

Assimilating Suffering: Performing Banality in *Living Out*

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What's distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.

– Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (1997)

The epigraph above describes the transgenerational and transcultural trauma that indirectly consumed my Puerto Rican/Latina acting body on stage in performing an undocumented Salvadorean female migrant under the Meisner technique of acting, by way of Stanislavsky. From October 27th through November 6th, 2011 I periodically experienced these hauntings on stage in performing the character of Ana in the Ohio State University's production of *Living Out* by Lisa Loomer. The play inadvertently employed the American comedic style of the television sitcom to illustrate the relationship of Nancy Robin, a white entertainment lawyer from the affluent city of Santa Monica, California, and her nanny, Ana Hernandez, who illegally emigrated from El Salvador 8 years ago. This production attempted to portray a "shared humanity" between the characters of Ana and Nancy by demonstrating their supposed relational affective responses to their work and mothering. The result was a portrayal of Nancy's white upper-middle class status that allowed for the ideological success of the American Dream, while Ana's race, class, and "alien" status subordinated her into a reductive form of affective labor.

This essay focuses on an active theatrical interpretation of performing the undocumented Latin American female migrant on stage. Deriving from my own experience of portraying the character of Ana from the play *Living Out*, I em-

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ploy an autoethnographic lens to examine my socio-historical position as the speaking subject on stage. In performing Ana, I discovered my own bordered body, existing within interchangeable performativities—that of a second-generation Puerto Rican lesbian. I came to recognize my own subjectivity functioning as spectacle along side the spectacle induced by the character of Ana. For brown gendered bodies marked by surveillance, the act of performing these subjectivities on stage subjects one to a voyeuristic gaze. This gaze, which reinforces the immigrant body as a means of entertainment, becomes an additional form of violence on bordered bodies. This paper thus illustrates how conventionalities of mainstream American theatre, such as the Method for the marginalized actor in *Living Out*, disregard complications associated with race, class, sexuality, gender, and citizenship, thereby assimilating her suffering—in a sense, subsuming her suffering—and reflecting it back to the citizen-spectator.

While much scholarship in performance studies, specifically Latin/o American performance studies, seemingly focuses on performances that rupture our ability to read the racial body of *Latinidad*, thus producing discourses of resistance, this paper lingers in the dual suffering of representing and the representation experienced by the racialization of the body within mainstream productions of Latin/o American theatre. Put differently, the character of Ana as constructed on stage by the mainstream American institution of theatre became a veiled interpretation of the Latin American female migrant's experience focusing on the desire for the American Dream in order to reduce the racist, classist, and xenophobic ideologies which caused the revulsion I felt on stage in performing Ana. At stake with this autoethnography is a first-hand exposition of performing *Latinidad* on the main stage.

The plot begins with Ana looking for work as a nanny in Los Angeles in order to support her trauma-ridden husband, Bobby (who Loomer portrays as consistently drinking beer throughout the play), and her two sons, the older of which lives in El Salvador with his grandmother. Ana's ultimate goal is to bring her older son, Tomas (whose father is not Bobby), from El Salvador to unite the family. After two unsuccessful interviews Ana learns that employers are more favorable to nannies that are not burdened with the responsibilities of their own children. Situations multiply when Ana stretches the truth and claims that both of her sons are in El Salvador in an interview with Nancy, the high-powered entertainment lawyer, and is hired immediately. As the narrative continues, Loomer's strained portrayal of the supposed shared humanity between Nancy and Ana is overshadowed by Ana's subjugated reality and the resulting death of her son who lives in the U.S. because she was caring for Nancy's daughter.

In the production playbill, the dramaturge, Tony Frank, maintains that Loomer “provides a story about two women striving to obtain the American

Dream; that dream which promises us the possibility of prosperity and success regardless of social class or circumstances of birth.”¹ This interpretative excerpt illuminates some of the operative techniques in neutralizing the character of Ana’s experience as an undocumented domestic worker in the United States. The U.S. will not grant the character of Ana citizenship because she emigrated as an economic refugee and not as a political refugee from El Salvador. Moreover, Ana has not seen her 11-year-old son, Tomas, in 8 years and she is unrecognizable to him in a photograph sent to him as illustrated in the play. In comparison to Nancy’s less urgent struggle of needing to work at a high paying entertainment law firm in order to afford living in the affluent city of Santa Monica, the dramaturge’s assertion of the American Dream illustrates Loomer’s ineffectual attempt at portraying a supposed shared humanity between the two women. Ana’s affective experience as an undocumented economic refugee is disavowed in an attempt to disguise the raced and classed inequities that exist between Ana and Nancy.

On October 25th, 2012, one year after my performance as “Ana” in this production, Yoselyn Ortega, a fifty year-old “naturalized” U.S. citizen and domestic worker from the Dominican Republic, stabbed and killed Marina Krim’s six year-old daughter and two year-old son in Krim’s Upper West Side apartment in New York City before stabbing herself in the neck several times.² Ortega had worked as the family’s nanny for two years before this horrendous event.³ Many conservative media outlets demonized Ortega as an ungrateful, entitled immigrant that envied Krim’s wealthy class status,⁴ while liberal media outlets portrayed Ortega as a good-natured woman who became pathological because of her struggles with poverty. Both the liberal and conservative media discussed how the Krim family “even” travelled to the Dominican Republic to visit Ortega’s family, therefore assuming a bond between nanny and family. In a conversation with my mother regarding this event, herself a Puerto Rican domestic

¹ Loomer, *Living Out* playbill, October-November 2011.

² David B. Caruso and Meghan Barr, “Yoselyn Ortega, Alleged Killer Nanny In Krim Children Murders, Case Stuns New York Parents,” *Huffington Post*, October 26th, 2012. Accessed on November 22, 2013 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/27/yoselyn-ortega-alleged-killer-nanny-krim-children-murder-new-york-parents_n_2030183.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *FRONTPAGEMAG.COM* published an article describing Yoselyn Ortega as resenting “her employers for living a life that she perceived as luxury, while she struggled to pay her bills.” The article further scrutinizes Ortega’s status within the dominant systems of power by writing, “Instead of being grateful that they did so much to try to help her, she griped about doing housework, quipping that she’s not a maid, but a nanny, which apparently she thought was more dignified.” Accessed at <http://frontpagemag.com/2012/deborah-weiss/when-class-envy-kills/> on November 22, 2013.

worker in the affluent city of Northampton, Massachusetts, she disclosed to me her fear of losing the trust of her employers because of the media coverage. My mother's voice shook as she described to me the embarrassment and disgust she felt as a result of her brown labored body and its depiction on the evening news through Ortega's re-presentation. Although there exists divergent cultural and political experiences between my mother and Yoselyn Ortega as domestic workers, my mother shamefully related to Ortega's domestic working experience and subsequent subjugated financial status.

While this unfortunate incident occurred almost exactly a year after the staging of *Living Out*, I discovered how my enactment of Ana's supposed desire for the American Dream forced me to disengage from such scenarios as Ortega's gruesome actions and my mother's reaction to the media coverage of the incident. Thus, I recognized a correlation between the contemporary bolstering of the Dream in theatrical productions and the obscuring of the affect produced by racialized immigrant labor, such as domestic work. Although liberal media outlets attempted to individualize Ortega's actions from other domestic workers in New York City, the shame and mental anguish experienced as a result of this incident felt like it was indeed universal to other domestic workers like my mother. It was media-induced scenarios such as these that contradicted my performance of Ana's desire for the American Dream and consequent neutralized suffering. Furthermore, the particularized struggles experienced by my mother as a result of this form of affective labor compelled me to resist my own performance of Ana as directed with the provision of the Method acting, which I will discuss in greater detail in latter parts of this paper.

Neoliberal Banality in *Living Out*

A critical analysis of the ideology of the American Dream is necessary to illustrate Ana and Nancy's disparity within the dominant systems of power in the U.S. The American Dream can be defined as a national philosophy embedded in the United States Declaration of Independence, which claims that "all men are created equal" and that they are "endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." This produces the illusion of possible prosperity in any individual that resides in the United States even though its ideology is based on the racist imperial foundations of the U.S. constitution. The writers of the United States constitution were inspired by the ancient imperialist model that believed in the expansion of its borders and the distribution of power into systems.⁵ Therefore, the foundational democracy from which the constitution originated worked to economically, politically, and socially disseminate its governing not

⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiv.

only within the United States, but beyond its borders to proliferate the ostensibly unfettering values of the constitution.

In their seminal book *Empire*, Hardt and Negri regard this racist imperial idea as one that “has survived and matured throughout the history of the United States constitution and has emerged now on a global scale in its fully realized form.”⁶ In the current era, the ideas of the constitution have erupted globally expanding its influence through Western neoliberal delegations of power. Neoliberalism is most commonly defined as an economic philosophy that opposes government intervention, and thereby, fosters the ideals of the free market. But in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey maintains, “We can . . . interpret neoliberalization either as a *utopian* project to realize a theoretical design for the reorganization of international capitalism or as a *political* project to establish the conditions for a capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites.”⁷ In short, the former provides the hegemonic discourses for the justification of the latter’s endeavor. Government is always already interconnected with knowledge production in neoliberalism and this interconnection implicitly and consistently produces a market-based populist culture substantiated in democracy.

Although neoliberalism’s present powers are not limited to any global geographical region, the American Dream as utilized in the U.S. could be used as a utopian apparatus contained in neoliberalism’s political notion that the object of neoliberal regulation is the propagation of labor for the accumulation of capital, and therefore delivers the prime model form of biopower⁸ considering the Dream’s insistence on the prosperous reproduction of life. Furthermore, one gains a sense of individuality by way of labor resulting in prosperity and comfort through the ideology of the Dream. Considering its effective influence on the population, the positive assumptions of the American Dream can be used as an apparatus to subjugate people into various forms of labor and modes of domination in the neoliberal state.

Examining the ideology of the American Dream from the perspective of neoliberalism places *Living Out* into a larger context. If taking into account the significance of the effects of neoliberalism on non-citizen subjects for the extraction of their labor, *Living Out* could epistemically provide the audience with unencumbered portrayals of the candid affect experienced by undocumented immigrants existing on the periphery of the U.S. Therefore, one can consider how the play could be staged as an epic Brechtian piece produced to provoke

⁶ Ibid, xiv.

⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 19.

⁸ In Michael Hardt’s article “Affective Labor” he defines biopower as “the power of the emerging forces of governmentality to create, manage, and control populations – the power to manage life.” Michael Hardt, “Affective Labor” in *boundary 2* (26:2, 1999), 98.

thought and discussion. Incongruously, *Living Out* was seemingly staged in such a way that the production exhibited qualities of a television sitcom as opposed to an epic Brechtian tragicomedy in this production. Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre calls for an analytical observation of the performance of the play rather than the spectators cathecting themselves to the outcome of the dramatic narrative.⁹ This production instead reinforced the spectator's cultural assumptions and provided her with marketable representations of the immigrant domestic worker and her white bourgeois employer. The actors supplied comprehensive characterizations and conventional mannerisms to typecast the characters. Rather than providing a thought-provoking epic piece for the mostly white and middle-class audience, this production of *Living Out* employed the style of the television sitcom to provide the consumer with the cultural assumptions that they presume regarding the Other.

The "Method" of Assimilation

To transfer the ideological constructs (i.e. the search for the American Dream) or the "super-objective"¹⁰ (the underlying theme that provides the meaning in the play as textually produced by the playwright) from the stage to the spectator of *Living Out*, the Stanislavsky Method required me to construct an "inner life" for the character of Ana. Stanislavsky created a method of acting which "emphasizes the universality of the laws for any actor building any character in any play."¹¹ Sonia Moore quotes Stanislavsky as stating, "What I write does not refer to one epoch and its people, but to the organic nature of all artists of all nationalities and of all epochs."¹² Pivoting on essentialist claims about human behavior provides the Stanislavsky student with the ability to assimilate a character's affective experience, thereby couching issues of race, gender, sexuality, class, and in the case of the character of Ana, citizenship within the context of "human behavior." Under Stanislavsky's "natural laws" of acting, I assimilated Ana's socio-historical position on stage by utilizing his notion of the "universality of human behavior" in attempting to supposedly share a humanity with the employer, Nancy. This method was intended to allow for a "truthful" performance that American audiences could relate to, and unfortunately, such an assimilation proved to be a detrimental violence on the actor and to the representation of the undocumented domestic worker existing in the periphery of the U.S.

⁹ Paraphrased from *Brecht on Theatre*, (23).

¹⁰ Sonia Moore, *The Stanislavsky System: The Professional Training of the Actor* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pg. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 8-9.

¹² *Ibid*, 9.

In Sonia Moore's "simplified guide to Stanislavsky's teachings," *The Stanislavsky System*, she writes, "Assimilation of the profound causes and of the inner reasons for action and expression is decisive in the creative process of the actor."¹³ Moore goes on to explain, "When the actor, from his own point of view, has a profound understanding of the character's motivations for his actions, as well as an understanding of his own attitude toward the character, then he will understand the subtext."¹⁴ In other words, Moore employs "assimilation" to describe the actor's possession of the character's psychic power through artistic production and disregards the socio-historical causes of the character's physical and discursive acts in the theatrical text. The notion of "assimilation" emphasizes the tacit appropriation through performance of a textual character's affective experience. Therefore, an epistemological investigation into the character's socio-historical position in the dramatic text is allocated specifically to the playwright and dramaturge while the actor relies solely on her own subjective inner experience in the creation of the character.

Rather than entrust the historical analysis of the character of Ana to the playwright and dramaturge only, I covertly chose to examine Ana's socio-historical position within the dominant systems of power as a result of her struggles as a non-citizen subject throughout the play. Through the employment of interdisciplinary perspectives, such as Latin American, Latina/o, Cultural, and Gender Studies, I discovered that the character of Ana's trajectory into the U.S. could have entailed a history of economic and political oppression imposed by the historical endorsement of neocolonial endeavors in Latin America. I came to realize that this larger historical context was neutralized and represented through U.S. cultural institutions, such as the mainstream institution of theatre, in an implicit effort to create what Jodi Melamed has termed "multicultural Americans" — "an ideological figure that arises out of neoliberal frameworks."¹⁵ In short, I ask what are the implications of producing a character like Ana through the matrix of acting and representation in neoliberal times?

As the actor performing the character of Ana, I became cognizant of the constitutive cultural labor I was producing for the mainstream institution of theatre in the U.S. By means of my performance, I disavowed historical meanings associated with the trajectory of undocumented female migrants and domestic workers, thus implicating my self to the cultural matrix of neoliberalism of which I am always already a participant. In short, the suffering associated with the historical subjugation of the undocumented immigrant traversing the

¹³ Ibid, 68.

¹⁴ Moore defines "subtext" as revealing "the character's relationships, his behavior, and the meaning of words and actions." Ibid, 68-69.

¹⁵ Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism To Neoliberal Multiculturalism" in *Social Text* (Winter 2006, 24:4:89),19.

U.S.-Mexico border was reduced, and thereby negated as ahistorical in the production of *Living Out*.

For example, if the character of Ana were historically situated in the context of her economic status as a refugee, her trajectory would entail the consequences of an imposed neoliberalism and the resultant war in El Salvador. After the Salvadoran Civil War (which was partly funded by the United States) ended in 1992 with the Chapultepec Peace Accord, the conservative and elite *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (the Republican Nationalist Alliance or ARENA) candidate, Armando Calderon Sol, won the election of 1994.¹⁶ He implemented a plan of privatization of several large state enterprises that resulted in a continued oligarchy as ARENA had more to gain from the preservation of the status quo.¹⁷ Although the Peace Accord allowed for democratic changes in political and military policy, it excluded the nation's economic policy.¹⁸ ARENA maintained an impression of democracy while defending the economic interests of the elite reproducing authoritarian governance through neoliberal policy.

Heidi Rimke writes, "Psychocentrism or the outlook that all human problems are innate pathologies of the individual mind and/or body, is a chief governing rationality of neoliberal populations."¹⁹ This rationality leads to the convictions of individualism, productivity, and autonomy that ultimately disregard the impoverished, even working classes of the nation. The policies that were applied by ARENA left more than half of the working-class and indigenous citizens unemployed in El Salvador.²⁰ Poverty and the propagation of guns lead to high homicide rates.²¹ Many fled the violent political and economic strife in their land and migrated north. The character of "Ana" could have been among these migrations. She migrated to the United States in 1995 leaving behind her three-year-old son, Tomas, promising to bring him to the U.S. when she gets her "papers" (citizenship documents).²² She might have been oppressed by her own country but she is also oppressed by her "alien" status in the United States, the very country that funded the war resulting in the condition which would have motivated her migration.

¹⁶ Paraphrased from Sonia Wolf's article "Subverting Democracy: Elite Rule and the Limit to Political Participation in Post-War El Salvador" from the *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol.41, No. 3, 2009: pg. 429-30.

¹⁷ Ibid, (429-30).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Heidi Rimke, "Psychocentrism and the Psychopolitics of Neo-liberalism" in *Racism and Borders: Representation, Repression, Resistance*, ed. Jeff Shantz. (New York: Algora Publishing, 2010), 96.

²⁰ Wolf, "Subverting Democracy," 429.

²¹ Ibid, 430.

²² Loomer, *Living Out*, 1.2.1-6.

Probing deeper into character analysis, I discovered that Ana's migratory experience could have been death defying. The long journey for many immigrants from El Salvador through Mexico to the United States is a traumatic trip that involves suffering sexual and physical assaults. Some women arrive to the United States pregnant from various rapes inflicted by coyotes or bandits, while others are taken to brothels or become trafficked and never seen again. Cecilia Menjivar writes, "Many of these immigrants' harrowing experiences during their journeys left them with more or equally severe trauma than the violence in their countries had caused."²³ The migratory journey becomes imprinted on the female migrant's body with trauma while concurrently entering a country that scrutinizes her as a racialized foreigner. The undocumented immigrant finds herself in a double-bind as she came to the U.S. of her own choosing, maybe in search of what Judith Butler terms a "livable life" and, instead, finds herself maneuvering within the confines of the U.S.-Mexico border as an undocumented immigrant.

In *Frames of War*, Butler maintains, "[N]ormative frameworks establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned."²⁴ Although Butler relates this to the victims of war, one can consider this notion as an expansion of the undocumented immigrant as a victim of the social and political relations of power in the U.S. The undocumented immigrant is only a life worth living for the capitalist productive forces in demand of her labor. The many undocumented immigrants found murdered and dead from hunger or harsh weather conditions in the deserts of the U.S.-Mexico border can be disregarded as either damaged goods or a victory for the "war on terror." In short, maneuvering the border entails hostility and subjugation by anti-immigrant legislation, and more precariously, death. These historical manifestations of the migratory experience of traversing the U.S.-Mexico border are reduced to banal representations of undocumented immigrants conceptualized by U.S. political discourse and interpreted to American culture through mainstream cultural institutions, specifically visual cultures, through the endorsement of the American Dream.

Realism's Conquest: Performing Brownness on the Main Stage

Considering the extent to which I researched the socio-historical and political history of the female Latin American migrant, the directed style of realism that I was forced to adhere to in the creation of Ana attempted to neutralize this his-

²³ Cecilia Menjivar, "The Intersection of Work and Gender: Central American Immigrant Women and Employment in California" in *The American Behavioral Scientist* (42:4, 1999), 606-607.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), 52.

tory, thus implicating me—the actor—as the arbiter of ideological meaning. The putative idea driving realism is the candid re-presentation of sociality in familiar and identifiable human conditions.²⁵ Indeed, my attempt to utilize realist methods in the artistic construction of the character of Ana was contradicted by my learned histories of Latin American female migrants. In discussing the ways that theatre “reinscribes dominant ideology in its realist form,” Jeanie Forte states:

If we take as a given the ideological project, the self-perpetuated of the dominant system, then we can see the place of literature (narrative) in subtly reinforcing the discourse of ideology, and the way in which the apparent unity, coherence and seamlessness of the classic realist text covertly subjects (and positions, in terms of subjectivity) the reader within that ideology. However, if a writer . . . aims to reveal and/or subvert the dominant ideology, as a feminist writer/text might, strategies must be found within the realm of discourse, particularly *vis à vis* narrative, which can operate to deconstruct the imbedded ideology: in other words, which might construct the reading subject differently.²⁶

Although Forte denotes this passage to the subversion of dramatic texts by feminist playwrights, her concern for the supplanting of the reader within implicit ideological constructs within the text is analogous to the production of the performance on stage. Ideological constructs become cloaked under commonsense re-presentations of social experience, which the spectator finds recognizable through my allegedly realistic performance. Employing Forte’s claim to “reveal and/or subvert the dominant ideology” performed by the actor within the production on stage has the potential to demystify, and even, reclaim knowledge. Unfortunately, this concept may not have successfully transferred onto the stage and thereby to the audience. Hence, I ethically questioned my process in constructing the character of Ana and whether the notion of assimilation becomes another form of violence onto the representation of the undocumented Latin American female migrant as a result.

How could an actor assimilate the performance of a subject on stage when that subject is so haunted by such an immense force of trauma that that force flows through the actor’s body and causes feelings of abjection? In the first couple of rehearsals of *Living Out*, I discovered a profound familiarity to this trauma through my own socio-historical position as a queer Latina maneuvering within the confines of identity as well as through the silent gaps of historically colonized bodies within Latin American and Caribbean diasporic communities in the U.S. My silent gaps were being permeated with my particular transgenerational history of oppression as I physically and emotionally con-

²⁵ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

²⁶ Jeanie Forte, “Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright” in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* ed. Helene Keyssar (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 21.

structed the character of Ana during these first rehearsals. Thus, due to the Stanislavsky Method's insistence on conjuring up inner affective memories, I found my self inundated with familial recollections of violence.

For instance, as a result of the Jones Act of 1917 in Puerto Rico,²⁷ my *Abuelo* (grandfather), Julio Burgos, was drafted and joined the US military during the Korean War and later went on to serve in World War II. While *Abuelo* was fighting in the war, my mother confessed to me that she witnessed *Abuela* getting raped and brutally beaten in their house by another man from their community in Cayey, Puerto Rico. My mother informed me that this was a regular occurrence for many women whose husbands were overseas. Additionally, *Abuela* had what people called on the island as *la operacion*. She was sterilized as part of the United States' effort to control poverty on the island from overpopulation. In "Puerto Rican Women in Culture, History, and Society," Edna Acosta-Belen states, "Between 1950 and the late 1970s the total fertility rate in Puerto Rico fell by 48 percent—from 5.2 to 2.7 children per woman."²⁸ A tacit acceptance of sterilization pushed by both the US government and Puerto Rican government and the failure of the insular government to promote other means of contraception lead to the high rate of sterilization and the decline of fertility.

Abuela's history of sexual oppression by the colonial and patriarchal state correlates with my own experiential racialized and sexualized violence as a result of my queer Puerto Rican embodiment and its exclusion from nationalist ideals in the Puerto Rican diaspora. Scenarios such as these produced feelings of ghostly "hauntings" from histories of trauma as I performed the character of Ana on stage. Grace M. Cho maintains that what is produced by the notion of haunting "is a constellation of affective bodies transmitting and receiving trauma."²⁹ The character of Ana's unacknowledged trauma as a victim of war and

²⁷ The Jones Act of 1917 granted residents of Puerto Rico citizenship in the United States in exchange for conscriptive military service and possession of its bulk exports of sugar, tobacco, and coffee through the use of US government appointed officials on the island. Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 2007.

²⁸ Edna Acosta-Belen, "Puerto Rican Women in Culture, History, and Society" in *The Puerto Rican Woman: Perspectives on Culture, History, and Society*, ed. Edna Acosta-Belen (New York: Praeger, 1986), 14.

²⁹ In defining her notion of diasporic "haunting," Grace M. Cho writes, "The bodies of diaspora, and particularly the Korean diopora, are constituted by unremembered trauma and loss. When an unspeakable or uncertain history, both personal and collective, take the form of a "ghost," it searches for bodies through which to speak." I employ the "haunting" (from a performance studies perspective) as an allegorical method by which the reticent histories of characters in theatrical productions affect the subject position of the actor. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 41.

migration haunted my own silent gaps, thereby conjuring up an assembled history of oppression occupied by Yoselyn Ortega, my mother, my grandmother, the character of Ana, and myself. The assimilation of trauma that this directed style of realism called for disavowed this haunted assemblage in order to produce neutralized, and thereby, marketable re-presentations of the undocumented domestic worker. Even as realism attempts to portray the “truths” of human behavior, it paradoxically cloaks the affective experience of performative hauntings through the employment of commonsense and recognizable human behavior.

Consequently, rather than construct a subjective inner life for the character of Ana, and given the extensive work executed on character development, I unintentionally resisted the Stanislavsky Method of acting and turned to the Michel Chekhov technique of imaginative acting and Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre through the epistemic support of feminist theatre theory. Brechtian theory of historicization provided me with a method by which to challenge the presumed neutrality of Ana’s affective experience in the U.S. as a bordered body. Brechtian historicization can provide a de-exoticization/eroticization of marginalized or “othered” characters on stage. Elin Diamond writes, “[The] performer’s body is . . . historicized, loaded with its own history and that of the character, and these histories roughen the smooth edges of the image, of representation . . . [T]his Brechtian-feminist body is paradoxically available for *both* analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity.”³⁰ Diamond effectively describes the historicizing processes that transpired within me as a result of the “haunted assemblages”³¹ previously discussed, invoked by incorporeal historical trauma transferred into acts of corporeality through my performing embodiment of the character of Ana.

Resisting Assimilation On the Main Stage: Toward A Conclusion

As a feminist actor utilizing Brechtian hindsight, I allowed for the representation of Ana as a non-citizen subject to spill over beyond the confinement of realism. My unintended rejection of Method acting for the more movement-based techniques of Chekhov’s theatre supplied me with artistic and imaginative ways to create the marginalized characterization of Ana on stage. These conventional techniques permit the actor to be free from the limitations of “subjective personality” and provide boundless opportunities for creativity of the body through external movement techniques.³² In discussing Michel Chekhov, Eugene Vakhtangov, and Vsevolod Meyerhold’s construction of the

³⁰ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 52.

³¹ Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora*, 41.

³² Accessed on December 2nd, 2013 at <http://www.michelchekhovactingstudio.com/technique.htm>.

technique, Lenard Petit writes, “They developed imaginative methods using psycho-physical techniques, exercises that use the undeniable connection between the body and psychology, movements and principles that generate various sensations and emotions.”³³ In short, these movement-based techniques provided me with the ability to creatively employ my body—my eyes, my mouth, my hips, my breasts, my arms, my legs—as the performing vessel for the character of Ana’s re-presentation.

For example, in the last scene of *Living Out* Ana and her employer, Nancy, engage each other in a phone call as they share a chair in the middle of the stage with a spotlight highlighting Ana and Nancy’s supposed shared mourning of loss—Ana, the loss of her child, and Nancy, the loss of her caretaker. The director demanded that I cry in this hyper-dramatized and hyper-realistic scene. Here I was as the character of Ana, sharing a chair with the woman that Ana despised more than any other because she was caring for Nancy’s daughter rather than her own son who dies as a result, and the director assumes that Ana should be crying, not just for the loss of her child, but for the loss of her “friend,” her employer, Nancy. Our human connection on that chair was supposed to be one of kinship—the shared affectivity of motherhood.

Rather than induce the emotive techniques of the Method, I looked deep into the spotlight and imagined myself slapping the actor that plays Nancy. My lips grimaced and I forced my voice to shake using my vocal chords, throat, and stomach. I tensed the muscles in my upper body down to my buttocks, which caused a shaking sensation, ultimately arousing the emotion of anger within me. Ana would not cry for this white woman; rather, her neutralized representation was disrupted by my performed embodied anger, which became evident by the audience as told to me by audience members after the productions. The actor that portrayed Nancy’s eyes filled with tears wishing for relief of her white guilt. This silent resistance was my attempt to embody Ana’s status within the dominant systems of power and express allusions which otherwise would have been reduced by the production as performed through realism with the support of the Stanislavsky Method of acting.

I discovered an additional space for resistance within the production of the play during a monologue that I performed while alone on stage with the audience, sitting in a chair with a spotlight highlighting my face. Ana has a phone conversation with her son that lives with his great-grandmother in El Salvador:

ANA. Tomás? Soy mami! ... Me puedes oír, mijo? ... Cómo estas? ... Sí? Recibistes el paquete? And the shirt? Does it fit? (*Pronouncing it for him.*) “Hill-finger.” (*Laughs.*) I don’t know, mijo they like to put their name on everything, quien sabe ... How is school? ... Then you got to study a little harder, Tomás, so when you come here you know your math ... Okay, just spend a

³³ Ibid.

little more time ... What are you eating? ... Bueno, Tomás, pero don't eat too much sugar ... Pues, tell me something else— ... (*He's running out of conversation.*) Do you miss me? ... I miss you up to the sky! ... You're going to come real soon, mijo. (*Surprised.*) No, no, not for vacation—you're going to come here to live! ... No, not with abuela. Your great-grandmother don't want to come, mijo, she says she's too old. (*Bobby exits. Pained.*) I know it's hard to leave her. But don't you want to be with Mami? ... Oye, did you get the pictures I sent you from the beach? With the rides? (*Laughs.*) *Te gustan?* That's me and my sister-in-law and her friend. (*Pause; fighting tears.*) No, mijo ... I'm the one in the middle. (*She hangs up and walks right into the next scene.*)³⁴

This monologue's subtext is a Brechtian historicization of Ana's transnational familial structure, illustrating the geographical and durational distance from her child as a result of her socio-political position as a non-citizen and mother. It allowed me the space to create Ana's affective experience through the employment of imaginative external "psycho-physical techniques" inspired by this historical subtext, which may have subverted the spectator's culturally conditioned expectations of Ana's re-presentation. Moreover, I found myself in solitude on stage without the onerous presence of the other characters to produce objective significations of Ana's ontology as a border body. This monologue, as expressed through the female character and given the time and space provided, was a "reification of the feminine subject-in-process."³⁵ Thus, I constructed this monologue as a gest within the realist style of *Living Out*—an attempt to disassociate from the text and the performance and watch historical and political processes at work in the border body.

Although I was forced to provide the spectator with a realist performance that disguises the processes of theatrical signification and thus produces banal notions of the undocumented immigrant's experience, my feminist performing body undertook an ontological integrity inspired by Brechtian hindsight with the support of feminist theatre theory to create a (hopefully) internal ethical characterization of Ana. I desired for the character of Ana's socio-historical position as a border body (non-citizen subject) to be exposed and re-presented in *Living Out* in order to construct new meanings for the audience by way of resisting the realist style of *Living Out* and the Method. I hoped the spectator grasped the absurdity of producing this play within the confines of realism and the Method technique, but alas, such a hope was perhaps lost in the mystification aroused by the normative theatrical techniques in this production.



³⁴ Loomer, *Living Out*,

³⁵ Barbara Freedman, "Frame-Up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre" in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 170.

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