Violeta Luna: Representations of Indigenous Identity: Woman of Corn —la llorona cibernética[1]

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ABSTRACT

This work describes an advanced Spanish conversation class that deals with the instruction of cultural topics of the Spanish speaking world. The materials are appropriate for advanced high school or university English/Spanish. The object is to teach students to actively learn to identify and deconstruct binary thinking and reductive narratives. This is done by means of reflexive analytic investigation in a variety of central considerations with respect to history, society and the U.S. and Mexican cultures, through the examination of the performance art of Violeta Luna.

Keywords: Violeta Luna, Violence, Mexico, The War on Drugs, Transgenic Corn, Performance Art, Gloria Anzaldúa, Pedagogy

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo describe una clase de conversación avanzada que aborda la instrucción de temas culturales del mundo hispanoparlante. Las materias son apropiadas para la enseñanza de inglés/español avanzado en la escuela secundaria o la universidad. El objetivo es enseñar a los estudiantes a aprender activamente a identificar y deconstruir el pensamiento binario y las narrativas reduccionistas. Esto se hace a través de la investigación analítica reflexiva, en una variedad de consideraciones centrales referente a discusiones sobre la historia, la sociedad y la cultura estadounidense y la mexicana a través del arte de *performance* de Violeta Luna.

Palabras clave: Violeta Luna, violencia, México, guerra contra las drogas, maíz transgénico, el arte de la *performance*, Gloria Anzaldúa, pedagogía

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INTRODUCTION

I recently taught an undergraduate Spanish conversation class designed to develop students' speaking skills through readings, discussions and presentations on cultural topics, and centered on Chicana and Mexicana identities. With sophomores and juniors, the class met for 50 minutes thrice weekly. Teaching strategies included multimedia instruction, printed and virtual texts, and the Blackboard online learning management system. In addition to in-class written work, students posted weekly online journal entries, responding to questions based on classroom activities, discussions and reading materials.

I structured the class such that students worked in groups and individually to lead discussions of assigned readings. Multiple formats, such as roundtable discussions, reaction papers and presentations fostered student engagement. Students were encouraged to identify diverse representations of *Latina* identity in the readings, the music, video and performance. I used selected critical readings from Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Coco Fusco, Diana Taylor, and Doris Sommer, among other texts that touched on history, cultural studies, sociology and Latina imaginaries, geared to identifying issues that ground United States and Mexican history and culture. I wanted students to grapple with ways in which class, gender, sexuality, race, and national origin affect and mediate Chicana and Mexicana experiences.

The overall objective was for students to deconstruct binary thinking and reductive narratives through reflective analytical inquiry, while also learning to critically understand performance art. Classroom and online discussions focused on questions of whether or not culturally marked individuals can occupy space in the center and/or periphery of hegemonic discourse; whether the body can be decolonized; whether there are political and ethical limits to art; what the role of academic instruction is in a time of intensifying global censorship and crisis; and whether the artistic, political, racial and sexual borders crossed by artists bleed into the social sphere. Such considerations, I hoped, would contribute to full-throated discussions about history, society and culture.

To achieve this, I chose a somewhat unconventional approach. In addition to the text-based materials, students were introduced to a handful of performance exercises I adapted from a performance pedagogy workshop I attended in Santa Fe, New Mexico,

conducted by La Pocha Nostra[3]. Performance exercises took 5-10 minutes of each class. Exercises challenged students to introduce themselves creatively with either a 145-character tweet or haiku poem. Other exercises included basic warm-ups, in which students moved around the room, and stretching and breathing exercises borrowed from dance, theatre and yoga. One effective exercise was *The Gaze*, in which students held prolonged intense eye contact with each other. Another exercise was a poetic extension of the Surrealist game called the *Exquisite Cadaver*: As students stood in a circle, I used previously assigned vocabulary to form the beginnings of sentences that students would then finish. This was a fast-paced exercise that allowed me to assess students' grasp of the vocabulary in a dynamic and engaging way. Following Vicki Galloway's approach (2001), I made no effort to discourage views expressed by students. This activity was a favorite; students loosened up and became energized for later discussions.

Prior to class meetings, I assigned vocabulary-specific readings and themes to facilitate discussions in class. For one such discussion, the assigned vocabulary centered on borders —particularly ethnic, gender-based, geopolitical and racial border crossings— to accompany a reading from Gloria Anzaldúa invoking the image of the U.S.-Mexico border as "*una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" (2007: 25). Students worked together in groups to discuss ways in which the notion of borders is elaborated conceptually, metaphorically, and symbolically. To extend this discussion, I introduced students to Violeta Luna and a couple of her performance art pieces: *NK603: Action for Performer & e-Maíz* (*NK603*) (2009) and *Requiem for a Lost Land: Réquiem para una una tierra perdida* (2011), two works that provide a unique lens through which to explore Anzaldúa's influential book. The following is a brief summary of Luna's work and background.

1. Background information[4]

A self-described actress and activist whose aesthetic projects engage ethnographic representations and hybrid entities, Luna is a Creative Capital and National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures Fellow, and member of the Magdalena Project: International

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[3] For more information on La Pocha Nostra, www.pochanostra.com

[4] All biographical information is based on two interviews I conducted with Violeta Luna in June 2016.

Network of Women in Contemporary Theater. She earned a graduate degree in acting from the Centro Universitario de Teatro (CUT-UNAM) in 1995, and La Casa del Teatro in 1998, in Mexico. She is cofounder and associate artist of the performance collaborative Seco y Mojado (along with her husband Roberto Gutiérrez Varea, Víctor Cartagena, and David Molina), and was previously associate director of El Teatro Jornalero Sin Fronteras. Luna has performed and directed performance workshops in Africa, Canada, Europe, Japan, Latin America, New Zealand, and the United States, and yet her solo work remains relatively unknown outside an intimate cohort of performance artists and academics.

Within this circle of collaborators and critics, she is perhaps best known for her work with Mexican-born interdisciplinary and multimedia performance artist and author Guillermo Gómez-Peña. An important voice in debates on identity formations, multiculturalism and globalization, Gómez-Peña's performance art transgresses national, linguistic and ethnographic frontiers —real and imagined— as he problematizes virtual and conceptual spaces for identity formations. He has founded several collaborative performance groups, including Poyesis Genética, The Border Arts Workshop and La Pocha Nostra. In 1991 he received the MacArthur Genius Award for his performance work and texts and the performance collective, La Pocha Nostra, formed by Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes in the same year. This international performance troupe has also included collaborating artists Violeta Luna, Michéle Ceballos, the deceased James Luna, Gabriela Salgado, Emma Tramposch, Dani D'Emilia, and Erica Mott.

Luna's most noteworthy works include *Frida* (2006), a spectacle that centers Mexican icon Frida Kahlo as the embodiment of women who challenge normative cultural values and affirm identity beyond politically and societally imposed gender boundaries; *NK603: Action for Performer & e-Maíz* (*NK603*) (2009), a critical reflection on the devastating consequences of genetically modified corn on life; *Requiem for a Lost Land/Réquiem para una Tierra Perdida* (*Réquiem*) (2011), an artistic intervention in which she explores the representation of violence in terms of the human body; and, *Apuntes sobre la Frontera* (*Apuntes*) (2011), a performative border collage that incorporates corporal actions and images to tell the story of an immigrant leaving her country to find better living conditions.

Lured to performance art from the theater, Luna uses the human body, space, and time in ways that contrast with traditional forms of dramatic discourse. According to Luna, her performance projects afford her greater autonomy, permitting her to be the site, the action and the locus of enunciation. She operates as a free agent, able to articulate aesthetic concepts politically, even biographically. Her performances are in themselves horizontal spaces —liberated zones, where she generates every aspect of the action, which, in theatre, is delimited according to hierarchical roles. Luna is not only a creator; she is an activist. In this regard, her approach to performance moves beyond traditional relationships of power that mark the actor as a tool and minion of the director. As an actor, she is a dynamic and integral part of the dramatic process and theatrical architecture —not merely a tool in the box of a predominantly male pool of directors.

Luna identifies with hybridity on a personal and physical level; her cultural and stylistic hybridizations move beyond geopolitically reinforced markers associated with national identity and border crossings. Her works problematize the epistemological architecture of notions such as mono-ethnic and monolingual purity. She believes it is her responsibility as an artist and human being to speak out about socio-political issues. In this respect, there is a visceral connection between Luna's formation as an activist and the way she began to access the world of performance art. This in turn relates to her family's connections with the art world in Mexico City, and to her six sisters' influence on her work. There has always been a strong female presence in Luna's work, and that is the normative space from which she works.

2. *Réquiem*

Réquiem is an artistic intervention in which Luna explores the representation of violence in terms of the human body. Minimally armed with a brown paper bag full of props, she recreates a crime scene that represents metaphorically and symbolically the fate of tens of thousands of victims of the War on Drugs declared by Mexican President Felipe Calderón in 2010, in collaboration with the U.S. government. This bilateral initiative stripped human rights from millions of Mexican citizens in a show of force (the Mérida Initiative[5]) that promised to deal harshly with drug traffickers.

[5] See Juan González's *Harvest of Empire*, New York: Penguin, 2011.

Karina Hodayán comments that *Réquiem* "re-situates state discourse on nationhood and the narco-war with a site of memory and mourning for the dead" (*e-misférica*). Bearing this in mind, I encourage students to view Luna's performance in *Réquiem* as an exploration of the political and social landscape of Mexico during President Felipe Calderón's term in office (2006-12). I present her performative inquiry as an examination of Calderón's collaboration with the U.S. government to declare war on narco-traffickers.

Luna based *Réquiem* on the political realities of Calderón's move to rule with a firm hand following his rise to power amid controversy, irregularities in the voting process, and a series of acts designed to legitimate his presidency. In *Réquiem,* I point out that Luna's performances "function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory and a sense of identity" (Taylor, 2003: 2), wherein the bodily subjectivity of the performer is an end in itself. In this way, Luna exposes the recent memory, and violent truth, that public spaces in Mexico, under Calderón, became scenes of horror. I provide media examples of the dismembered bodies of victims of narco-traffickers. I show that drug cartels, vying for control over markets and drug routes, staged gruesome displays in order to instill fear in the hearts and minds of the Mexican people.

Students learned that Luna has performed *Réquiem* around the world in museums, galleries, international festivals, *encuentros, pulquerías*, and theatres. They also learned that due to the variety of performance sites, attendance is often limited to an intimate number of spectators. The version of *Réquiem* that students watched is a 16-minute, 32-second long video that documents Luna's performance at Skuc Gallery in Ljubljana, Slovenia, July 10, 2011[6]. I asked students to identify ways in which *Réquiem* represents a ritualized memorial for tens of thousands of victims of the War on Drugs perpetrated by the U.S. and Mexican governments. It features David Molina's original soundtrack, which includes a modified voice recording of former President Felipe Calderón's speech (in English) before the U.S. Congress in 2010, and an enhanced recording of Mexican poet María Rivera reading (in Spanish) her poem "Los muertos" during a protest march in Mexico City in 2011.

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[6] The video of *Réquiem* can be found on the website of the Hemispheric Institute (http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e82-luna-video).

Although Luna is the only performer physically present in the gallery, I ask students to think that the former Mexican President, the Mexican poet and the Mexican people may also be considered as protagonists of the performance: Each element —the video, the soundtrack, Luna's gestures, her body, the space, the audience— may be viewed as autonomous; each has its own narrative.

One of the premises of Luna's project is to investigate different ways of representing violence with the human body.[7] In 2010 there had been a surge in violence in Mexico after President Calderón declared war on drug lords and drug traffickers, initiating a massive militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and other public spaces in Mexico.

The video begins in total darkness; only the voice of Calderón addressing the U.S. Congress is heard. Then, Luna is seen standing in a position central to the performance space. Spectators are sitting, squatting, and standing around the performance site in a semi-circular fashion. Luna is dressed in black pants and sleeveless top. She moves deliberately through the space with a brown paper bag in her hand that reads, "MÉXICO 2010," pausing at times to consider her orientation with respect to the space and the audience. She then removes large white bottles from the bag and places them in different locations on the floor.

The soundtrack, as mentioned above, consists of two distinct audio recordings that have been modified. At times the voice of President Calderón sounds like a skip in a record. Molina manipulates the recording such that certain parts of the speech repeat in a mechanical way, evincing a technological glitch or the voice of a robot. At other times during Calderón's speech, the voice of María Rivera is heard intermittently repeating the words "los muertos" between spliced segments of Calderón's speech. Likewise, during Rivera's oration, Calderón's voice is heard repeating "Mexico." In the background of both speeches Molina has dubbed in the mechanical militarized sounds of airplanes, rockets, and other warlike sound effects.

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[7] From a personal interview with Luna in June 2016.

I urge students to note the ways in which each and every element of the performance constitutes a particular narrative, which in turn contributes to the whole. The soundtrack for *Réquiem* serves as one of several such narrative lines in Luna's performance. It not only marks changes in Luna's movements within the performance space, but also her gestures and what she is wearing. Molina's deliberate manipulation of both Calderón's and Rivera's oratory performances reinforces a binary construction from which Luna emerges as a third voice, another narrative. Again, the juxtaposition of oratory and physical performances evokes a seemingly antithetical performance-as-text relationship. Robert Neustadt observes that performance art may be read as a text, where it "is a collection of *signs* that articulates meaning through internal and inter-textual juxtapositions" (1999: xvi). Neustadt goes on to say that writers "structure texts from a myriad of linguistic, visual and political signs" (1999: xvii), a notion that dovetails conveniently with Luna's view that performance art employs gestures and movements as a kind of 'language' with which the performer may create meaning without a text. By binary I mean to signal the linguistic opposition of Spanish to English; the opposition of Mexico to the United States; the opposition of a mythological past to a dystopic technological future; and the opposition of Catholic to Protestant, each of which Molina's soundtrack embellishes and Luna's performance disturbs.

As noted, Calderón's speech has been modified to sound robotic, aligning his narrative with progress, technology, the U.S., and a dystopic future. The metallic sounds that intermittently ping throughout Calderón's speech, the sounds of rockets and other machines of war, reaffirm the promise of militarization and death —for the Mexican people. Hodayán observes that *Réquiem* exposes "the expendability of resources and people under global capitalism" (Hemispheric). Yet, Calderón speaks of this historic moment before the U.S. Congress in terms of his "honor" and how grateful he is to be there.

> It is a great honor for me to come here before you today. I would like to thank the Congress and the American people for this invitation. I want to express my gratitude to all those here, who have supported Mexico during very challenging times. I also salute Mexican Americans and all Latinos who work every day for the prosperity of this great nation.[8]

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[8] From a personal interview with Luna June 2016.

At the same time, in opposition, Rivera's voice rings out in solidarity with the masses, calling for the end to the violence:

> Allá vienen
> los descabezados,
> los mancos,
> los descuartizados,
> a las que les partieron el coxis,
> a los que les aplastaron la cabeza,
> los pequeñitos llorando
> entre paredes oscuras
> de minerales y arena . . .[9]

I entreat students to consider technological intervention and the supplementation of the human voice and personhood as allusions to the relationship between machinery and the human organism. The soundtrack alludes to a cybernetic dimension in the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico. It bears recalling Donna Haraway's positing of the human as a cyborg, "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1990: 191). To advance this notion further, I provide students with Haraway's observation that modern war in the last century was a "cyborg orgy, coded by C^3I, command-control-communication-intelligence . . . a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality" (1990: 191). I suggest that Haraway's comments apply equally to the War on Drugs orchestrated by the U.S. and Mexico, because they recall high-tech surveillance practices, the use of satellites and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), as well as futuristic weaponry as ways of performing war and surreptitiously mediating subjects.

Luna represents the violence perpetrated by the U.S. and Mexican states on the Mexican people in several ways. First, students note that she provides a historical context for the performance with a brown paper bag labeled, "Mexico 2010," from which she extracts six white bottles clearly marked with the Mexican national emblem, a symbolic representation of the Mexican body politic. Here students are introduced to the metaphorical notion that the body is like a container, in this case a bottle. When Luna removes the bottle caps and turns the bottles on their sides, white and green paint symbolically spills from them like blood from decapitated corpses. The numerically labeled cards that appear next to the decapitated bottles/bodies inform viewers of the raw data, the

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[9] From a personal interview with Luna June 2016.

number of dismembered victims and the collateral damage of the U.S.-Mexico War on Drugs. Bottled-up frustration thus spills over in the symbolic depiction of an executed Mexican body politic —a representation of violence inflicted on the human body: Collateral damage in a binational U.S.-Mexico-led initiative.

In effect, Luna recreates a crime scene in what students learn to interpret as an act of performative forensic analysis. She unmasks the obscene underside of state-sponsored terror in the streets of Mexico via the War on Drugs. The performance piece extends the value of war further, as *Réquiem* exposes the violent aftermath of cultural, economic, military, political, and social hegemony, and students observe the unequal relationship of power between the U.S. and Mexico. Students are also encouraged to view the War on Drugs as a metonymical value for the neo-colonial relationship between these neighboring countries in a period of global neoliberal hegemony.

Such unequal cultural, economic, political, and social relations speak to what Walter Mignolo refers to as colonial difference. For this reason, I assign students a reading on the elaboration of border gnosis (Mignolo, 2000: 11). Mignolo's thinking in this regard aligns with that of Étienne Balibar, whose work with Emmanuel Wallerstein reveals a multidirectional circuit of exchange, predetermined by relationships already hierarchically organized with respect to a nation's economic, cultural, military, political, and social standing in the world order. It is possible to speak of Luna's performance in *Réquiem* in such terms, because the performance speaks to underlying transcultural processes. To elaborate, I introduce students to a compelling notion that requires further analysis and interpretation. I explain that the performance site itself is a locus of enunciation; that is, it is a place in which aesthetic, cultural, economic, epistemic, religious, political, racial, sexual, and subjective information is manipulated, reformulated, re-examined, reimagined and transferred. Different forms of transference mark each site, such that the performance in Slovenia, for example, impacts viewers and performer alike in ways that are distinct from a performance in Mexico or elsewhere in Latin America.

Likewise, the body of the performer is itself "the site for a ... text's genesis, appearance, and reception" (Allatson, 2002: 254). The performance becomes an act of transference in which a world of cultural information —economic, gendered, political,

sexual and social— passes between viewers and performer. Throughout the performance, a large group of people can be heard intermittently on the soundtrack, chanting in unison, "*¡No más sangre, ni un muerto más!"* Early on in the performance, just as María Rivera begins to recite "Los muertos," Luna squats down on the floor. She removes a small plastic bag full of white powder and empties the contents on the floor in a line, creating a symbolic border demarcating the U.S. and Mexico. This symbolic delimitation serves not only to inform viewers of the longstanding geopolitical history between the U.S. and Mexico but also explicitly draws a symbolic narcotic line in the sand.

Luna removes white bottles from the bag, placing them —six in total— in different locations on the floor. Placement of the bottles and the line of white powder serve to organize the space into a pyramidal composition. Luna removes cards from the bag then unscrews the cap of the bottle nearest to her. She places the cap on the floor to the side of the bottle and then puts the card next to it. The card reads "5,000." Luna lays the next bottle on its side and removes the cap. She then places cards reading "10,000" and "15,000" on either side of the cap. Visible on the side of the bottle is Mexico's national emblem, an eagle with a serpent in its mouth, perched on a cactus. Luna repeats the act of removing caps from the bottles and placing cards with numbers reading in the tens of thousands. Green and white liquid spills from the bottles.

Luna pauses to pull a white dress down over her head. She kneels, pours white liquid into a silver, heart-shaped bowl and then spreads that liquid on her arms and hands. It is possible to construe that Luna's white clothing and body painting, the narcotic line in the sand, and the white bottles labeled with the Mexican emblem are all metaphors for the relationship between the Mexican people, the U.S., and narcotrafficking. As such, the bottles represent the Mexican body politic in the grip of narcotics and narcotics traffickers. The line of narcotics between the U.S. and Mexico is a metaphor for a common problem, a binational conflict. Luna's white dress and white paint place her at the nexus of the conversation between distinct elements. She embodies the white narcotics and emerges metaphorically from the line in the sand between the U.S. and Mexico as a third entity, neither Mexican nor from the U.S., but a hybrid entity that arises from an existential threat that brings death to the Mexican people more often than to people of the U.S.

Luna removes a hairbrush from the bag and begins to unfurl the braids of her hair, pausing only to gesture spectators to come closer. She brushes her long black hair and faces the audience, then tilts her head toward the floor to brush the full length of her hair. Gathering her hair and wrapping it around her face like a blindfold, Luna holds several poses using her hair to obscure her face. This use of the hair to cover the face is a symbolic gesture that signifies violent actions. Luna is a victim, but she is, at the same time, the perpetrator of the violence, the signifier and the signified, the subject and the object and *an other* emergent identity from the interstitial space that divides performer and spectators.

Luna uses her body, her hair and the performance space to explore the representation of violence, not as props, but as a force of nature, a mournful mother —*la llorona*— of the beheaded Mexican citizenry. The performance is a ritualistic memorial for the more than 50,000 deaths, countless wounded and hundreds of transborder communities impacted by the U.S.-Mexico binational initiative to fight organized crime and associated violence. As I noted, Luna organizes the space in a pyramidal composition. The white powder represents the symbolic border region and separates her from the audience. The bottles are arranged along an axis in accordance with Luna's body, which becomes the nexus of the composition. On her knees, in a white smock, with arms and face painted white, the space converts into an altar, a sepulcher, a mass grave; Luna becomes a priestess, the white of her arms and face and smock are as symbolic forms of processes of purification. She juxtaposes these sacred ritual gestures with poetic and political discourse. At the same time, the soundtrack shares archival evidence of the social drama, while Luna transfers that information with her body to the viewers.

Luna bends over until her nose practically touches the floor and extends her long black hair onto the floor. She then puts photos of victims into her hair. Her hands are methodical as she ensures that each photo is placed where it is visible to onlookers. Because her face is turned to the floor, she performs these actions without seeing what she is doing, like a headless corpse replacing its own head with headshots of victims of the War on Drugs.

After meticulously positioning the photographs, Luna pours blood colored liquid onto her hair and the photos. In the final moments of the piece, she pulls the white smock up over her head, taking care to gather her hair and any excess red liquid. She lays the smock —symbolically bloodstained— on the ground, where she then sprinkles dirt on it. Each of Luna's movements is ceremonious, informing a kind of solemn, sacred ritual. Nevertheless, what remains when Luna has finished looks like a crime scene. There are little white cards with numbers scattered in the space. The blood of the Mexican people, symbolically signified with green, red and white paint, is spilled on the ground. A white bloodied smock remains center stage recalling the violence of the War on Drugs and its economic, political and social impact on the Mexican people. After the performance, Luna invites the public to come closer to engage in dialogue.

In summary, Luna's performance in *Réquiem* speaks directly to the violent impact of a binational initiative forged by the U.S. and Mexico to disrupt organized criminal groups in the transborder region between the two neighboring countries. Her performance problematizes the discursive practice of politics, and thus recalls the history of embodied practice that has paralleled and run counter to the European thinking that has dominated the cultural production of the Americas for more than 500 years.

3. *NK603*

The video of *NK603* that my students watch is just over 33 minutes long and formed part of the 7th Encuentro of the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics in the gallery of the Museo Nacional de la Universidad de Colombia, Bogotá in August 2009. Luna's intention in this piece was to mobilize public opinion against transnational corporate projects that have "nothing to do with the interests of the Mexican people, and much to do with the implementation of policies designed to grab from them land and natural resources" (2015: 4). Luna notes that the groups most affected by these projects have been the Mexican Native people, particularly the Raramuri, Huastecos, Cora, Huichol, Nahuatl, Purépecha, Maya, Tzotlzil, Zapotec, and Mixtec peoples.

After the introduction, in which a laboratory technician, dressed in a white smock, polishes surgical instruments, Luna appears on a dimly lit dais wearing a cornhusk skirt, Zapatista bandana, serape, and straw hat. An ear of corn is emblazoned on her back.

Machete in hand, she cleaves the air between herself and spectators. Her movements are deliberate and represent the ceremony and ritual of traditional indigenous festivals and celebrations around the sowing, growing and harvest of longstanding Mesoamerican corn. Also evident in Luna's portrayal is the "strength of ... indigenous women, keepers of the corn" (2015: 5). While her cornhusk skirt speaks to a symbolic female and racialized identity, her hat and machete speak to ongoing indigenous presence.

NK603 emerges from two historical markers: The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), signed in 1994, and the Zapatista movement. Luna uses images that expose the dangers of genetic engineering and Monsanto seeds, and —with composer David Molina— sound recordings from various social movements, including Zapatistas, juxtaposed with recordings of scientific discourse in favor of and against transgenic modification of corn. The soundtrack itself performs a textual drama that works with the other elements in the performance. In *NK603,* Luna delimits three imaginary spaces that correspond temporally to a mythical Mexican past that revolves around corn, community and tradition, and two stages of a technologically advanced, futuristic transnational corporate bioengineering laboratory. These sites are distinct *loci* of enunciation where spatial/temporal and racial/gender relationships take shape among performer, audience and multimedia technology. In the classroom, I was specifically interested in having students engage a passage in Chapter 7 of Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (2007), as follows:

> Indigenous like corn, like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn —a female seed-bearing organ— the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads. (103)

To view Anzaldúa's work critically, I assigned readings that included selected passages of *Reading Chican@ Like a Queer: The De-Mastery of Desire* (2010), in which Sandra K. Soto observes that in Anzaldúa's description, the *mestiza* is "genetically engineered corn ... a biological hybrid" (2010: 61). After viewing *NK603*, students explored ways in which Luna approaches corn and identity. I challenged students to explain Luna's description of *NK603* as a "reflection on the reality of genetically engineered corn" (Luna, 2015: 4), where she articulates *maíz*, the native corn of the Americas, with a new

genetically modified identity. I then asked students to identify ways in which Luna's performance might represent a 21st-century version of Anzaldúa's new *mestiza* —an updated border crosser, and embodiment of what Donna Haraway calls a "hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (1990: 191). Students discussed ways in which Luna's body becomes a "battleground/where enemies are kin to each other" (Anzaldúa, 2007: 216), and considered how this subjective internalization of geography, and the mapping of contested cultural terrain, makes her body a site from which notions of gender and *mestizaje* are reimagined and rearticulated with inclusive parameters, only to be disrupted, denatured, and the dominant cultural formations dismantled.

Students ascertained Luna's political intentions and formed questions regarding her aesthetic articulation of indigenous iconography*,* wherein "black and purple corn represents the heart; white corn, the bones. Red corn represents the blood, and yellow the flesh-skin" (Luna, 2015: 1). They were asked to elaborate on Luna's body, painted purple as a representation of the heart of corn. I also asked them to compare Luna's imagery with Anzaldúa's descriptions of the relationship between the *mestiza* and nature: She is "Indigenous like corn;" she is a "product of crossbreeding;" she is like an "ear of corn;" she is "tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture;" and, "with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth" (2007: 103). I noted Luna's observation that for "Mexicans, and many other Latin American people, corn is not a 'thing.' It is a symbol of our origin, what gives us *existence*" (2015: 1). I then asked students to consider Soto's claim that the aptitude of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* "originates not just from experiential knowledge but from a more innate connection to the natural" (2010: 67). I encouraged them to entertain the idea that Luna's performance calls attention to ceremonies, rituals and organic processes as ways of knowledge that inform dialogue between humans and nature.

An interesting discussion regarding the juxtaposition of Mesoamerican native corn with a new, genetically modified variety of corn led to a more prolonged conversation about the perilous relationship between technology and humans. Students examined Luna's development of a hybrid identity that intersects biology, technology, the human organism, selfhood and gender. They also debated the possible meanings of identity in light of the

importance of corn, community and traditions for a people who consider themselves "children of the corn" (Luna, 2015: 1). There were a lot of biology majors in the class, and the scientific knowledge they brought to the table shaped the conversation and established its tone. Some students were critical of Luna's depiction of the perils of transnational agricultural corporations in Mexico.

I asked students to consider Luna's use of the body as a conceptual map, where she locates memory, culture and capitalist intervention. Bearing in mind her personal cartography, and the metaphorical space she creates, students discussed how Luna's body serves as both subject and object —signified and signifier, a site of representation and a liberated zone. This discussion extended to ways in which *NK603* incorporates Mexican iconography as it articulates concepts such as *mexicanidad*, to problematize binary constructs such as male and female; Catholic and Protestant; north and south; Anglo and Indigenous; center and periphery; and interior and exterior. I asked students to correlate Luna's performance with Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands as an open wound from which "the lifeblood of two worlds [merges] to form a third country —a border culture" (2007: 25). Students identified in Luna's work alternative, multidimensional views. They said that these views corresponded to the notion of a "third country," her *locus* of enunciation being the aesthetic and conceptual borders she crosses. Her body becomes a site of interrogation of political and social phenomena, and focus on community engagement, political action and theatre.

4. Student activities: A group presentation

As noted in the introduction, this course required students to respond to questions on blogs, write essays, and online forums, and lead discussions individually and in groups. Daily activities began with warm ups. The following outlines one of two group assignments that required students to work collaboratively on an oral presentation. I assigned the first group presentation by the beginning of the fourth week. For this assignment, students were asked to research the life and work of a performance artist whose work we had not discussed in class. They were to deliver their findings orally to the class. I gave students three weeks to work on this project. The second group presentation, at week eight, required students to create a performance piece of their own.

For the first group presentation, the class divided into four groups. Each group researched a different performance artist —the cultural background, education, family life and friends, professional life, performance projects and historical context. This project required a 15-minute presentation, followed by a variety of activities of the group's own design requiring class participation. Activities ranged from question and answer and/or debate, to role-playing; one group turned this part of their presentation into an entertaining quiz of the material they had just presented.

Students were required to first submit a proposal. Then, a week later, in order to ensure that projects were on track to meet deadlines, I asked that they provide a summary of the work they hoped to accomplish or had already accomplished, including obstacles encountered and plans to overcome them. Research was done outside of class. By the third week, I consulted with groups individually before their presentations were submitted for my review via Google Drive.

I gave students a lot of freedom to choose their subject matter and to decide how they wanted to present their findings. Wherever possible, I guided them to realizing their projects. Ultimately, I merely checked the content and form of their work —the grammar and such— and made sure they had included attribution for images and texts used in their presentations. Most students used PowerPoint presentations; however, there were two memorable presentations that included student generated video documentation.

Due to the length of presentations, we could only incorporate one presentation per class meeting. Also, the day before presenting their projects, I required students to share their presentations and supporting documents with classmates via Google Drive. In order to ensure dynamic conversations, and everyone's participation, I informed students that part of their participation grade depended on a list of at least three questions for their presenters. To be sure students did this, questions were to be emailed to me before class.

Student presentations were exceptional in form and content. The information they shared was relevant and dynamically presented. Although students were permitted to use notes during their presentations, most used them only as a guide. Also, groups were very

responsible in managing their time, directing activities and providing classmates with new vocabulary and cultural context.

CONCLUSION

The strategies used for the undergraduate Spanish conversation class described here would work equally well in an English and/or in a high school setting. While student reactions varied, many expressed appreciation for the material taught through a different medium and learning through a more rounded experience. They were respectful of each other's views and brought diverse perspectives to topics they described as interesting and relevant. Most students had never heard of performance art before. The integration of performance with text-based materials and group discussions articulated in Spanish opened their eyes to other forms of socio-political critique.

My approach to this class was based primarily on the notion that culture is not a material substance, a blueprint, or a finite body of knowledge; rather, culture "is made by people interacting, and at the same time determining further interaction" (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998: 24). To this end, the course did not merely teach language *and* culture, it got students to physically engage language *as* culture.

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