, black, and Chicano culture; without blues, jazz, Tex-Mex, and Cajun music; without Latino, Creole, and Asian food; without writers and artists of color. Would it even be the US? Is there such a place on the map? Was there ever such a place?

Are we approaching the last days of an Empire, or is this merely the long, dark night of a democratic republic immersed in a severe identity crisis? How did we reach a “post-democratic” era and not even know it?

For the moment, post-9/11 America is in “lock down,” rapidly becoming a closed society. Thanks to Bush’s unilateral and isolationist policies, the US is completely alone in the world, facing the bizarre burden of having to defend and enforce “liberty and democracy” through violent means.

IV
The Western Frontier reappears…

Immigration hysteria has always resurfaced in times of crisis. It’s an integral part of America’s racist history. But this time it’s different. What characterizes this immigration debate is an absolute lack of compassion when referring to migrants without documents. The “aliens”—that is, the brown-skinned ones—are “criminals” by the mere fact that they are here “illegally.” But the criminality that is a consequence of their location—being on the wrong side of the US-Mexican border—is now taken to be symptomatic of their broader “criminal” identity. They are treated with suspicion for being connected to or supportive of global crime cartels and terrorist cells.

The loaded terms such as “illegal alien,” “alien,” or the even more damming term, “illegal,” are now synonymous with smuggler, border bandit, drug pusher, and gang member. The distinctions between “illegal” and “legal” easily disappear in the eyes of the racist. The brown face of evil morphs into the face of every “other” when the button of fear is pushed.

The incommensurable human suffering of migrants who move from their “proper place” without documents is a direct consequence of a failed global project, but their suffering appears inconsequential. The fact that hungry men, women, and children risk their lives by crossing the desert to make a few dollars to send back home remains insignificant. The fact that most of their earnings are sent across the border infuriates the nativists even more. For them, humanity stops at the border, “this” side of the border. Paradoxically, these self-styled “nativists” are of European origin, whereas their “alien” enemies are indigenous Americans whose ancestors walked this American land for thousands of years, long before the first border checkpoint was installed with the 1882 Exclusion Act.

Since the US-Mexico border is now perceived as the most vulnerable national security barrier and as the probable entryway of
terrorists, to defend “illegal aliens” is to participate in anti-American behavior. If you dare to help them in any way—feed them or offer them a ride (not to mention a job or a place to live)—you may be breaking the law. For this reason, we can legitimately proclaim that human empathy and human solidarity are now illegal in the USA.

Remember the outrageous treatment of the “No More Deaths” volunteers in Arizona (2006) who were prosecuted merely for giving aid to migrants in the desert whose lives were in danger?

When a caller recently told Bill O’Reilly, “I will never employ an alien or rent to an alien because I’m an American patriot and my job is to defend America,” the right-wing shock jock answered: “Good for you, Sir!” The absolute lack of empathy for those who are culturally different from “us” (the fictive white majority) permeates the mainstream media and its version of political discourse. When one US citizen is killed or kidnapped abroad the whole country becomes outraged. However, the monthly deaths of migrants crossing the border are rarely reported, and the daily deaths of Iraqi civilians remain impersonal numbers. They are “collateral damage” in the multiple fronts of the War on Terror. The demonized brown body in the age of terror has no name or personal identity.

Pay attention to the tone and language of the immigration debate and one cannot help but ask: Has America lost its compassion (or rather the mythology of American compassion) for the underdog and its tolerance for cultural otherness? At what point did white people stop calling themselves immigrants? And weren’t they initially illegal too?

The damage that the Bush administration has inflicted upon our legal structure, civic culture, and our psyches is profound. Compassion has been replaced by fear: a generalized fear of otherness and difference. Fear is now our national culture, our subconscious, and our zeitgeist. This same fear helps to wage war and inflict torture on people who have come to this country for many of the same reasons as white immigrants.

V

In a state like California, with a majority Mexican population, “the governor” openly praises the Minutemen. His off-the-record comments about the “hot-tempered” nature of Latinas match up with his public statements that indicate he does not want “aliens” to have driver’s licenses. He is clearly suspicious of their “alien” nature. He believes that forcing them to walk or to rely on inadequate public transportation makes them easier to watch by law enforcement officials.

Against all logic Arnold was reelected governor with one-third of the Latino vote. Why? Did we vote for him or for the action hero? Have we Latinos become that depoliticized and alienated? Are our psyches so colonized by trash culture that we have lost our political compass? Aren’t we aware of the racist history of the GOP?

A brief look at Latino electronic media might give us some clues: When surfing Spanish-language TV channels, what do we find? A mediascape populated by hysterical celebrities and cyborg babes in micro-tangas speaking about… nada. Tabloid newscasts feature “the weirdest and most violent.” “X-treme” and “uncensored” talk shows and “reality shows” strive to out-outrage their Anglo counterparts. It’s embarrassing. Latino media has become an over-the-top cartoon of the US media that originally inspired it.

As a Latino artist I constantly ask myself: How do we fight this political despair and cultural loneliness we feel in post-9/11 America? How should we respond to the fact that Spanish-language media addresses the lowest common denominator when creating its programming and media content? Where can Latinos go to renew our cultural identity and political clarity? In the past we might have looked to local art spaces and community centers. But these cultural spaces are facing probable extinction due to severe underfunding of the arts and community centers and the services they provide.

VI

The frightening post-9/11 political lingo has been normalized, and so have the fears and
humiliation rituals shaped by it. George Orwell’s bible of “Newspeak” and the cold-war jargon of the “Wetback Menace” are nothing compared to the linguistic artistry of the Bush regime.

Phrases like “Homeland Security” and “Patriot Act” are fascist terminology that closely resembles Nazi jargon. “Homeland Security” in German literally translates to the original name of the Nazi SS. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, is now the new acronym for the border patrol. What a pitiful metaphorical choice! Is their objective to “freeze” all border crossings? Think about these terms! Isn’t it clear that “National Security” really means security for a few middle- and upper-class whites and insecurity for the rest? Have we become so shortsighted that we can’t understand that “ethnic profiling,” now official policy and daily practice, is a euphemism for blatant and institutionally sanctioned racism?

As we build the “second border wall” we are sending an unambiguous message to the rest of the world: “The US DOES NOT wish to be part of the world community; leave us alone… or else!”

VII

As the popularity of neocon policies decreases along with the mirage of national unity created by the phony patriotism of war, we become aware of a dramatic fact: We are a divided country, and divided we stand.

The internal divisions multiply beyond the popularized blue/red American schism revealing multiple Americas, fragmented communities, and divided families. The “typical” Chicano family of today is also divided along conscious and unconscious ideological lines. Seated at the same family table one can find a soldier and an antiwar activist, a border patrolman and an undocumented uncle, an artist and a Hispanic businessman, a confused patriot and a lonely internationalist. Clearly, the post-9/11 culture of panic, militarism, censorship, and paranoid nationalism has permeated our psyches, daily interactions, and personal relationships.

As critical artists, we are overworked and poorer than we were a decade ago; we’re politically exhausted and scared shitless of the immediate future. It is no coincidence that in the last few years personal illness, breakups, and suicide have all increased exponentially against the backdrop of social, racial, and military violence. Understandably, our bodies and psyches are internalizing the pain of the larger sociopolitical body, and we are absorbing the fear and despair of the collective psyche. As Latinos, our brown bodies are also occupied territories in which other wars are taking place.

VIII

The US-Mexico border is wider than ever.

As an artist engaged in binational cultural exchanges for 25 years, I have never seen my two countries more separated from one another. While Mexico is obsessed with its own postelectoral crisis, the US is obsessed with the War on Terror. While Mexico grapples with organized crime, the US grapples with its inner demons of terror. Indifferent neighbors, neither one is paying attention, much less talking to the other.

From the US side, Mexico is, at best, invisible (post-9/11, Latin America disappeared as a regular news item); and, at worst, a Dantean inferno. From the local news to recent Hollywood movies and video games, Mexico is portrayed as an ongoing source of drugs, illegal immigration, senseless crime, and political turmoil—and nothing more. When discussing organized crime in Mexico, US pundits and politicians fail to understand the obvious: the guns that perpetrate that violence are actually made by US gun manufacturers and sold by US dealers. This too is an “inconvenient truth” of global significance. It’s the same with drugs. The US distributors and consumers don’t play significant roles in action movies—unlike in the real world. In public discussions no one acknowledges that violence and drugs are part of a systemic global problem. All sides are implicated. There are no good guys or bad guys in this film. (Gonzalez Iñarritu’s amazing 2006 movie Babel made this case in a very poignant way.)

Strategic ignorance plays a major role in all this madness. Many “patriotic” Americans easily forget that it is thanks to “illegal” aliens hired by other “patriotic” Americans that the
What the anti-immigrant rhetoric doesn’t seem to acknowledge is that a closed border not only impedes people from coming in, but it also stops people from leaving. Isolationism works both ways. The internal panopticon affects us all. And isolationism in the age of globalization is a worrisome symptom of cultural entropy and political desperation.

Even worse, isolationism is self-perpetuating. The irony is that the exaggerated border enforcement designed to keep undocumented immigrants out and to make crossing much more difficult has actually made it so that immigrants stay within the US longer. Sometimes their stay becomes...permanent.

The new immigration laws, Homeland Security’s use of biometric devices such as retinal scanners for international visitors and human scanners for “certain travelers,” combined with the infamous precepts of the Bush Doctrine are effectively contributing to an international boycott of the US. All over the world forums, dialogues, summits, business operations, and even art festivals are silently boycotting the participation of Americans. Anti-American sentiment is rampant throughout the world. When Bush left Guatemala, the last of seven Latin American countries he visited this year, Mayan shamans decided to “purify” their sacred archeological sites “to eliminate the bad spirits” left behind by the US president.

The US tourist industry is in disarray. European, Canadian, and Latin American travelers are having second thoughts when it comes to vacationing here. They simply do not wish to undergo humiliation upon their arrival. Even my Mexican family and friends are hesitant to visit me in California. My friend, journalist Alfredo Araico, told me recently, “I’ll wait for Bush to be out of office to visit you. I hope you understand, carnal.” He was simply giving voice to a very common feeling. The words “United States,” now interchangeable with the Bush era, are tainted by negative connotations of human rights violations,
torture, unnecessary military violence, and the mistreatment of innocent immigrants.

What is the extent of this informal boycott? What is being done to combat it? Who knows? The media is not reporting it. They are too busy with the postmortem misadventures of trash queen “Anna Nicole,” Brittany Spears’s rehab regime, and Paris Hilton’s run-ins with the law.

Let’s face it, the War on Terror is also a war on difference: cultural, political, religious, racial, and even sexual. And the many targets of this war—Muslims, Arabs, Arab-looking people, Latino immigrants, people with thick accents and ethnic features—are being lumped into one single menacing form of otherness. The list goes on to include the poor and the homeless. Dissenting intellectuals, critical artists, socially conscious scientists, and activist gays are all being targeted. Those waging this war, “the new barbarians,” continue to multiply, threatening Western democracy from without and within.

Fortunately, the vast territory encompassed by Bush’s infamous pronoun “Us” (as in Us against Them; Nosotros, los Otros) shrinks day by day as dissonance from the Right increases and the Left becomes more vocal. Democrats, now in control of the House and the Congress, are clumsily trying to multiply their political compass and undo some of the structural damage they’ve sustained since 2000. Do they have the necessary cojones to do it? Nancy Pelosi notwithstanding, do they represent a progressive alternative to the neocons? Incommensurable silence.

Here’s an even tougher question: Can the mirror of critical culture be restored in the USA? I hope so— We hope so—with all our hearts. But it would require the coordinated efforts of hundreds of progressive communities working toward this goal: to transform a culture of fear and isolationism to one of humanism and international cooperation. Can this be done without the participation of artists and intellectuals?

For the moment it is critical for US-based artists and intellectuals to speak up with valor and clarity. Our job has always been to side with the underdog, to question the discourse of power, and to contest the imposition of oppressive practices in the name of national governance. Today the master discourse embraces and promotes ultra-nationalism, isolationism, xenophobia, and censorship. This goes against our core beliefs: to make sure that borders and institutions remain open; and to cross those borders we are not supposed to cross. We, the artists and intellectuals—not politicians or soldiers—are the ones who must defend freedom and democracy. Clearly our notions of “freedom and democracy” differ dramatically from those articulated by our public officials. In fact, they are in stark opposition to the notions of those in power. And we must be prepared to promote and defend our beliefs. Our futures depend on it.

During a recent debate I had with a nativist, he asked me to provide him with a strong reason why the US should not close its borders with Mexico. My answer was as follows:

To me, the “problem” is not immigration, but immigration hysteria. Immigration is a byproduct of globalization, and as such it is irreversible. One-third of mankind now lives outside their homeland and away from their original culture and language. The existing nation-states are dysfunctional and outdated. And the legal structures that contain them do not respond to the new complexities of the times.

His response to my answer was: “I don’t understand a word of what you are saying. The fact is that the aliens are here illegally.”

I continued:

To me immigration is not a legal issue but a humanitarian and humanistic one. No human being is “illegal,” period. All human beings, with or without documents, belong to human kind, our kind, and if they require our help, we are obliged to provide it. It’s called being human. Period. In this context, nationality becomes secondary. Their pain is ours, and so is their fate.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked contentiously.
“Just as I became an immigrant one day, you yourself might become one in the future.”

He looked at me with perplexity and disgust and after a long pause, he said, “You people are determined to destroy us. What have we done to you?”

At that point I realized there was not much space for intellectual negotiation with him. His arguments were strictly emotional. He was fighting for his life, his inner country, and his sense of belonging to an imaginary world. He was the real alien, lost on a multiracial and multicultural foreign planet where border culture and hybridity are the norm.

I finally answered: “You know, señor, immigration to the US is the direct result of the economic and political behavior of the US toward other countries. Most immigrants, including myself, are unconsciously searching for the source of our despair. I think I found it just now. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

—from the Borderless Americas, July 2007

Reference

New York Times