



# **Dialogue and Repertoire: The Ever-Changing Nature of Walking and Talking Together**

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This conversation between Professor Diana Taylor and Dr. Andrea Maciel presents Taylor's life-long experience fostering art and activism, as well as promoting dialogical research encounters through The Hemispheric Institute of Performance & Politics. The discussion encompasses the role of the archive as part of a mutual collaboration between performance and practice as research whilst opening a critical inquiry on how new epistemologies for artists and researchers can contemplate the archive as a force for the creation of laboratorial praxis. Drawing on her long experience as a core member of Cross Pollination (CP), an international arts research platform for the exchange of knowledge and nomadic laboratory spaces, Maciel invites Taylor to also reflect about the power of performances and somatic practices to trace trauma related to social cultural alienation and oppression.

Keywords: performance, activism, archive, politics, trauma, identitarian discourse

**ANDREA MACIEL:** The theme we are looking at for this Special Edition is dialogue. And dialogue in performance studies can be also understood as an agency in the process of creating repertoire and archive. Perceiving the archive as an ongoing conversation can also be a way of seeing an emancipatory relationship between archive and performers. For me, it is safe to say that the Hemispheric Institute encounters were able to foster spaces for dialogue leading to the creation of many different repertoires in my practice.<sup>1</sup> All the processes, creative practices, thought-provoking experiences that I witnessed and practiced throughout at least a ten-year period at the Hemi Encounters were not only something that I carried with me – enabling agency, perspectives and insights through my practice – but also went even further beyond that. I have also witnessed so many artistic companionships coming out of the Hemi encounters, unfolding into projects and collective work. Hemi was also present for a community of artists and researchers as an awareness of an ethos which we can relate to.

Bearing this in mind, how do you see the presence of this kind of dialogue, as related to the idea of archive and repertoire?

**DIANA TAYLOR:** There are many different ways of approaching this. Let me start with my most recent book *¡Presente!: The Politics of Presence* (2020). I write that, to be me, I have to walk and talk with others. So, I start with the notion of subjectivity as interrelated, as dependent on dialogue and shared practice (such as walking). We have to be in these relationships in order to be ourselves. You must name me. I must name you. It is a practice of recognitions. So, I think it shapes the foundation of every single thing we do. But, as you said, there is also an ethics to dialogue, a politics to it, a method to it, there is a whole epistemology stemming from relationality and dialogue. Who do we talk to? How do we relate to others?

I started the Hemispheric Institute in 1998 because of the urgency and the difficulty of interpersonal, interdisciplinary, international dialogue. Every one of us contains what I've called a rich 'archive' and 'repertoire' of knowledge. But we *know* and act from different places. A person or community in the Yucatan Peninsula, or Buenos Aires, or Saskatchewan has different points of reference. We cannot understand each other's languages, or gestures, or practices without understanding the context. We would need to speak and share work

and ideas to communicate across the differences. When I became part of the Performance Studies Department at NYU,<sup>2</sup> one of my first observations was that the scholarship was basically written in English: the texts were predominantly from the U.S., Great Britain, Australia, and Canada. But clearly people from the rest of the world have rich performance practices and theorizations. They may approach issues from a very different place, and we cannot assume that we are talking about the same things. So I thought – let’s find a way of bringing artists, scholars, and activists from the Americas together to share work. But it wasn’t easy. Artists, activists, and scholars from different countries, working in different disciplines, languages, economic conditions, and so on, did not have the experience of working together.

Here’s an example. In a very early ‘Encuentro’ or gathering of the Hemispheric Institute (“Memory, Atrocity, and Resistance”, 2001, Monterrey, Mexico) I met with the artists and activists who had joined the event. I was explaining why I thought it was important that artists, scholars, and activists come together to share their work and ideas on a topic. I think the Encuentro was about the repression and disappearances that took place during the dictatorships. One of the artists said: “I understand artists sharing work with activists – think of Grupo Arte Callejero (GAC), young artists who collaborated closely with activists from H.I.J.O.S., the children of the disappeared in Argentina, trying to bring the torturers to trial and justice. So, that makes sense. The artists help make the violence and the movement visible. But why scholars?” I responded that artists and activists – especially in the case of GAC and H.I.J.O.S. – put their bodies on the line as part of their process. But I asked: who complicated the idea of ‘the body’. Who taught us to think about sex, gender, race, class, abilities, age and so on when thinking about ‘the body’? “Ok, ok,” they said. “You can stay.” And that is how we built Hemi and the Encounters as spaces of dialogue, of sharing, of trying to communicate across all the differences that separate us.

The act of bringing people together from very different contexts and circumstances requires us to rethink Western cultural assumptions. What counts as art? Who/what is art for? How do ‘artists’ differ from activists? And what about scholars? These separations go way back in Western thought. Plato, Arendt reminds us in *The Human Condition* was the first to introduce the division between those who know

and do not act and then those who act and do not know ... so that knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances. So, to value everyone as a thinker and a creator is crucial. And, as important, we need to challenge the Western notion that the 'archive' of written knowledge is stable and survives and the 'repertoire' of embodied, performed knowledge, is ephemeral and disappears. In my *Archive and Repertoire*<sup>3</sup> I argue that memories, habits, practices (such as singing, weaving, dancing, storytelling, cooking, and so on) that pass through the body are living performance practices. They continue to be shared and transmitted, often with changes and modifications. The forms of transmission between the archive and the repertoire are different and the distinctions are very important. Both systems of transmission are vital, and they often work together. In a legal trial, for example, the jury pronounces the verdict that is then written down in government archives. But it is also important to know that the transmissions through the archive and the repertoire change over time – neither are stable. While clearly each individual performance will never be the same twice, materials in archives undergo change and our relationship with those materials also change.

**AM:** Would you consider this ever-changing nature of the archive precisely what links the archive with dialogue?

**DT:** Yes, sure.

**AM:** This makes me think about the artistic relationship between practice and the act of creating definitions, which is something present in our 'practice-as-research' methodologies. I feel that this can often get scholars and practitioners into great trouble. The question is how to define something that is not definable in one shape? How to observe the fluidity of what we are producing and at the same time organise concepts around what we do? How do we observe the *Zeitgeist* around us in a sense that we can produce connections between the archive and the reality of our present moment?

**DT:** I think those connections come through repetition. It's through doing things again and again and again and knowing that every one of our approximations is temporary. We can go back to the archive

and see how it was done back then. Or remember how we did it last time. While it may be the ‘same’ dance or performance piece, it’s never the same. When I finish a book, the first thing I want is to start everything again. And it’s already changed. The next book only reflects that moment, because if I needed to go back and write again, I would do so in a different way. We haven’t exhausted a topic or captured the ontology of anything by naming it.

**AM:** Maybe this is a good point: give up on capturing ontologies and stick with repetition. Would you say that repetition is already a way of conversing?

**DT:** Yes, and a reformulation; a reframing attitude of observing the same things in different ways, taking in consideration different elements, changing our minds about the same objects. It just strikes me that we are too often affected by this old Western traditional way of building definitions, as if a written dictionary will define and somehow ‘fix’ what things are. I don’t think so. Our creative process is in constant change.

**AM:** Reading your chapter on 9/11 in your book, *Archive and Repertoire*, I was struck by your testimony on how it was almost impossible for you to deal with that political moment. The whole context of the War against Terror in the wake of 11 September was a massive turning point, affecting our way of existing in the world. You said, and I quote, “I didn’t know how to live in the world anymore.” The first years of the Hemispheric Institute Encuentros/Encounters co-existed with this world scenario. I am aware that the intention behind the creation of Hemi exceeded a mere encounter of political performance; the Hemispheric Encounters had above all this clear aim of being an episteme of practices, a peer-to-peer support place. A place to be with and, as you said, to “walk and talk together” whilst listening to different voices from performances in the Americas. But there was a very scathing political scenario to respond to. The polarization between West and East was the great global tug-of-war. It was such a loud conflict that, I think it is safe to say, it ended up compressing many other possibilities of dialogue and relationships between many nations and cultures.

From my point of observation, Hemi was simultaneously responding to this *Zeitgeist* and at the same time existing as a space in which performance artists from Latin American, the U.S., and Canada (and other corners of the world) could speak in an amplified arena of visibility with one another. My question is: how do you see those twenty years of continuous dialogue and responses to ‘terror’? Today we observe the terror within society through endless polarizations unfolding in hate campaigns, digital cancellations, fascist outbursts. We are just recovering from the shock of 8 January, with the invasion of Brazilian Parliament in 2023,<sup>4</sup> and the US is looking back on the damage provoked over the last two years in the wake of the 6 January Capitol attack in 2021.<sup>5</sup> In so many ways, we can state that the terror has moved within. The polarization is highly internalized, supported by an extreme mediatization of politics. How do you look back to those twenty years of performance production within the Hemi context in relationship to this shape-shifting presence of terror in our world?

**DT:** I think your point is so important. The terror has not gone away. It seems so widespread now. In fact, I think we could say that “the Americas” stem not just from an interconnected landmass but from an interconnected practice of terror: conquest, genocides, enslavement, disenfranchisement and exclusion of populations, wars, and criminal politics. My *Archive and Repertoire* book comes after *Disappearing Acts – Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s Dirty War* (1997), which was a very important book for me, especially in relation to what you are talking about. The book starts narrating my viewing of a performance in 1990. This was eight years after the re-installment of democracy in 1982 post dictatorship Argentina, a very fragile and troubled democracy by the way.

So, I was there, watching this play put on by a very prominent leftist theater playwright/director/actor Eduardo Pavlovsky who was also a psychoanalyst. He plays a torturer. The play was staged in this pit of mud; it was beautifully staged. Pavlovsky cast his actual wife, who was helpless and naked throughout the performance while he was torturing her, demanding that she name him. The justification, apparently, was that we should all name the torturers as a political act. The physical exertion that this female actor/character went through was such that she literally could not speak. They had to have a female actor sitting in the bleachers at the back saying her lines.

I had been invited to speak at a forum on authoritarianism, authority and authorship, in which I argued how the work was not challenging or denouncing authoritarianism, but rather repeating the violence and the gendered nature of the violence. My comment triggered a very angry reaction from the people involved in the play. The director got extremely angry with me, arguing how she was condemning authoritarianism. She said I had no right to say anything because I wasn't from Argentina and had never been tortured, and that I should shut up because I was an American, Yankee, feminist, fascist. I was stunned, but not silent. I responded that "You don't need to have your eyes pulled out of your head to understand Oedipus," which I think is a very important premise in theater. You don't need to have experienced the trauma to understand or be moved by a representation of trauma. That's why representation is important. That's why we have art, theater, performance.

That night, I went back to my hotel room, and I thought to myself, what am I doing? Do I have a right to speak? And I thought: well, I'm a person who is professionally dedicated to theater and performance. I am from Latin America. I know a lot about the dictatorship because I've lived and studied it. And I know quite a bit about theater because that's what I do. So, if I don't have the right to speak because I wasn't tortured or because I am not from Argentina, perhaps it is better that I give up my profession. I'll become a dentist or something. And that inspired a great reflection into what dialogue was for me. Who controls it? Where and when are we allowed, or not, to speak?

*Disappearing Acts* was the most difficult book I have ever written because I needed to understand what, if anything, I could offer from my perspective. But Argentina was in a painful moment – trying to overcome the brutal dictatorship, the pure and unadulterated fascism. People were suffering from what I called 'percepticide' – they had been forced not to see or hear the violence going on all around them.

As I was finishing that book in 1995, I was observing the same fascism beginning to make itself visible in the US. It was already clear to me that what we're seeing now in the United States that culminated on 6 January was already being incubated back then. The "Contract with America" came out in 1994 with all the 'reforms' for cutting public



investment, shrinking the participation of the state, and delimiting citizenship rights.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, looking back at our current political situation the Contract with America sounds almost progressive.

It was right after that book that I started Hemi. I began the planning and development in 1997 and we received funding in 1998. The purpose behind Hemi was to create a space for creative people from different places, backgrounds, cultures to honestly talk to each other. We never had rules. It wasn't like, "You had to be respectful." The goal was engagement, active listening, and sharing work.

In Hemi, the conversations kept changing over the years and that was fantastic! Fascinating how subjects evolved. The first *Encuentro* was in 2000 and the things we were talking then were not the same that we were talking in 2002 or 2019 for example. But even this variety of topics touched on the same substratAM: the genocide and marginalization of indigenous people in the Americas, enslavement and its ongoing enactments, gender/sexual violence, discrimination, economic disparities and resource extraction, white, male, patriarchal supremacies, and ongoing criminal politics. All these problems are Americas-wide.

In parallel, we were witnessing the United States at war with Iraq and all the violence unfolding from there. But we knew that this violence was always there, and that the US has been practicing this same kind of despotic violence since its own foundation. In 1954, the CIA was involved with the Guatemalan state coup, and they were disappearing people by then. So, our discussions were about a practice of violence and terror that was always already there. And the discussions were also intertwined and depended on where you were situated in the Americas. Many times, our discussions were all about identity, and this usually came from US and Canada. People from Mexico for example would not go crazy about identity; they would rather talk about violence, feminicides, censorship.

**AM:** It's very interesting what you were saying, in a sense of pointing out how the conversations were always changing and evolving whilst speaking to the current political moment. So, the differentiation was happening within the ethos of the groups of scholars and activist who were finding new aspects of political performance. At the same

time, there was an exploration of how to embody this vast array of social traumas through this dialogical thread.

Do you think it would be safe to say that there were two kinds of dialogical lines going on in parallel: one stretching the happenings in the world and how this political violence speaks to us, and another sensing and exploring how performances were reflecting it?

**DT:** Yes, absolutely.

**AM:** This also stretches the point of importance in the cultivation of a space for multiple vocalizations of cultural subjectivities. Hemi was a place in which difference, plurality, and embodied agency could co-exist, creating a collective atmosphere in a period in which this plurality and diversity of social conversations were getting extremely stiff in the world. Maybe I am touching on a can of worms here, but it is already apparent the segregating nature of identitarian discourses.

**DT:** Yes, and it goes back to who is allowed to speak. Who gets to speak and how we speak collectively.

**AM:** This is definitively a reality for those working in educational and artistic contexts at the moment. We have been suffering tremendous pressure and witnessing people being cancelled as a result of a war of identities. I am totally aware of how important it is to acknowledge diversity and empower unrepresented categories, but things seem to be out of balance at the moment in terms of how the rules of communication put in place to acknowledge the diversity of identity can be used in an authoritarian way. This is a very complex and complicated issue now, and I believe this discussion will evolve as we include a range of different voices.

What happened within the context of what you're narrating from your experience in Argentina is an elimination of the symbolic process. When the space for understanding and being part of a collective debate can only exist out of the concrete experience of the facts, we are in danger of losing key aspects of performative practice and additionally disregarding any possibility of human empathy.

**DT:** Absolutely. It goes against everything that performance says and does. Performance is simultaneously an action and a form of being in the world. It's driven by imagination which depends on the 'as if'. So, if I need to be that person who is suffering the experience to understand or talk about it, then only this person can do it. On one hand, we need to recognize the impulse – people from under recognized groups have been displaced and silenced for too long. Having white male actors take on women's (and everyone else's) roles dates back to ancient Greece. But that's not what we're talking about here. We're experiencing a 'cancelling,' as you call it, predicated on the assumption that we cannot understand or communicate across difference. It is the worst form of isolation. There's no communication. No solidarity. No empathy. There's no imagination. It's terrifying, really.

Going back to what we're talking before about walking and talking together; part of that is based on the assumption of mutuality, on how we share many things in a respectful way. So, if I have total control on setting the rules on how you are going to deal with me, how I can be named by you? How do I become myself through interrelationality? And how can we come to self-realization through collective respect and mutuality? Granted, giving ourselves up to the idea of naming each other depends on mutual respect. Naming has been soul crushing and destructive for people who have been enslaved or criminalized for 'deviant' behaviours for being Black, or female, or trans, or differently abled. But respectful mutuality with our peers, the people we choose to walk and talk with, allows us to be more fully ourselves. And if people don't allow this to happen anymore, then we are all diminished, I think. It also makes us vulnerable to hate discourses. When it becomes a law, and staff in all institutions have to be trained in every aspect of interaction, we run a risk of policing our behaviors to such a degree that we disregard our sense of mutual respect and togetherness. What is frightening is that this promotes a neoliberal managerial approach to life.

**AM:** Certainly, this leads to a stiffening of our sense of connection and dialogue. Not a shadow of a doubt that this is an obstacle to exercising our plurality, our idiosyncrasies in terms of how to be together. I guess it is safe to say it can obstruct a collective creation of archives, repertoire, and performances in the world. Do you have any thoughts or ideas about how to stir new sparks that can get us out of

this new neoliberal, managerial dynamic in our social relationships?

**DT:** I am very sad to see how corporate and managerial our institutions have become. As you were saying before, the terror has also been institutionalized. It's a shame that our institutions have adopted this neoliberal managerial approach to life rather than allowing debate and discussions about the themes that are challenging to us. I would say, let's have interactions, let's talk about things respectfully rather than dictate them.

I have a friend who's a feminist artist who was recently interviewed by a magazine. The topic of pronouns came up. She said she wanted to be referred to as 'she', but they wanted to use 'they' instead. She insisted on 'she,' and in the end, they didn't publish the piece. So, this can even escalate to a point where one can't name oneself. I personally prefer everybody to be a 'they'. I'd be very happy to do away with pronouns altogether. I think gender is just a huge, big issue of social control. But we're not going to get rid of gender altogether.

**AM:** It really shuts down our sense of togetherness and connection, I think. As a performer, I wonder how we can respond to it. It is a such troubled subject, touching on very acute issues. But I keep asking how performances can create interesting ways of opening up perception, provoking a new awareness about this trouble.

**DT:** In my new book *Presente!*, there is a chapter called 'We Have Always Been Queer' about Jesusa Rodríguez's performance in Montreal, *Juana la Larga*, that sparked a big discussion about sexual identity, especially trans identity.<sup>7</sup> I've published it aware that it could be attacked. Again, I insist that understandings of sexual identity, like much else, depend on the context. We can't assume that everybody shares the same context. Jesusa's performance provoked a heated debate centered on her representation of the medical violence directed at an 18th century hermaphrodite. The confrontation was complicated. It featured Jesusa, a lesbian Mexican artist, an 18th century hermaphrodite, Juana, a trans man in Canada, and many others who weighed in on the various sides. And my question there was: how can any one of them/us presume that they understand how the other one feels? What performance offers is exactly an open space for inquiry, and it seems to me that this space is shutting



Figure 1. From Juana la Larga, Jesusa Rodríguez, Hemispheric Institute Encuentro ©Julio Pantoja, 2014.

down the possibilities of exploration of how other's feel and think. If one honestly asks: what did I mean when I said that? What did this mean to me? And, necessarily, what did this thing mean to you?

**AM:** Good point. A discussion that has the aim of acknowledging identities can end up shutting down the unknown and obliterating connections. Following this thread, I would like to ask you to talk a little bit about the digital, which is also an area that holds a lot of tension, especially when we weigh up the digital medium which allows for the propagation of the archive and algorithmic logic. Both are part of the same living web: it is through the media that we act, connect, show

up, shout out, campaign for funding, get ideas published or not. And it seems to me that there is a war going on in digital medias, where algorithms are programmed to increase hate campaigns, where extreme right-wing movements like Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump in the US, and Brexit in the UK seem to be nurtured by algorithmic logic.

At the same time, digital space allows for the possibility of creating a bank of political performances, following the example of what you have done through the Hemi Archives and the *e-misferica* digital journal.<sup>8</sup> Digital Performance archives are driven by an intention of fostering dialogue and keeping the liveness of the creative process accessible to a vast public.

My question is: how can the performance archive's presence in digital media be restrained and limited by algorithmic manipulations? Considering that the nature of performance is to break the norm, or question the mechanisms and conformities that restrain our social perception, I keep asking: how can we hack this binary logic?

**DT:** I think we are talking about two different things. The digital is one more form of communication and interaction. The web existing in space, the airwaves, the fiber optic, the whole infrastructure, was developed for military use, and later we were allowed to use it with this huge amount of flexibility and connection that we have. Our life depends on digital communications. However, like everything else in our life, at the moment, this is completely controlled by neoliberalism. We have a neoliberal regime controlling the airwaves, in the same way that it controls television and so on. And because of that, it controls the politics. So, I think the fight is against neoliberalism, not against the digital. The digital is just one more platform, one more way, one more place.

We have to be fighting the banks now. We must be fighting all these environmentally destructive industries. That's what we have to focus on. And part of this fight may be focused on the power we can exercise as consumers, because if you don't buy, things come crashing down. It's only buying and debt that keep this machine functioning.

It seems like it's a big fight, no person alone can do that. It takes a huge amount of social organizing, and we can organize on the same exact platform that they control.

**AM:** This situation is part of our daily fight. Groups and organization like Cross Pollination and Intercultural Roots, which I am part of, have to deal with the paradox of using these platforms and being used by it.<sup>9</sup> We are usually 'gifted' by Google and Microsoft with 'free' funding for ads and we are aware that if, on the one hand, these tools can expand our outreach, on the other they are the same tools that use our data to sell even more. I often catch myself thinking: what alternative will come out of this digital feudalism? Again, it seems that we go back to the issue of who gets the right to talk louder than other voices.

At Intercultural Roots<sup>10</sup> our activism consists of expanding notions of health through peer-to-peer support and enable-the-enablers programmes. We were recently, for example, enabling artists in war conflict zones in Africa, to promote peaceful dialogues through the dissemination of folkloric dance cultures that trespass the borders of the civil conflict. But we need to hand over our info to them and we don't know how this is going to be used. I think that we should expand this discussion and perhaps involve engineers and programmers in our digital activism.

I would like to talk about collective and individual somatic traces of pain. It seems to me that this is key in the process of promoting dialogue and social emancipation from neoliberal logic.

As a somatic dance-theater teacher, my work is centered on developing a felt-sense of the body's potentialities. It is about inviting bodies to feel and sense what they can do, which involves being aware of their inner impulses and body-memories. This practice inevitably forces people to confront memories of trauma and pain. Sometimes this work brings about that which is impossible to bear. From my experience, I feel that this is a pivotal point: supporting people to be with their pain in a safe space and look to the memory of the trauma in an expanded way, which can help them to develop a sense of agency.

This work is developed in the theater laboratory, when Cross Pollination works with young artists to create a space in which vulnerability can be a means for creation and growth. The key point is to foster a work dynamic allowing young artists to be in touch with what makes them feel vulnerable, but at the same time exercise clear boundaries in terms of how they would like to step in and out of this space, for

the sake of their own autonomy as an actor-creator. In order to create this safe space, we need stability, trust, being present with each other and creating an ethos of mutual responsibility which enables kinship and peer-to-peer movement practices which, consequently, fuel collective activism.

I feel that, in the collective social field, this psychophysical dynamic also applies. We could witness recently in Brazil how the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions were obliterated by extreme right-wing military factions in Brazilian Government. The reaction to the 2014<sup>11</sup> Truth Commissions' aim to dig up traumatic memories and promote clarification regarding cases of torture, deaths, and disappearances throughout the Military Dictatorship, gave leverage to Bolsonaro supporters, culminating in his election in 2018. Today, on 17 January 2023, there are millions of Brazilians protesting against the democratic election of President Lula and calling for a reinstatement of a Military Dictatorship.

What has happened to people's memory? This movement of never looking back and burying memories is, in my view, a great impediment for any dialogue in any field. It is space in which the excluded bodies see themselves in a hole that is impossible to climb out of.

**DT:** I am co-directing a project at the moment called 'Zip Code Memory Project' <https://zcmp.org/>. Zip codes were created to deliver mail efficiently but, of course, they also become zones of racial and economic divisions. Some people live in very wealthy zip codes and a lot of people live in very poor zip codes. During the pandemic in New York, the death rate of the people living in a poor zip code were more than twice as high as those in wealthy zip codes.

This inspired a colleague and me to do something. The project is very much about what you are talking about. We did what we know how to do – convene large groups, engage artists, activists, and scholars – to offer workshops in marginalized zip codes of New York “to gather and process the effects of the pandemic. How had it affected our lives? Where, in our bodies, did we carry the uncertainties, anxieties and fears it provoked, the harm we had suffered?” (*Zip Code Memory Project*). We needed to build trust, create a space for imagining repair, and demanding justice.



What was clear to me, and it has been for a long time since I wrote *Disappearing Acts*, is that certain people carry trauma. Like for example, the Mothers of The Plaza de Mayo in Argentina whose children were permanently ‘disappeared’, carry trauma. It is certainly individual trauma, but their trauma-fuelled activism makes clear it is also collective trauma. The entire population who did not support or agree with the dictatorship was put at risk. Marginalized populations, descendants of enslaved people, often continue to experience trauma. In part, trauma is handed down genetically through ‘epigenetics’. But it’s also prolonged through continued assault – discrimination and institutionalized practices of exclusion and inequality. This collective trauma needs to be acknowledged and addressed with all the attention that medical professionals in Western, capitalist systems reserve for traumatized individuals who can afford treatment.

But Western medicine has been terribly neglectful about everything related to trauma. At first, they said it was very rare, then later they started to relate it to people who’ve come back from war (Freud’s ‘shell shock’). Then Judith Herman<sup>12</sup> made clear that women who have suffered rape and/or domestic violence often experience trauma. We are finally coming to a kind of social awareness that trauma is endemic, despite the lack of recognition from Western medicine. There is a wonderful book called *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van Der Kolk that really brings evidence to the failure of Western medicine on dealing with trauma.<sup>13</sup>

And because trauma is endemic, we have to address the things that have produced it – the dictatorships, the white supremacist violence in the United States. These, as I said earlier, continue the great ‘conquests’ and enslavements through different means. So as long as the group that controls everything – power, money, access, etc – was in control, everything was supposedly all right. When that group feels challenged, it unleashes chaos and terror.

If you look deeper at all the dictatorship in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and most of Latin America, from the fifties until the early eighties, they were about neoliberalism. And the U.S. supported and encouraged the dictatorships to open their markets to neoliberalism. The historian Greg Grandin<sup>14</sup> has a brilliant book about this.

**AM:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

**DT:** Now, I think there are different strands to those extreme right-wing movements. The U.S. is experiencing a demographic shift – ‘white-non Hispanics’ will no longer be the majority by 2043 (“Whites no longer a majority”). That group has considered itself the true founders and the economic engine of empire – forgetting of course the near extermination of Indigenous peoples and the ‘free’ forced labour or Blacks, LatinX, Asians and other people of colour who continue to work for less than a living wage. Poor whites now join the ranks. Instead of blaming neoliberalism that out-sourced jobs, etc, they blame people of colour for stealing their jobs. The economic violence remains, but there is a different approach. People can’t just say you are going to be my slave and work as a maid in my house. Now there is an expectation of equality. There’s an expectation that people can go to universities, people can have jobs, women can be more empowered in society and so on. In reality that is an almost impossible dream. This new authoritarianism, this neo-fascism has to do with keeping those people out of power, as always. So, it’s not just neoliberalism but it’s about keeping these populations out of power and in ‘their place’.

I used to think keeping people ‘in their place’ would be impossible. Demographic shifts and generational shifts promise to change this slave plantation order and mentality. How can the few who profit control the many who suffer because of this system? But then I stop to consider the conquest of Mexico. Millions of Indigenous people in Mesoamerica were conquered by 800 Spaniards. Which leads to the conclusion that what is needed is power. The Spaniards had firearms and horses. They brought disease and inflamed regional discontent. Most important, however, was that they took advantage of the conflicts within the Indigenous groups so that they in fact destroyed each other. And this is what the ones who run the apparatus of control are now doing; they are consolidating power through all the mechanisms that we were talking about earlier, through the media, algorithms, law reinforcement, through the Supreme Court. The misinformation campaigns have us all hating and threatening each other. ‘Cancel culture’ is a provocation from both the right and the left. We will cancel each other. The legal system can do the rest. Eliminate voting rights, affirmative action, abortion rights, and now contraception! Authoritarianism combined with rampant capitalism. In a word, fascism.



Figure 3. María José Contreras interactive performance, Talk to the Future, Zip Code Memory Project, 2022, © Desiree Rios

So, I start to question the statement that everybody has trauma. Maybe that's not true. I'm beginning to think that some people profit a lot from trauma, and they don't think that there's anything wrong with it. And maybe only later do they start thinking, oh yeah, maybe I shouldn't have done that. For example, in the United States under Trump, the government put migrant children in cages, held them in cages called ice boxes or 'heleras'. I haven't heard one person in the United States saying, "Oh God, I wish I'd done something about that." Apart from activists and people who were already involved in the social justice movement, everybody else was very tranquil about it. Are people blind to these children's trauma? Have they blinded themselves? Are we being taught not to care?

**AM:** Yes, I understand your point, we can't generalize trauma without the risk of creating a big umbrella that puts everybody involved in the same place. But don't you think that those psychological, and psychophysical conflicts are expressed in the paralyzation of our social political lives and the fact that this makes even more evident the correlation between minimal state, fascist waves and all the violence that comes with it?

**DT:** Yes, absolutely. This is what I wrote in my *Disappearing Acts* book. That is why this book is so important to me. This very public display of violence is often accompanied by public silencing. The Argentine military disappeared people in public. But you knew that if you said anything, you could be next. It didn't matter who you were. So, I call that 'percepticide'. You have to blind yourself. You cannot hear or see or acknowledge what is doing on around you or you will die. Percepticide is a way of killing your senses in order to be alive.

I remember people telling me that they would hear their neighbour being taken away and they would muffle their ears with their hands, because they could not allow themselves to hear, see or do anything. Percepticide annihilates relationality. I really believe there is trauma there. People felt threatened, and they felt that they could be next. Many of them couldn't speak about it for years. The people I interviewed at first when I was there, they kept saying, no, no, I never knew. And then later they started to reveal, but it took a lot of time. This is collective trauma. The public display of terror is meant to silence and traumatize the population.

However, for example, the assumption that we were all struck by the pandemic, I don't think it is totally true. People who had money and resources went to their country houses so they could feel safer, and they could do this because there was someone that could deliver food to their house. It was a pandemic wave that hit everyone differently. There were the ones like me that could stay at home and teach my classes through Zoom, but there were the ones who didn't have any choice other than risk their lives to be paid. Because there's no social structure for these folks, their families, their kids. Could you say that we were all traumatized?

**AM:** Of course. We must differentiate the trauma. It is almost similar to the assumption that human issues are global, disregarding all the cultural and historical differences in terms of how we are experiencing the same situation. Yes, let's not treat trauma as a *tabula rasa* in which local conflicts and historical marginalization are eliminated.

**DT:** Exactly, and we participated in it. My life is made possible by people who work for little or no benefits, little or no money. That's the reality. And if I can't face that reality, then I can just muffle my ears like people who listen to their neighbours being taken away.

My point is, and this the true line of thought of my *Presente!* book, which says: "What can we do when it seems that nothing can be done, but doing nothing is not an option?" I've got to do something. Doing nothing is not an option. Absolutely not. But that's the whole thing in neoliberalism, right? That's what neoliberalism stands for: nothing can be done and there is no alternative. That's what Thatcher said, right? There Is No Alternative: TINA. We need to say no to that. There are alternatives, and we have to fight for them every single day from wherever we are positioned. And the more we fight for them together as groups, as artistic and political coalitions, the more effective we will be. I love the kind of work that you're doing, your idea of dance-theater though somatic practices, through groups that are bringing and inviting other groups.

**AM:** Yeah, it is like having a new kind of political alternative that can be compared to a viral contagious movement. Understanding the viral in another way, as a contagious transmission of affects and good memories that connect us. It is necessary, because it's exactly when social conflicts are disregarded, when people experiencing conflicts like the delivery guy who has no alternative but to face his

death, this guy knows deep inside that social life is paralyzed. And then this same guy will be totally enraptured when someone comes with a histrionic discourse saying: let's break everything, let's go to Congress and destroy it all. This despotic shout is captured as a way of doing something in a world where no mobility, action or participation is available. The emptiness of alternatives within this person will contribute to their adherence to fascist actions.

I like the subversive idea behind the Hispanic, LatinX and Black demographic expansion in the US. Sounds like the return of the originally excluded and can sling a possible and necessary cultural revolution. On the other hand, we know that this can awaken reactionary manifestations from a cornered imperialism. As you suggested, lets continue to talk and walk together in resonance with what it is possible to do, move and dream together.

I am curious to ask you how you feel in yourself, at the moment. How do reflect on your trajectory and all the constellations of things that made you who you are so far. You are so many things and have been in so many places. I mean Mexico, Canada, New York, Argentina, all these places are also part of you, right?

**DT:** I feel great. I'm very happy. I'm working on a new book. And I feel so lucky to have my house in Mexico, because it's such a necessary balance for being and working in New York. New York represents the height of global capital, right? And here, in my little town in Mexico, everything still feels not pre-capital, maybe, but certainly not neoliberal here yet. The town I live in has a very strong Indigenous presence and people still cultivate bartering and other ways of producing things they need in their lives. There's definitively a different way of doing things here, a different sense of time. I've been coming to this town since I was a teenager, and it allowed me to nurture this imagination or this idea that there is another way of being in the world. Things can be different. We do have alternatives. But we must be able to talk and walk with our allies, no?

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## Notes

- 1 "The Hemispheric Institute gathers artists, scholars, writers, learners, and activists from across the Americas. We focus on social justice and research politically engaged culture and performance. We share this work in digital archives and amplify it through dialogues and public scholarship, residencies, publications, and gatherings. Our dynamic, multilingual network crosses disciplines and borders, and is grounded in the fundamental belief that artistic practice and critical reflection can spark lasting cultural change."
- 2 Performance Studies at NYU is dedicated to the analysis and study of cultural enactments of all kinds, and to understanding how they can produce meaningful change. Combining an interdisciplinary range of approaches including feminist and queer theory, critical race theory, and other modes of analysis, with an equally diverse range of research methods, Performance Studies offers graduate and undergraduate students the opportunity to explore and think critically about the world-making power of performance in theater, performance art, dance, sound/music, visual and installation art, activism, and online, as well as in the performance of 'everyday life'.
- 3 *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University

- Press, 2003. Translation into Portuguese by Eliana Lourenço de Lima Reis, Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais Press, November 2012.
- 4 On 8 January 2023, following the defeat of then-president Jair Bolsonaro in the 2022 Brazilian general election and the inauguration of his successor Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva, a mob of Bolsonaro’s supporters attacked Brazil’s federal government buildings in the capital, Brasília.
  - 5 On January 6, 2021, following the defeat of U.S. President Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, a mob of his supporters attacked the United States Capitol Building in Washington, D.C.
  - 6 Contract with America, a document signed September 27 1994 on the Capitol steps in Washington, D.C., by members of the Republican minority before the Republican Party gained control of Congress in 1994. The “Contract with America” outlined legislation to be enacted by the House of Representatives within the first 100 days of the 104th Congress (1995–96). Among the proposals were tax cuts, a permanent line-item veto, measures to reduce crime and provide middle-class tax relief, and constitutional amendments requiring term limits and a balanced budget. With the exception of the constitutional amendment for term limits, all parts of the “Contract with America” were passed by the House, under the leadership of the speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich.
  - 7 Jessusa Rodriguez is a Mexican director, actress, playwright, performance artist, scenographer, entrepreneur, and social activist.
  - 8 e-misférica is a biannual, peer reviewed, online journal published by Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. The journal publishes scholarly essays, multimedia artist presentations, e-books and performances in English, Spanish and Portuguese.
  - 9 Cross Pollination (CP) runs a nomadic laboratory for the dialogue in-between practices, both scholarly and performance-based, as an integral and essential part of the politics of embodied research in theater and performance. Cross Pollination and Intercultural Roots are both organizations which are fostering the dialogue between artists and their practices through online platforms.
  - 10 Intercultural Roots for Public Health and traditional Embody Arts is a UK Charity organization promoting arts for health and social change through art and educational projects. IR brings together practitioners, artists, scholars and teachers to create collaboratively and develop their practices for health and social change.
  - 11 On 10 December 2014, the commission issued a report with its findings. The report identified the participation of 337 agents of Brazilian government involved in human rights violations, including arbitrary prisons, forced disappearing, torture and subsequent death of political opponents to the dictatorship in Brazil.
  - 12 In *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (2022).
  - 13 *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* is a book by Bessel van der Kolk (2014) about the effects of psychological trauma, also known as traumatic stress.
  - 14 Greg Grandin’s book *Empire’s Workshop* is an eye-opening examination of Latin America’s role as proving ground for U.S. imperial strategies and tactics. He is also the author of *The Last Colonial Massacre* and the award-winning *The Blood of Guatemala*.