Defecting Witness

The Difficulty in Watching Regina José Galindo’s *PERRA*

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“You don’t have to privilege the ethical over the aesthetic in art if the aesthetic remains the condition of possibility of the ethical in art.”

— Fred Moten (2003:249)

When I met Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo in 2013, she was wearing a dress that revealed the faint white lines of the word “PERRA” on her left thigh. The scar, like a ghost on the body, evinces an event or an action that has occurred. A bold sign of time’s incorporation onto the skin, the scar manifests as a remnant of an embodied archive of injury. The mark of the initial cut wears away with the passage of time, yet the scar only emerges with new skin. By healing in the present a wound of the past, the scar reminds us that the historical and the social event are coeval. As sociologist Avery Gordon tells us, the ghost is “one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way” ([1997] 2008:8). In that moment, I certainly interfaced with ghostly matter.

Eight years earlier, Galindo sat alone on a metallic chair in a cement room holding a paring knife in her right hand. I watched a video recording of this performance, wondering what
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treacherous act was about to occur; I had not yet seen the scar. What kind of terror waited to flood the empty room on the screen before me? She wore a black dress with a high collar, the fabric cascading towards her ankles. A slit opened to expose her left thigh, a waiting, brown canvas. With the tip of the small knife, she began to slice the letter “P” into her thigh. Galindo was slow and deliberate. She took deep breaths and long pauses before each cut, and at times made multiple cuts in the same spot to pierce through the skin. Then she sliced the long side of the letter “E” followed by short, consecutive perpendicular incisions. She paused again. She sliced the “R,” moving the knife swiftly on the round curve to complete the letter. Her head tilted downward towards her leg and I searched her partially concealed face for a signal of how I should feel. My eyes darted across my computer screen, watching and rewatching, looking from the cuts on her thigh, to her shaking hand, to her face. The hand holding the knife began to quiver slightly as she wiped it onto her dress. Seemingly renewed, she took up the knife again. She drew another deliberate “R.” She made two more incisions, then paused for a moment before slicing the bridge that connected them to make the letter “A.” Blood pooled around the joints of the letters like afterthoughts of the initial cuts. Perra, bleeding perra. Bitch, bleeding bitch. A beat passed and then she stood up, letting the black fabric curtain her freshly inscribed leg. Finally, she walked out of the video frame.

Though the video blackens out and the performance is over, the scar lingers as both a corporeal and affective reminder. The slipperiness of the time and space that moves between the original cut in 2005, to me when I register the scar in the live moment in 2013 when Galindo gave a talk at Brown University,1 to the women found dead in Guatemala with this same word written on their bodies in the early 2000s, asks me, among other spectators—a tentative “us”—to witness pain differently. At the heart of this performance is an effort to remember the victims of feminicide in Guatemala, whose bodies are rendered as disposable, their

1. Galindo was invited to give an artist talk for a conference on Theater and Civil Society at Brown University on 10 June 2013.

Figure 1. (facing page) Regina José Galindo, PERRA, 2005. Detail. Sometimes the dull blade necessitates multiple cuts to pierce the skin, as the artist carves the mark she shares with the murdered women of Guatemala. (Courtesy of the artist and Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani, Milan/Lucca; photo by Kika Karadi)
2. Latino studies scholars Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, after feminist sociologist Diana Russell, use the term feminicide (feminicidio) in reference to the “murders of women and girls founded on a gender power structure” that implicates “the state (directly or indirectly) and individual perpetrators” through public and private violence (2010:5).

3. In Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*, he explains: “A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).” In his description of an image’s punctum he also refers to it as a wound, much like the cut of PERRA that touches the viewer beyond the photograph ([1980] 1981:119–20).
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1. I use the first person plural “we” to speak with and to audiences of Galindo’s work, which upon viewing these images includes the reader and the YouTube indicator that reports the over 12,775 views of her performance (which is to say one can watch over again limitlessly and still be counted). As spectatorship is my central concern, I use this “we” to speak to my own experiences of watching the piece as well as other curators, art reviewers, and scholars who have written about Galindo’s work. I intend for this we to speak for those who have also shared a sense of impotence when witnessing distant violence through various representational forms.

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3. Defecting Witness also equivocates in this shared atmosphere of feeling impotent. A theory of the defecting witness builds on affective duration to consider a culturally specific and ethical mode of beholding difficult art. Immediately, the descriptor “defective” connotes a failure, the opposite of effective, yet there is no model of what an “effective” witness looks like. In a strictly juridical sense, a witness will later testify in order to prove or disprove that an event occurred. I do not intend to corroborate ideologies of “effective” or “defective” witnesses, but rather to probe how being changed through the act of witnessing imbues spectators with an ethics of shared responsibility. On the contrary, I intend to mobilize the term “defecting” as it offers a more robust, albeit purposely slippery, understanding of the witness. In a political sense, reminiscent of the Cold War and McCarthy eras, “to defect” signifies becoming “a rebel or deserter; spec. to desert to a Communist country from a non-Communist country, or vice versa.” Moreover, defecting also means, “to fall away from (a person, party, or cause).” In the Latin American postdictatorial era—the timeframe in which Galindo grew up—mentioning or expressing the details of military crimes one had witnessed was and still is a dangerous act that has often led to torture, fatal threats, and harassment. By witnessing the crimes of the military, those who could potentially identify and name the perpetrators of the violence threatened to undo the web of lies and misinformation that held together the state apparatus of extreme violence. Diana Taylor, building on Argentine psychoanalysis Juan Carlos Kusnetzoff, uses the term “percepticide” to describe “the military’s attack on the perceptual organs of the population” in her study of theatre in Argentina’s Dirty War (1997:259). As Jean Franco further details in Cruel Modernity, “mini-totalitarianism” emerges in the wake of extreme violence as a means of using fear to control a population that clearly knows the actors responsible for specific crimes (2013:22). In short, what Franco and Taylor describe are tools of terror that blind populations to the violence of the state. The grotesque violence witnessed in the social sphere, such as in Guatemala, is a “demonstration of power through extreme acts of cruelty,” which simply put, comes from “an extreme cult of masculinity” (225). In watching difficult art like PERRA, multiply removed from these extreme acts, defecting accumulates time and emotion (duration and affect) through the process of being moved, or by falling from one settled understanding of social violence to a place of palpable uncertainty.

4. Through her difficult aesthetics, as well as her own witnessing, Galindo shares with the international and anonymous spectator an epistemological and ontological transformation. Like Galindo, we can behold the pain of feminicide’s social residue without substituting it with our

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6. Guatemala’s civil laws endorse a particular structure of women’s dependency on their male counterparts. For example, up until the 1998 reforms of the Civil Codes, “husbands could legally object to their wives’ working outside the home,” among other trenchant gender-based restrictions, and the nation mandated domestic and economic labor roles for the assumed heterosexual, cisgendered family. Though the reforms to the Civil Codes do not prescribe such explicit behavioral expectations, they dictate the lived realities of working-class Guatemalan women.
own understanding of pain, a sense of intimacy from a distance. At the same time, observing this pain as represented by Galindo causes us to falter in our certainty of knowing history, violence, and pain. Galindo, as a ladino artist who concedes her phenotypic and socioeconomic privilege in the Guatemalan context, neither performs a digestible narrative in the voice of victims, nor an explicit narrative of indictment on the Guatemalan state. Instead she turns to the affective toll of violence on the social sphere to critique ubiquitous murder and disposability. Analyzing emotion, and in this case feeling impotent, allows us to see “where ideology does its most devastating work” as the social weight of violence endures, reverberates, and even increases over time (Doyle 2013:9).

In contrast to the reader of the Central and Latin American tradition of testimonio, the defecting witness resists the consumption of narratives as a trace of the truthful, authentic, or pure. Many scholars of Latin American literary studies have written about the politics of truth within testimonio. For example, past literary criticism has celebrated testimonio as an authentic voice, yet the genre facilitates the “interpellative performance” of confession for the international reader, as well as for the writer to whom the speaker narrates their story (Saldaña-Portillo 2003:154). Recalcitrant regarding the production of facts or truths, PERRA suggests — through the performative collapse of victim, perpetrator, and witness — that the truth of state violence is fallible. Enduring and accepting this fallibility over time creates gaps and holes in the knowledge of a historical event. Defecting facilitates an active shift in certainty as one accumulates information about this event, both in fact and fiction. Falling away from a mastery of details, from the certainty of an event, towards an active and ethical uncertainty allies the spectator with another’s pain, a pain that they can never know yet can bear alongside. In short, defecting privileges an ethics of responsibility despite and because of this uneven footing. I read Galindo’s pauses and the self-alienation in her own actions as a space in which she asks her audiences not only to sense the truth of violence, but to bear it too. This alienation takes on new meaning when Galindo is not pretending to be another body but rather embodies various roles as herself. Bertolt Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt — initially translated as “alienation,” now more prevalently as “distanciation” — is a theatrical and social description of a performer’s awareness that she is “being looked at” and thus estranged from her own actions. No action is ever self-evident onstage and thus spectators are prevented from a total “self-surrender” ([1949] 1961:131). Brecht sought to make the familiar strange, working against the percepticide of European fascism, much like the blinding facilitated by Guatemalan military general Ríos Montt during the 36-year civil war known as La Violencia. In her performance, Galindo simultaneously makes a real cut into her body and a copy of a cut, one that repeats the phrase of a normalized violence. In doing so, her performance deploys alienation/distanciation by keeping conflicting binaries in play: the real and the copy, the victim and the perpetrator, the local witness and the international one.

The defecting witness extends art historian Jennifer Doyle’s call for critical engagement with emotionality in art reception. She offers the following charge: “if it is easier to dismiss the artist or the audience’s emotionality as naïve or as a critical failure, it is partly because we have been 7. “Ladino” is a Guatemalan term for people of mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry, and is a term affiliated with a socioeconomic status within Guatemala, including that of the ruling government.

8. The early 1990s saw a lively debate about the politics of truth and representation within the testimonio genre, from its development in Central America to its reception by leftist scholars in the United States. As editor Georg M. Gugelberger details in the introduction to The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America, testimonio first originated in “Cuba in the immediate years of the revolution, then manifesting again in Bolivia before it became nearly a Central American genre” (1996:5). Testimonio is usually a first-person narrative, told through an interview or through diary entries, in which a survivor of extreme violence details her ordeal and survival. Initially read as a transgressive writing practice and an opportunity for the subaltern to speak, the reception of testimonio became entangled in debates about the stakes of academics canonizing alterity.
working with inadequate models for what feelings are and how they work” (2013:107). I aim to proffer my own affective experiences in watching this piece over time—including experiences of shock, anger, confusion, heart palpitations—as one model for hard feelings. What would it mean to consider the affects of witnessing difficult performance as part of an act of falling away from one allegiance toward another—as defecting? Because of this performance, I continue to experience and re-experience a sense or an aura of what pervasive and threatening violence against (some, not all) women in Guatemala might be like, though I am always already a defecting witness, and never a substitute or a surrogate. Walter Benjamin famously argued for the irreproducible aura of an original work of art that is lost in the “age of mechanical reproduction.” In particular, he writes that the film actor has to “operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it” ([1968] 2007:229). In PERRA, however, the work of art is in fact the aura of an original. The work of art is not a copy of the cut, or the victim, or the perpetrator, but in fact a sense of the gravity of feminicide. When we acknowledge that the performance is not meant to represent feminicide, but rather the violence’s social effects, audiences carry the affective weight of PERRA.

Galindo’s performance implicates us, as her beholders, only-ever as partial witnesses—hearing not the first-person account, but rather the second or third account. Rather than diminishing this copy of a ghastly account as false, inaccurate, or untrue, Galindo offers us another entry point into how we can interact with the remains of violence. As performance theorist Rebecca Schneider has argued in Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment, repetitions teach us the capacity for flight within mimetic missteps, framing “time as full of holes or gaps and art as capable of falling or crossing in and out of the spaces between live iterations” (2011:6). Galindo’s performance does not mimic the deaths of the absent women, but rather bears the same cut, modeling what “inadequacy gets right.” Like Schneider, I mine the “curious inadequacies of the copy” (6) in this performance as it contributes to ways we might better hold, though not know, another’s pain.

Defecting offers an alternative heuristic for how one might emotionally engage with the residues of excessive violence, or bear what feels unbearable. Kantian aesthetics remains the underlying hegemonic structure of art theory and practice that requires viewers to maintain disinterest from the content of art in order to arrive at a judgment of taste purely through form. In this version of aesthetics, omniscient, objective, and disinterested qualities signify the rational behaviors necessary for universal judgments of taste (Kant [1790] 2000:128–29). On the contrary, my subjective analysis reflects my own social and political commitment to amplifying the ontologies of women of color, particularly the ethnically mixed and indigenous women of Guatemala who are over-determined as the sociopolitical subjects of feminicide.

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In accordance with Galindo’s larger body of work, the artist appears to the viewer in arduous, enduring, and abject scenarios: the cement block room that could be a prison in PERRA; the holding cell or immigrant detainee space of American Family Prison, a small room constructed inside Artpace, San Antonio where she lived with her daughter and husband while museumgoers peeked in through a small window (2008); as a sedated body in Guatemala City’s municipal garbage heap where women’s bodies are frequently discovered, as in No Perdemos Nada Con Nacer (We do not lose anything at birth; 2000); and in the mass grave site at La Verbana Cemetery in Guatemala where she created 52 anonymous headstones labeled “XX” in honor of the victims of ethnic genocide, marking the murdered as seen, remembered, and publicly marked (2007). The holding cell, the dump, and a mass gravesite are shameful locations to house bodies, death sites that are frequently hidden from public view in order to avoid military accountability. Galindo’s performances are dependent upon being viewed precisely because she sets them in clandestine spaces like these, spaces that reveal state violence at work. She has “never made performance without documenting it because [she is] interested in inserting [her]self into the
first world” (in Carolin 2011:141). While many artists’ performances are dependent on viewership and on documentation, Galindo’s audiences, whether in person or through her documentation, are also witnessing the secret spaces of Guatemalan murders, and more broadly, the cruel sites of human torture and isolation, like US immigrant detention centers, often kept hidden from the public eye. The accessibility of the video documentation of PERRA via YouTube provokes localized transformations beyond the exhibition space. As international beholders, we are given a sense that we are seeing what is not meant to be seen, in a place that is not meant for the public eye—which is perhaps the very reason why we must not turn away from the action in the video. By sensing what should not be sensed or seeing what should not be seen, beholders navigate a terrain where blood is ink, a knife inscribes history, and the camera lens is a peephole.

As Fred Moten’s reconsideration of the relationship between the aesthetic and the ethical in art suggests, Galindo’s aesthetic remains the condition of possibility in which memory and haunting—the systems of power that we cannot see—can cross time, screens, and geographies to motivate Galindo’s cuts. As a result, the (moral) polemic of right and wrong must not be privileged over and against the conditions of possibility that Galindo affords viewers through making the invisible visible. The imagery of her performance haunts the spectator as specters of a country’s violent past and present. Though the performance immediately causes one to question the specificities of the harm that her cuts reference, just as the exhaustive, detail-orientated truth-telling format of testimonio raises concerns about the intervention of the academic and its impact on the truth-telling of the victim, we might consider the cut as the only materiality of what was true: the cut of words into a body.

Hailing from a country known for its testimonial output, Galindo offers not the “artful truth” of testimonio, but another kind of truth: the undeniable evidence of extreme violence in the making and recording of the cut. She represents the representation of this harm while simultaneously embodying the disorientating triangulation of victim, perpetrator, and witness. She often stages abject bodily materials, like blood and urine, as evidence that a violent act occurred, and yet, she remains the only perpetrator in sight. Audiences who have seen Galindo’s performances, both live and via documentation, often describe their experience as witnessing the scene of a crime, as did curator Clare Carolin who writes that witnessing Galindo’s work is akin to “the compulsion that both repels and attracts spectators at the scene of a crime or an accident” (2011:133). Art critic Fernando Castro Flórez, inspired by Henri Michaux, meditates on the abandoned materials that are “like that of a crime scene; the trace is what indicates what cannot be cancelled” (2011:113). This trace of violence is palpable, but also ambiguous. Galindo skews the triangulation between victim, perpetrator, and witness by inhabiting all three of these subjectivities: she embodies the collapse as multidirectional vectors of violence crosshatch upon her body, and within our visual frame. As a victim, the artist performs the role of one subjected to physical violence. The victim is enacted upon, while the perpetrator enacts the harm. This vector of unidirectional power moves from perpetrator to victim through the range of motion from right hand to left thigh. Lastly, as a witness, she observes herself in this repeated act of pain. Thus, in the recording, we see the body inhabit this triangulation and then collapse these positions as she embodies all three roles simultaneously. While previous scholarship on self-injury and masochism positions artists who do harm to their bodies in relation to desire, such as Kathy O’Dell’s Contract with the Skin (1998), this performance references events that have previously occurred within the “mini-totalitarianism” of Guatemalan feminicide. For Galindo, the desire is not simply about self-injury, but about a need to represent the injury of another body that cannot be represented.

Telling one’s own story as a marginalized subject—as the criminal, the ill, the social pariah—has long marked literary narratives. This format often takes the shape of a highly exhaustive and detailed text, such as the testimonial Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia (1983); published in English as I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (1984) as verbally narrated by Rigoberta Menchú to Venezuelan anthropologist Elisabeth
Defecting Witness. This testimonial voyeuristically circulated widely within Western educational spaces as a subaltern literary text that detailed the military violence against an entire demographic in addition to Menchú’s personal narrative of the death of her family, a narrative curated with the help and input of Menchú’s interviewer. This resistant literary genre has proven to be both cathartic and laborious for writers as they are asked to recount and verify the details of gendered and gruesome violence—yet it is the violence that makes it a worthwhile project. As literary and cultural critic John Beverley explains in *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*, such works declare themselves “history” with an “ethical and epistemological authority” that is derived “from the fact that we are meant to presume that its narrator is someone who has lived in his or her person or indirectly through the experiences of friends, family, neighbors, or significant others, the events and experiences that he or she narrates” (2004:3). Moreover, it is a format that holds within it uninterrogated relations of reception between speaker and listener during transcription, and between survivor and reader in a printed format.

The case of Menchú is one such uninterrogated series of relations, and literary scholar María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo captures the layers of transference succinctly: Menchú “tells her story in Spanish, rather than in Ki’che’, to an exiled Venezuelan leftist while visiting Paris on a diplomatic mission” (2003:155). During the Guatemalan genocide against indigenous people, Menchú witnessed extreme violence against her loved ones at the hands of the Guatemalan military, such as “the repeated rape of her mother, the death of her father in the Spanish embassy fire of 1980, and the kidnapping and public assassination of her fourteen-year-old-brother” (161). As Menchú and her village disperse for fear of persecution, she joins the armed guerilla movement against the military and later becomes a champion for human rights for indigenous Guatemalans. Saldaña-Portillo’s main critique of the reception of Menchú’s story is the slippage from Menchú’s “I” to a collective “we” that came to speak for all indigenous Guatemalans, as well as the way in which the reception of the story was harnessed to create a particular form of “first-world” solidarity through the naming of a “third-world” literary genre. This “first-world” canonization of testimonio as the truth of an entire collective, Saldaña-Portillo claims, “risks reestablishing the very sentimental understanding of the subaltern that Menchú’s text works to undermine” (157).

The testimonio genre asks of those who have survived and/or witnessed great torture and pain to tell their subjective story in a digestible, legible, and sentimental format. As a result, the genre inaugurated a particular politics of international recognition around the “truth” of a historical moment of violence as told through the subjective experience. The act and the writing of testimony is not limited to Central and Latin American atrocities, as the recent testimonies of First Nation’s survivors of Canada’s abusive Residential School system reported in *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future*, a summary of the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC 2015). The verbal structure of testimony that narrates these events privileges the ability to recount, through a colonial language of the Americas—whether in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or French—the excesses of violence that are more often than not unspeakable or beyond language. On the contrary, *PERRA*’s truth-telling through embodiment refuses any easy understanding.

Anthropologist Victoria Sanford’s extensive research on Guatemala’s civil war (1960–1996) and the aftermath of genocide shows that Maya populations were explicitly targeted: “fully 83 percent of victims were Maya and 17 percent were ladino” (2003:148). Importantly, Sanford makes a crucial link between genocide and femicide based on the same symptoms of social cleansing, such as “the cause of death, the location of cadavers, and the profile of the victims” (111). Thus, through no fault of their own, indigenous survivors who have witnessed the deaths of their loved ones, and community members who have survived rape and brutal sexual assault, become the representative voices of genocide, much like Menchú. Unwittingly, testimonio works both with and against the indigenous women whose stories work to condemn Guatemalan war crimes even while their singular narratives spotlight their personal trauma for the cathartic
sympathy of “first-world” audiences. Hemispheric literary scholar Patricia Stuelke unravels this unique relationship that calls upon victims to perform their trauma: “within neoliberal multiculturalism, indigenous subjects have been called on to perform inter-actable difference and dramatize their own victimhood in exchange for affective and cultural recognition” (2014:769). Can indigenous women be something other than survivors or victims in the schema of Western, hegemonic voyeurism? PERRA teaches us another way of looking, and importantly, that subjectivity is never one’s own.

In this way, the testimonio genre has become the form, par excellence, of neoliberal recognition and consumption of suffering. I follow what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli has described as the problem of the “liberal diaspora,” a phenomenon where “colonial and postcolonial subjective, institutional and discursive identifications” enforce the “enlightenment idea that society should be organized on the basis of rational mutual understanding” (2002:6). This insidious word “should” compels everyday performances of “indigenous authenticity” in order to facilitate “rational mutual understanding,” even when that authenticity relies upon the subjects’ capacity to stop being themselves. The liberal diaspora gains purchase through the maintenance of civility, such as legal reconciliation or government apologies. Defecting, as a public refusal of mutual understanding, shares the weight of bearing difficult affect over time rather than consuming it.

Opening Our Eyes

Watching and rewatching the video documentation of PERRA across screens, sites, and time periods, we experience a hetero-temporal moment: from the cut in 2005 to our own position in real time to the unnamed and unidentified moment of murder. Finding pause in the bicultural and singular view often associated with witnessing, art historian Jane Blocker astutely notes that the “West sees [...] impartially and from a distance, the way a camera sees. And yet, the one thing a camera cannot see is itself” (2009:53). The multiple temporalities of when we see, from the cut to the scar to the video recording, complicate our ways of seeing differently, seeing ourselves, and seeing our own seeing. The gravity of the pauses made between incisions highlights these layers of spectatorship. In a theatrical frame, the pause in a scene is not empty space onstage but rather is full of affect: characters are thinking, scheming, and feeling in relation to other characters, actions, and dialogue. In Galindo’s pause, as she both contemplates and directs her gaze at the unfinished word on her leg, we are given a moment to question what remains before us, as the artist does too.

A poet and a performer, Galindo’s creative process often begins with words. Her “writing” takes form both in print and on her body. Whether on skin or paper, Galindo’s writing offers another way of graphing memory. As viewers and readers, we can interpret her skin as simultaneously canvas and parchment upon which she enacts a politicized and racialized feminography. This “feminine writing” calls forth a canonical witness of phallocentric writing, Hélène Cixous, as she poetically rails: “I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation” (1976:889). Galindo’s subjectivity, like Cixous’s, extends and averts the “I” of the self through an active transformation of a “singing flesh.” Galindo’s feminography, made manifest through the carving of PERRA into her leg, implicates the countless women whose bodies also hold that word, both in life and in death.

Although it may be tempting to read Galindo’s performance as one that writes women, once again, into a history of victimization, the refusal of mimicry in the performance avoids this feminist hazard. Rather it is the precise and articulate conditions of disposability that PERRA makes visible—the conditions that allow Galindo’s “first-world” audiences to be at a remove from having to bear witness to these acts in the first place. In her essay “The Destiny of the Informe” included in the coauthored Formless: A User’s Guide, for example, Rosalind Krauss rejects the “wound as woman” trope espoused by theorists of abjection, such as Julia Kristeva and Laura Mulvey, which recursively figures the traumatized and wounded as “feminine by nature and
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Although Galindo identifies as ladino, Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman’s conceptualization of Native women (re)mapping settler space can extend into how we understand creative production by mixed indigenous women in the Americas. Importantly, Goeman situates the Americas as a “social, economic, political and inherently spatial construction [that] has a history and a relationship to people who have lived here long before Europeans arrived.” I follow her lead in turning to creative works that seek to interrogate the “possibility of spatial interventions, such as those found in literary mappings” (Goeman 2013:2).

Dispersal of identification in this performance maintains a seemingly past violence in the present moment. The cut of the word PERRA into Galindo’s thigh is indeed a truth of violence lingering, remaining present as a scar. The video’s image of blood rising to the surface of her skin, filling in the outline of P-E-R volcanically breaches through the cut itself and like affect theorist Eugenie Brinkema, I wonder too, “where, after all, is the wound?” (2009:131). Consider instead the radical act of bodily inscription as the mark of presence through the penetration of the skin (the mark as “I was here”). Index 54 of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy’s “Fifty-eight Indices on the Body” further supports the cut on the skin as a mark of the live, as this organ is a porous border between a falsely dichotomous inside and outside. “Truth is in the skin, it makes skin: an authentic extension exposed, entirely turned outside while also enveloping the inside [...] it inscribes marks from within” (2008:159). Galindo’s feminography is one kind of inscribed truth borne through a durational and politicized scarring. The cut and its subsequent scar expose the invisible bodies (personally remembered by Galindo) onto an exterior self, because, as Cixous writes, “in one another we will never be lacking” (1976:893). This movement from inscription on the skin, to writing another’s cut onto one’s own body, stretches the time and space of violence into the present. As spectators, we might want to bracket the violence as one that only exists in 2005, but feminography resists this bracketing such that we must recursively bear witness in the present.

Feminography envisions spectatorship as a live practice of feminist reading, including other forms of women’s writing on the body, in and out of moments of pain. Transforming the writing of cruel epithets on the bodies of cadavers, what Jean Franco calls “expressive crimes” where “bodies illustrate the logic of the killers,” Galindo’s cut/writing materializes truths often classified as abstract, incomprehensible acts of cruelty (2013:21). In her singular cut, Galindo furthers a (re)mapping of gendered space through a creative writing and performance practice that provides “avenues beyond a recovery of a violent history of erasure” (Goeman 2013:2). In other words, the cut, albeit difficult, folds open the violent acts that the Guatemalan authorities seek to erase, in order to show, rather than recover, how the mechanics of such violence is made possible.

Spanish to English translations of “testimonio” reveal the word’s capacity to slip into both the verbal act “to testify” (testificar) and the sensation of bearing “witness” (testigo). As such, the Spanish word for witness lives within the act of verbally testifying, but PERRA deconstructs these assumed relations between seeing and speaking. In the act of viewing and sensing Galindo’s performance, this translation also connotes the tension between speech and embodiment. This collapse in Spanish between “testimonio” (to tell a story of what one has seen) and “dar testimonio” (to bear witness) becomes apparent in the title “Bear Witness/Dar Testimonio,” the name of a 2015 retrospective of Galindo’s works over the past 20 years curated by Lia Newman at the Davidson Art Galleries. In Newman’s own words: “Bearing witness can be paralyzing. Sometimes traumatized individuals experience a sense of dissociation, withdrawal or numbness” (2015:6–7). Experiences of withdrawal and dissociation intensify a gap between the witness’s...
experience of what is sensed in the present (both aurally and visually), and how that witness’s corporeal relation, her embodiment, in and to the world has changed because of that act of witnessing. Galindo is a person who witnesses the violence in her home country and then through embodiment asks us to witness what she has seen, to witness how she has processed a sense of withdrawal and numbness. Speech and language cannot entirely capture the experiences of the witness, especially when those experiences induce a paralysis that stuns sensation and freezes cognitive processing, along with other necessary tools that one needs to tell an intelligible story (testimonio). Galindo’s commitment to putting truth on the body exemplifies one way of divorcing witnessing from its relation to verbal testifying. We are to bear witness to her body that performs witnessing.

While curators and viewers have talked about their relationship to Galindo’s work in terms of witnessing, this term warrants further interrogation given the weighty history of testimonio. Galindo positions her body as the evidence of the murders, in lieu of the actual evidence that is consistently “misplaced” by Guatemalan authorities looking to close or abandon criminal investigations. As anonymous spectators, we watch Galindo become the evidence of the corpses she herself has witnessed, if indirectly, in the social sphere of her home country (through peers, news media), a mise en abyme of seeing and being seen. In an interview about her impetus for performing, Galindo states:

In Guatemala, though spirits are generally gray, color abounds. Blue sky, green mountains, red blood. It’s not uncommon to see an armed clown holding up a bus, a yellow canary picking slips of paper out of a pocket, a body drowning in its own blood on the asphalt. (in Goldman 2006)

Galindo’s vivid and poetic description of life in Guatemala asks audiences to witness, through their own bodies, a paradoxical state: Is it possible to have a sense of being there, without being there? Her description asks us to be sensually present with Guatemala’s lush and verdant topography alongside a visual terrain of bodily harm in which red blood, like blue sky, is of this land. To bear witness, in this context, implies that audiences carry a sensation, though not the thing itself, through the accumulation of duration and emotion. The defecting witness inhabits the multitude of gaps in the making of the copy. To bear witness to a copy implicates our participation in a contagion effect. However, we cannot quite fulfill the juridical role of witness, which necessitates testifying before a sanctioned group of arbiters of justice. The witness to Galindo’s work has no formal court because the performance removes one kind of performance (the courtroom) in service to another (the violence of the everyday). We must sit with this processual and durational ache of knowing another’s pain and vulnerability in our own bodies and necessarily through speech.

What would it mean to be responsible for the affects of other bodies? “All bodies are vulnerable to the affect of others,” José Esteban Muñoz writes of the “vulnerability artist” (2006:194). Bringing together Kafka’s “hunger artist” with literary and aesthetic theorist Sianne Ngai’s suggestion that “bad feelings” obstruct agency, Muñoz’s vulnerability artist is one who conjures affects with the intention of posing the problem of agency (2006:194). In other words, artists such as Galindo who put ugliness on the body short circuit the question of agency of the body in service to the question of affects in and transmitted through bodies. The body becomes a conduit, a corporeal preposition. Is this not the role of testifying, whether for one’s own experience or the experience of others? When we become vulnerable to intense affect, something is being asked of us, just like there is something being asked of us through the urgency often heard in the voice of the testimonio speaker: “When we are addressed [...] directly, as it were, even by someone who we would normally disregard, we are placed under an obligation to respond; we may act or not on that obligation, we may resent or welcome it, but we cannot ignore it” (Beverley 2004:1). When Galindo cuts into her leg, what is being asked of us? When
she completes the word on her thigh, what is being asked of us? When she pauses and inhales between letters, what is being asked of us?

When speaking at the Creative Time Summit in 2010, Galindo described her body

not as an individual body but as a social body, a collective body, a global body. To be or reflect through me, her, his or others’ experience; because all of us are ourselves and at the same time we are others. A body is therefore a body of many people, that works and works itself, that resists and resists itself, because the world systems hurt, prevent, suffocate, exterminate; we in the meantime, don’t conform to but survive, act, resist, and create. (Galindo 2010)

Her body is a conduit; the social body, as she says, moves through her own body. In short, she moves from one identification to another — perpetrator, victim, and witness. In this state of becoming, the defecting witness fittingly remains caught in the pauses that she enacts, falling from one sense of uncertainty to another.

Defecting extends the viewer as the bearer of vulnerable relations between bodies and violence rather than the speaker of truth about that violence. The act of defecting, to “fail or fall short” as a spectator, appears in Ngai’s lexicon as the act of going limp in the face of demands to act otherwise.10 Going limp resists animating the racialized self in ways that minoritized subjects are meant to respond as dictated by stereotypes, what Rey Chow has termed “coercive mimeticism”: the demand “to respond and to replicate the very banal preconceptions that have been appended to [those who are marginal to mainstream Western culture]” (2002:107). In the same energy of this paralysis from watching trauma or violent acts that Newman describes, paralysis connotes shock, while going limp connotes a refusal to move under duress. By extension, a defecting witness in the presence of difficult art falls short of this expectation to move or speak upon command and instead can be moved without moving, a relationality-in-stasis.

Following Ghosts

What does it mean, then, to be in an unmoving relation with something we cannot see? When the Guatemalan authorities refuse to remember the dead in the present, Galindo explicitly invokes, remembers, and lives with them through performance. In opening ourselves to the social life of ghosts, their absent-presence creates an atmosphere of speculation, curiosity, and purposeful uncertainty. Gordon’s Ghosuly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination uses literary works as evidence to consider the psychic work of violent ephemera in the shape of ghosts.

The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. ([1997] 2008:8)

Ghosts communicate affectively: they obfuscate the boundaries of visibility through experiences of heart-racing, gut-plummeting affect. Reviewers, including art critic Tomas Micchelli, have decidedly referred to this murky affect of the ghost in Galindo’s work as empathy (“radical empathy,” according to Micchelli [2009]), or compassion, which posits relationality in soft terms. We lose the complexity of affective responses to ghostly navigation by naming this resolutely as empathy, rather than an ambiguous affect. These indeterminate states fill the defecting witness, initiating an active directionality towards not understanding and naming this affect

10. In Ugly Feelings, Ngai analyzes American writers of slapstick comedy whose work follows “confrontations with the systems encompassing them, formulating a resistant stance by going limp or falling down” (2005:297).
through that search. In *PERRA*, I find three ghostly matters: the paring knife, the lingering scar on Galindo’s thigh, and the ghosts of genocide as evidence.

Consider the role of the paring knife in Galindo’s performance. This is a domestic tool often used to cut through the flesh of fruit and vegetables, to puncture soft surfaces in order to consume their insides. Though it is unclear what kind of weapon actual perpetrators used on victims of feminicide, Galindo’s artistic choice (whether a good or bad copy) holds powerful symbolism. By appropriating tools of harm and torture, particularly in re-inscribing harm onto her body, Galindo takes the “tools of violence” away from the torturers who “attempt to publicly display their own power” (Thomas 2011:110). Yet, the paring knife (as a weapon now) also gestures to everyday domestic tasks. In choosing a tool used in the intimate personal space of the kitchen to represent a public weapon, Galindo makes the impersonal killings personal and accessible to a cross-cultural and international audience.

The paring knife used in the performance requires that Galindo not only cut once into her skin, but twice, suggesting that the knife’s dullness requires painstaking reiteration. Figure 2 shows the moment when Galindo has paused between cutting the second “R” and the last letter “A.” In the video, her right hand trembles, and she pauses to grip the fabric, as if to dry off her hand. Are these moments of pause an affective murkiness, of feeling the affect of ghosts in the present moment? Does Galindo sense the ghosts of those who were cut before her, taking pause to access their presence? How many histories, victims, perpetrators arrive in this gap? Might the “barely visible” bodies, summoned through Galindo’s wielding of a domestic-tool-turned-weapon, start to haunt both the artist and the spectator through each contemplative cut?

The spectacle of expressive crimes in Central America evinces the ways in which violence permeates and clings to social life rather than the specific acts of violence themselves. The long history of writing around the politics of spectatorship teaches us that the gaze is not innocent, and neither is the object upon which we look. The spectacle is “not a collection of images,” Guy Debord writes, “but a social relation among people, mediated by images” ([1967] 1983:4). Writing about the “radical empathy” in Galindo’s 2009 Exit Art solo show, Micchelli describes this relation in *PERRA* as “an extreme manifestation of an artist’s impulse to simultaneously feel and give form to feeling” (2009). This form of feeling becomes the subject of the performance; Galindo interrogates the limits of empathy with the bodies we cannot see. Acts of empathy can slip into dangerous surrogation,11 which assumes that viewers can only be moved by *PERRA* by seeing themselves as the visible/invisible subject in pain. Thus, it is a performance mediated by social relations about social relations.

Colonized subjects and historical figures of color emerge in the archive precisely at the moment of their rebellion or their death — ever more present in history than they were when they were alive. Naming the missing and the murdered is indeed central to any ethical and political form of reclamation. Yet Galindo does not speak the names of the victims; she resists this historical capture of the victims of feminicide in an effort to spotlight the unspoken acts and conditions of violence. By extension, we can contemplate what *PERRA* has to offer. While not a remembrance of the individual victims, Galindo’s performance leaves us with a cut/scar that is living and moving proof of violence’s affective remains.

Like an understudy for the dead, Galindo performs the work of an actor by using her body in the role of the unrepresented, while at the same time refusing to erase her identity as a racially ladino woman. Though she represents acts that have been committed against predominantly indigenous women, she does not claim the ethnic or racial identities of the victims, but

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11. Joseph Roach’s transhistorical process of “surrogation” offers a performative precedent for this work. He writes that, “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other forms of departure [...] survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternates” (1996:2).
she does claim the proof of violence in the cut on the woman’s body—an identification she does share. By writing on her live body the text that was written on dead bodies, she demonstrates that what is written on a body lives beyond the act of writing, into the live moment as a scar. Spectators of performance often eagerly want to erase the difference between actors and the characters they perform, seeing Galindo as the victims of feminicide and subsequently implicating her participation in an unethical substitution. However, throughout the piece, Galindo maintains this distance between who she is and who the dead are by performing this at a highly spectacular exhibition under her own name, rather than in a play in which she performs the life of a victim, for example. We find evidence of her resistance to mimetic representation in her preparation for performance. For example, in No Perdemos Nada Con Nacer (2000), she sedated herself before being placed into a plastic bag in Guatemala City’s municipal garbage heap. In this way she did not pretend to be a dead body by holding her breath or laying still, but instead, she was actually unconscious and unable to control her own body. Similarly in PERRA, she does not pretend to cut into her body as if in the role of the perpetrator of a feminicide, but rather she commits to the action by cutting into her thigh.

Through the nonmimetic role of “cutter,” cutting into her own body, Galindo asks audiences to witness the pain brought on by cutting and bearing the resulting verbal slur, not the physical pain of the original victim. After all, Galindo wields the blade. The gravity of Galindo experiencing pain in real time unsettles the extent to which she “becomes” a character. We see this unsettlement precisely in her moments of pause. As the time between each cut of each letter increases, we sense an indiscernible shift in affect as she endures pain and considers another’s narrative, asking us to pause alongside her. Dominick LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” (1999) and Jill Bennett’s “empathic vision” (2005) provide two useful frames through which we can develop a sense of relation in falling away from the certainty of knowing another’s physical

Figure 2. Regina José Galindo, PERRA, 2005. Between cuts, the artist hesitates to process the pain. (Courtesy of the artist and Prometeogallery di Ida Pisani, Milan/Lucca; photo by Kika Karadi)
pain, what I have thus far called defecting. LaCapra’s empathic unsettlement of secondary witnesses, such as Galindo and her viewers, involves “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (1999:722). Unchecked empathy, as Saidiya Hartman articulates in her analysis of the abolitionist writings of the 19th century in which free whites placed themselves in the body of the slave, works to erase the subject an empathizer seeks to represent (1997:20–21). However, Galindo does not mimic being cut, or assaulted, or dead—she cuts into herself. Like a process of empathic unsettlement, defecting asks for the “unsettlement that [the narrator] addresses to affect the narrative’s own movement” (LaCapra 1999:723). Jill Bennett’s theorization of empathic vision in contemporary visual arts aims for an “aesthetic of relations” that does not rely upon the interpersonal correspondence. Empathic visions in contemporary art, she claims, are works that enact the “political as a sphere of interconnections, in which subjectivities are forged and sustained, but within which new links might be traced between subjects and places with only limited experience in common” (2005:21).

Building on LaCapra and Bennett, my theorization of the defecting witness suggests that that empathy is not a sense of “I know” or even “I feel your pain” but rather that “I can carry this with you.” Holding the burden of another conjures up the staggering images of Emma Sulkowicz, the brave Columbia University student who was raped and then carried a 50-pound mattress to her classes, on the train, and throughout New York City. Students and nonstudents helped to carry the mattress, literally bearing the weight of her survival and trauma from a bru-
tal sexual assault she has detailed publicly. This piece, entitled Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight) (2014), negotiates the endurance of victimhood alongside the embodied empathic act of the witness, since Sulkowicz’s rules for the performance required that she not ask for help but could accept help if spectators offered (see Smith 2014). Carrying the weight alongside survivors, much like Galindo boring the cut and then bearing the scar, contributes to the archive of critical witnessing emphasized by LaCapra’s empathic unsettlement and Bennett’s aim for political understanding through empathic vision. In becoming a defecting witness, we are not only moved emotionally to empathize with the original victims, but we are moved to move from being a distant spectator to a present bearer of another’s pain.

What does it mean to have a ghost follow you and yet be unable to respond to its hail? Living with the ghosts of atrocities transforms a spectator’s orientation to the world in ways that do not expire, especially as one continues to feel impotent. Akin to theatre theorist Herbert Blau’s anxiety with the suffusion of reality through the digital, I, too, feel that “even when [I] turn [the video] off [...] it seems somehow to be on” (2007:541). Defecting witnesses are left with the undeniable mark of affect, as we feel the material trace of a pain we cannot know, while we continue to push against its catalyst anyway. We are left with the main objective of PERRA: a politics of rage, a sense of injustice, and an approximation to the unimaginable.

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