

Performance in the Wake: Study in/of Contemporary Hemispheric Performances

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Abstract (English): *In this essay, I sketch a conversation between contemporary hemispheric performances and Christina Sharpe's concept of the wake. Although Ni Una Menos and Las Tesis are rooted in Latin American feminist mobilizations and theories, and Wu Tsang's performance piece We Hold Where Study cites an Afro-diasporic L.A., all three of the performative practices I study are interlocutors with theorizations of violence which underscore its foundational, yet repetitive workings. Reading them through the lens offered by Sharpe's conceptualisation of the wake, the modulations these performances visit upon the category of the political can be brought to the fore. In turn, reading the wake through these performances pushes and continues thinking in the wake. Both the contemporary performances and Sharpe's wake undermine the dependence on presence and identity which ideas and practices of representation — political or aesthetic — still harbour.*

My essay doesn't exhaustively map the collaborative work of the research group, Performance in the Wake, but it stems from our focus in that group on how contemporary hemispheric performances revise political concepts, profoundly altering how we study — in this piece, politics, performance, "we," and "study."

Keywords: performance, representation, politics, feminism

Abstract (Spanish): *Este ensayo enmarca una conversación entre performances hemisféricas contemporáneas y el concepto de la estela de Christina Sharpe. Aunque Ni Una Menos y Las Tesis estén arraigadas en movilizaciones y teorías feministas de América Latina, y aunque a su vez la pieza performativa de Wu Tsang We Hold Where Study cite una ciudad afro-estadounidense, los tres diferentes usos de performance dialogan con teorías de la violencia y de la política que enfatizan sus operaciones fundacionales y repetidas. Con la estela de Sharpe en mente, las revisiones e intervenciones sobre la categoría de lo político de estas performances puede apreciarse mejor. Viceversa, leer la estela a través de estas performances continua un pensamiento en y de la estela. Tanto las performances contemporáneas como la estela de Sharpe minan la dependencia que tienen ideas y prácticas de la representación —ya sea política o estética— en los conceptos de la presencia y de la identidad.*

Mi artículo no mapee exhaustivamente el trabajo colaborativo del grupo de investigación, Performance in the Wake, pero se nutre de nuestro interés compartido en las revisiones contemporáneas del pensamiento de lo político desde las artes, contaminando ineluctablemente cómo estudiamos — en este ensayo, "nosotras," estudio, performance, y lo político.

Palabras claves: Performance, representation, politics, feminism



Since the spring of 2020, Performance in the Wake provided a space for collaborative research among graduate students and invited artists, activists, and scholars. My essay offers one possible log of how the collaborative research has accompanied and shaped my thought on the contemporary hemispheric performances discussed below. It doesn't track the entirety of our activities but is clearly indebted to the latter. For instance, I discuss the performances in the tone and animus of much of our collaborative research: associative and dialogic, rather than classificatory and granularly analytic. Since the performative studies and the wake are gathered in this text because they mobilise and defy stable definition, my writing does not seek to arrest that movement. Finally, this essay is imbued with our focus on how contemporary hemispheric performances revise political concepts in decidedly theoretical-practical ways. I consider these ways as moments of study, which remap the terms of debate on performative, theatrical stages. They profoundly alter *how* we study—politics, performance, “we,” and “study.”

I. Categories of the political in the wake

A wake follows and stays where life was. It is *after* life, *then* it is life. Christina Sharpe's wake stays where antiblack violence, old yet present, took a life (2016). A wake mourns and attends where violence repeats. It persists where repetition took, opening the problem of different repetitions which this essay will grapple with. The performances I will soon look at, in themselves repeated behaviour, contest repetitive, old yet still persistent, forms of violence. Both the “undeclared war” against women which continually recolonizes in today's globalized, largely postcolonial world (Federici 2004, 2017, Segato 2014, 2016), and the undeclared war against Black Americans which lays the foundation for war between others' states (Wilderson 2010) are modelled around the both foundational and repetitive operations of antagonistic violence.¹ These operations are both required

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¹It is a main presumption of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's understanding of hegemonic politics that one antagonism must be privileged in order to tame otherwise entirely contingent political and social affiliations (2001, 2005). Mouffe especially has decried as

by and channelled through the performativity of violence—that is, its dependence on repetitive enactment (Martinot and Sexton 2017; Segato 2014, 2016; Wilderson 2010).² Repetition drives the persistence of the past in the present, askance of those historical narratives which provide progressive horizons. This persistence is expressed in words like lynch law and afterlife of slavery in the U.S. In the face of femicides in Latin America such persistence is acknowledged as an echo of colonial power in what Rita Segato calls “dueñidad” (mastery or proprietorship) (2016), in what Suely Rolnik terms a “capitalo-colonial unconscious” drive (2018), and in Bernadita Llanos’ idea of the “neo-archaic” (2004). Rather than testifying to irrational relics of a pre-modern time, rather than alerting to accidental collaterals of late modernity, these expressions point to an awareness of the performativity and memory of violence. Such currents, movements, and surface effects surrounding and supporting political representation, while revealing the tenets of representation like presence and identity—stable, only to be captured and provided in duplicate to an onlooker or to a voter—to be more tenuous and dependent on performative iteration than the idea of representation admits.³ Sharpe’s wake beautifully figures such an awareness:

Wakes are processes; through them we think about the dead and about our relations to them; they are rituals through which to enact grief and memory. Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual; they are the watching of relatives and friends beside the body of the deceased from death to burial and the accompanying drinking, feasting, and other observances; a watching practiced as a religious observance. But wakes are also “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship;

postpolitical the multiplication of political antagonisms and suggested it may weaken emancipatory politics based on class (2007).

If some of the above theories of violence are modelled on primitive accumulation in Marxist critiques of capital, clearest in Federici’s analysis, they no longer privilege class as the fundamental antagonism structuring society.

The ill-named primitive accumulation refers to the ongoing dispossession and confinement which founds and re-founds the accumulation of capital.

² This understanding of ongoing repetition further builds on theories of gender performativity such as Judith Butler’s. She writes:

If the phallus is a privileged signifier, it gains that privilege through being reiterated. And if the cultural construction of sexuality compels a repetition of that signifier, there is nevertheless in the very force of repetition, understood as resignification or recirculation, the possibility of deprivileging that signifier. (69)

³ I am admittedly speaking of a simplistic understanding of representation, but a simplistic understanding of representation is often at stake in political studies and discourses of representation. Identities and communities are included or excluded from representation, while the operations of representation are too rarely subjected to scrutiny. Aesthetic concepts of representation have always been more attentive to the openness and multidirectionality of representing, re-presenting, and (re)creating something as present or given.

the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved, in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)"; finally, wake also means being awake and, most importantly, consciousness. (2014, 60)

The wake resonates with the performance practices I am looking at, since they mourn absent bodies. The wake has a fiduciary moment in which the dead and their memory are defended. And it has a compositional moment in which the dead and their memory are susceptible to remobilisation.⁴ The ripples of the wake, however small, cannot be concluded or determined by the body of causation. In staying where life was, where movement was arrested, disturbances move where bodies passed, currents continue to drag and pull, while grasping for indeterminacies attendant upon the wake. In words which Elena Cardona chooses for her contribution to this special issue, the wake might be performative in its reverberations: ". . . the wake might be performative insofar as it reverberates: repeating, reiterating, irrupting" (2022 10). Cardona's evocative words foreground the dense and haptic atmosphere in/into which reverberations—and I would like to add, the wake—move. Rather than extricating performance from violence as if it were aloof from or immune to it, I take the images of the wake and of reverberations to visualise how these performances thus assume a stage violently scripted in repetition and determinations. Sharpe's wake is, after all, an afterlife of slavery, full of the detritus which Saidiya Hartman attributes to the "afterlife of property": "the detritus of lives, with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril" (12). Detritus of lives, in Hartman's piercing formulation, is mobilised in Sharpe's wake. Similarly, Cortes Rocca's concept of residuality and emergency in performance mobilises residues and detritus even in the so-called tide of *Ni Una Menos*' feminism (2021). Not empty, the stages which are performed and performed on are consonant with the wake.

In this piece, I work on the assumption that the wake affords a lens to read contemporary political performances, and I explore how these performances further mobilise the concept of the wake. I look at how the collaboration between U.S. based artists Wu Tsang and Fred Moten, Argentinean feminist movement *Ni Una Menos*, and Chilean performance collective *Las Tesis* inherited categories of the political but, thanks to Sharpe's concept of the wake, inherit them in remobilising and recomposing them. I am interested in something not quite captured by the words, political performance. Instead, performance does something to the context of political mobilisation in/into which it moves. The wake offers an understanding of the recombinant and revisable movements of performance. But I also

⁴ The compositional even seems to be a rigorous understanding of defending the dead (Sharpe 2014, NourbeSe Philip 2008).

offer study, the strike, and virality to the wake to trace its reach and contours. In that way, the performative studies which follow continue to inquire into the hemispheric cross-contaminations between the performances and thought drawn on here.

II. A study of L.A. streets

In Wu Tsang's 2017 piece, *We Hold Where Study*, two duets dance two styles: krumping and contact improvisation. Each duet is paired with a moving camera showing the duets on split, sometimes interblending screens. One duet dance in a dimly lit studio, the other dances in an urban landscape under darkening skies. The cameras move in different patterns, from angular to swerving, zooming in and out, but always repetitive. Rather than presenting a choreography, the duets too repeat or rehearse recognisable gestures or fragments of the style. Finally, the sound score is more repetitive than melodic. One might think that the intermedial piece is structured, or even explained textually, that is, through subtitles: "Assembly line," "The consultant," "Socioecological disaster," "War," and "Algorithm."⁵ These subtitles are drawn from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's collaboration,⁵ most explicitly from "Leave Our Mikes Alone" written in 2014 after Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri. But the movements on the screen contradict the subtitles and, as I'll describe in what follows, perform the fascinating and difficult idea of "we hold where study" announced by the title.

The bodies on screen, the dance of the cameras, as well as the split screens and criss-crossing, move in and out of the assembly line. The movements on one screen at times reappear on the other, blending the choreographies momentarily. Some movements are pop culturally familiar, others like the lying bodies on both screens are citations of the die-ins held in many places across the U.S. to protest police killings of Black people.

In moving in and out of the assembly line, and in and out of one another, the movements enact the titular "hold" and "study" in which a repetitious study remembers and stays with the hold, perhaps in terms outlined for the wake, all the while it rehearses and recombines anew. Contrary to the "colour line of assembly's" antagonistic organisation, study is a work of incompleteness, continually revising, repeating, incompleting. Moten and Harney write:

We are incomplete. [...] Another word for incompleteness is study, or more precisely, revision. The consultant gets this revision from us, from study, from our sumptuous revisions of one another out of existence, as existence. Study happens and it don't stop. In study, we are engaged consciously and

⁵ Wu Tsang collaborated with Fred Moten in their exhibition in 2019 in Berlin's Gropius Bau ("There is no non-violent way of looking at one another") of which this video is a part. In the following, I cite "Leave Our Mikes Alone" as it is included in *All Incomplete*.

unconsciously. We revise, and then again. [...] Revision has no end and no connection to improvement, never mind efficiency. (43-44)

Although the consultant and the assembly line draw on study, they can't exhaust it. Study happens, perhaps even unintentionally or non-subjectively or unplanned, and reboots again and again, knowing no ending. In *We Hold Where Study*, sequences are repeated and interrupted, revised and discarded, without apparent conclusion. In the dance movements, study is rendered in the style of krumping, offering an Afro-diasporic study of L.A. streets. Christina Zanfagna describes: "Born in the neighbourhoods of South Central, krumping, or clowning as it is sometimes called, is a hyperkinetic dance resembling street fighting, moshing, sanctified church spirit possession, and aerobic striptease." (65) The repetitive *and* experimental style of krumping channels a study through diasporic references which have everything to do with fighting, spiritual possession, and strategic uses as well as abuses of the assembly line in this city of loneliness and segregation, riot and fame, celebration, revelry, and falling. The almost baroque layering of citations in krumping is a study of the streets of LA which recomposes in the wake — recomposing L.A. streets' fronts of war-like politics, the studies flanking and crossing them, as well as the spiritual, aesthetic, transgressive media which lend them provisional sustenance. Krumping fails to make sense outside of those repertoires, such that krumping is a partial, incomplete study which revisits repertoires, recombining them into "associative, polytextual, intertheatrically citational recombinant patterns" (Davis 24). This is another way of saying that krumping, in Tsang's piece as well as more broadly, is not scripted but is performed in dialogue with the audience, with whom a repertoire is shared.



Fig. 1: Still from Wu Tsang's *We Hold Where Study*, 2017. 2-channel HD video with stereo sound. 18:56 minutes. Image courtesy of Wu Tsang and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi.

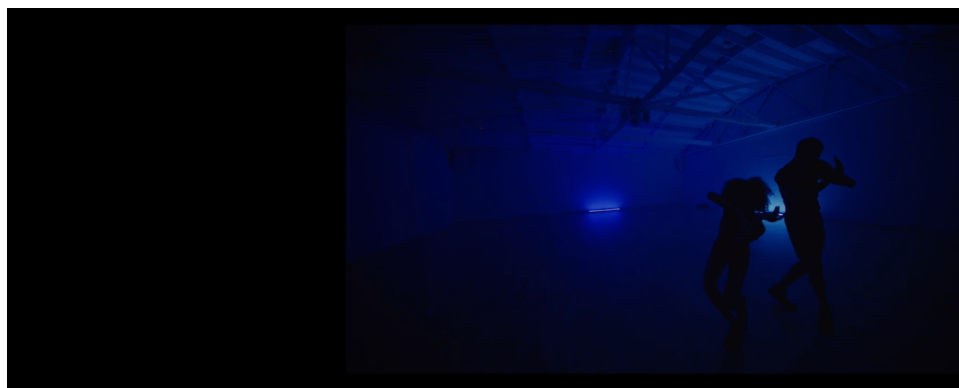


Fig. 2: Still from Wu Tsang's *We Hold Where Study*, 2017. 2-channel HD video with stereo sound. 18:56 minutes. Image courtesy of Wu Tsang and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi.

Early definitions of performance speak to these wakeful study practices. Richard Schechner defined performance as “twice-behaved”, repeated, “restored behaviour” (51-52)—i.e., citational, compositional. At a first glance, this definition of performance emphasizes mediation and derivation over originality:

While performing, a performer experiences [their] own self not directly but through the medium of experiencing others. While performing, [they] no longer ha[ve] a ‘me’ but ha[ve] a ‘not not me,’ and this double negative relationship also shows how restored behaviour is simultaneously private and social. (111-112)

We might take this definition of performance to err on the side of determination, like Butler's and others' theories of gender performativity which emphasize that gender roles always precede us on the stage. At a second glance, Schechner's definition of performance locates (the self's) indeterminacy, not to speak of transgression and freedom, in routing the self through the medium of experiencing others and finding oneself through a double negation.⁶ The experience of self and other proceeds through the medium of another (the role, the text, the public, the

⁶ This double negation resonates with a psychoanalytic understanding of negation. For Alenka Zupancic's continuation of Freud's work on negation, for instance, negation inaugurates a thinking relationship to reality. But negation is also the reason why reality cannot ever simply be found, but will inevitably be refound, “bear[ing] the mark of repetition and of the gap the latter implies” (6). This paper is not focussed on psychoanalytic concepts, but there are clear resonances between negation in psychoanalysis, the repetition of performance, and the residual nature of the real which Paola Cortes Rocca conceptualises psychoanalytically as traumatic in the same article which I also cite here on performance (2021).

ritual). Self-experience *is* thus performative as it approaches and works through others and other media and objects (Rebentisch 2021). In this article I submit that Tsang's intermedial piece, and Las Tesis's viral performance, *Un violador en tu camino*, route self-experience through media *tout court*. The performative self is suspended between the twin constellation of negation and double negation. This means that the subject emerges, shot through with what they are not/not not, through mediation and media prostheses like roving and dancing camera eyes, for Tsang, and like social media virality for Las Tesis. Determination/repression and transgression are thus, perhaps irremediably, tangled up.

Moten writes about the freedoms study can afford by referring to Zi Buddhism's *ji ji muge*: "The difference between no block and non non block is both infinitely small and infinite." (15-16) As Schecher's and Moten's choices of double negation betray, through its repetitious study, performance cleaves small, negative spaces in, amid (media), and between the stations of algorithm. However small and situated these spaces of freedom may be, Tsang's piece shows how this study is at a maximal distance of the *colour* line of assembly traversed. At times languorously, at times frenetically, the krumping dancers and screens dash the colour line. These intimations give us a first measure of the freedoms the wake can perform while dwelling with the dead.

III. The feminist strike

An emphasis on study and revision is palpable in what observers and allies call Ni Una Menos' "feminist epistemology" (Mason-Deese 2020) or "materialist philosophy" (Brizuela 2020). A practical epistemology, it unfolds in assemblies and their painstaking deliberative decision-making process; in the collaborative writing feeding into publications (Ni Una Menos 2018); and in the virality of their medial and performative practices from hashtags and video invitations to mobilise. Like Tsang and Moten's study, this epistemology is not to be confused with academic study and its often-monologic procedure and presumption of scholarly immunity vis à vis "its" object of study.

For one of the movements' most widely read thinkers, Verónica Gago, the strike is a special moment of feminist epistemology. It is a tool in thinking what Gago calls "war's web of violences" (66). It too is practical and relational; procesual rather than eventual; a horizon, rather than a goal to be achieved (25, 28).⁷

⁷ See further, in particular, Susana Draper's "La huelga como proceso" in Tinta Limón's 2018 *8M Constelación feminista* de la editorial, and the entire compilation of essays which together work on "[v]er esta huelga como proceso, como parte de un tiempo de rebelión que recrea la forma de hacer y pensar la política. Este libro es parte de esa praxis, contiene reflexiones vivas de un proceso abierto" (Trans: seeing this [feminist] strike as a

As a thus characterised special moment of feminist epistemology, we can consider the strike a moment of study. As Isabell Lorey writes,

The discontinuous time-lines of refusal and rupture also actualize Rosa Luxemburg's theory of the strike at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which the mass strike is imagined as a revolutionary force that changes its direction and the movement but does not stop, instead always starting up again, continuously beginning anew. (16)

The strike is also performative, perennially a puzzle to thinkers of economic determination. In that view, if economic conditions are ripe for the revolution, flamboyant and risky political manoeuvres like withholding labour in a collectively agreed strike should not be necessary. If economic conditions are not ripe, then it was inexplicable how the strike could—on occasion—convene publics, could impose its own terms, seemingly “performatively.” When Gago paraphrases Ernesto Laclau to suggest that the strike is a floating signifier, that is, dependent upon articulation (33) and when she cites Rosa Luxemburg, in acknowledging that the strike contains its own political thought (47), she establishes the performativity of the strike in feminist epistemology. This is echoed by Paola Cortes Rocca's suggestion that performance has the potential to elaborate “*figuras de cierre y también figuras anticipatorias de un nuevo estado de lo decible y lo escuchable*” (2021 “*Fragmentos de lo real*”).⁸ In their article for this special issue, Cecilia Palmeiro and Paola Cortes-Rocca call the feminist tide's uses of performance “an apparatus of intelligibility, a theoretical revolution” and refer to Marie Bardet's idea that *Operación Araña* was a performative seismograph (2022 10). The way Gago describes the strike as performative is thus ensconced in NUM's uses of performance more broadly. Like Cortes Rocca and Palmeiro's idea of the feminist avant-garde, the feminist strike in Gago's account of the practice is a collective appropriation of creative forms of presentation: She underscores, for instance, the creativity of the strike in speaking of its “collective fabulation” and of its compositional process (60). Its collective and creative valences will be explored in what follows.

On October 19th, 2016, *Ni Una Menos* called to a feminist strike after the femicide of the teenager Lucía Pérez, after the coverage of her death which echoed the cruelty of the crime, and upon the repression of the 100 000 women strong *Encuentro de Mujeres* (Meeting of Women) in Rosario, Argentina. In one of their calls, they declare:

process, as part of the time of rebellion which recreates ways of doing and thinking politics. This book is part of that practice, containing living reflections on the open process” (Pare)).

⁸ Trans: figures of closure as well as anticipatory figures of a new condition of the sayable and audible (Pare).

Decidimos parar frente al crimen de Lucía Pérez y contra la represión en Rosario [...]. [D]ecidimos parar porque frente a la represión y el femicidio de una adolescente que nos decían que nuestros cuerpos no valen, entonces dijimos: produzcan sin nosotras. (105)⁹

The “we” in this decision is already a performative redrawing of the stage since it is defined primarily by its gender, rather than its class or worker affiliation: a female “us” declares its strike; the strike is in solidarity with other women repressed or disappeared. It appears to be secondary that labour is being withheld. But here, too, Gago’s account of the informal women workers’ strike could not be more crucial to understanding how this strike performatively enacted its own terms. The conundrum informal women workers felt and articulated was: “Dicen que no pueden parar y que quieren parar” (Gago 50).¹⁰ How should workers strike if their working hours are nowhere registered? If their work was not recognised as productive? Where does opposition register if contractual antagonism is structurally foreclosed through informalised labour and women’s unwaged work? In deciding to strike, though, the informal workers of the feminist strike performatively redefined the strike, the subject involved, and work/production. In other words, they performatively enacted the terms on which their work could be felt – negatively, by withholding their labour as the strike classically does; but also, by opening the definition of strike to its redefinition in the strike-as-moment-of-study.

This insistence on the performativity of the strike is an important check to what in economic terms often associates the strike with subtraction. In withholding labour for a given time, the dependence of capital on it will force concessions or recognitions of labourers’ rights. Indeed, Gago and other thinkers of the feminist strike have insisted on the visibility women’s labour *did* receive through the subtraction of the strike. In this vein, Gago mentions “bloqueo,” “desacato, desafío,” and “sustracción, sabotaje” (24, 25, 54).¹¹ What is more, the subtraction Gago has in mind is expansive, or as she would say, transversal: in a characteristic connection of violences in the “war against women,” the invisibility of women’s labour is connected also to the invisibility of disappeared women and victims of femicides. However, it seems clear that the feminist strike comes into its performative own when the striking bodies convene in assemblies, communal kitchens, and marches. This coming into its own, this gathering, rings out of the following description included in Ni Una Menos’ *Amistad política+inteligencia colectiva*:

⁹ Trans: We decided to strike after Lucía Pérez’s killing and after the repression of Rosario [...]. [W]e decided to strike because after the femicide of the teenager and the repression of Rosario which tell us that our bodies are worth nothing, we said: produce without us, then (Pare).

¹⁰ Trans: They say they can’t strike but that they want to strike (Pare).

¹¹ Trans: blockade, contempt, challenge, subtraction, sabotage (Pare).

las mujeres reclamamos nuestro tiempo, dejamos de hacer lo que nos imponen, para hacer lo que queremos. Encontrarnos, pensar juntas, tomar la palabra, ocupar las calles, las plazas, apropiarnos del espacio público y convertirlo en un espacio de hospitalidad y de libre circulación para nosotras. Vamos a poner en acto nuestra utopía antipatriarcal. Para conjurar el miedo, para hacer visible nuestro hartazgo y potenciar nuestra fuerza en cada territorio. Para crear lazos de solidaridad, redes de autoprotección y cuidado entre nosotras. (31)¹²

Here, “poner en acto,” to enact, is as casual as it is a clear avowal of the performative self-awareness of the feminist strike. At the same time, it remains studious in its incompleting, always unfinished unfolding. It essays, rehearses, enacts. That, I think, is what the string and nature of the processual, active verbs alert us to. “Poner en acto” works through the gathering and convening which is expressed in “poner el cuerpo,” to embody or put the body on the line. The latter phrase had already been used to describe Ni Una Menos’ demonstrations, assemblies, and vigils by María Moreno in her “Elogio a la furia” (2016). In their article for this special issue, Cortes-Rocca and Palmeiro refer to how the feminist tide activates a specific “poner el cuerpo”: “The tide enacts a way of speaking, seeing, and activating that takes the form of a sensitive revolution or, as it is called in Guatemala, *acuerpamiento mundial*. We think of *acuerpamiento mundial* as a way of putting our bodies on the line that awakens the collective in the singular” (2022 3).

Years prior, Cecilia Palmeiro used the words “poner el cuerpo” to describe Néstor Perlongher’s art and politics (2011). For Palmeiro/Perlongher, too, “poner el cuerpo” means saying otherwise by putting the body on the line in language. Far from definitively written, this body is textual (fig. 3). If Perlongher, Palmeiro and Gago are interested in the other ways of saying which a bodily gathering like the feminist strike and its study methods affords, these bodily ways of saying otherwise thus do not hail from one naturalized or essentialized idea of woman’s body but are traversed by the apparatuses of language, spanning from patriarchal to contestatory. Indeed, with Palmeiro we could begin to glimpse a countercanon of “poner el cuerpo” which links the sexual dissidence of predominantly gay and trans men in the 1980s and 1990s with today’s feminism.

¹² Trans: we women reclaimed our time, we stopped doing what we are obliged to do, in order to do what we wanted. To meet, think together, take the word, occupy the streets, squares, appropriate public space and transform it in a hospitable and free space for us. We will enact our anti-patriarchal utopia. To ban fear, to show that we are fed up, to feed our strength in every territory. To create bonds of solidarity, networks of self-protection and care among ourselves (Pare).



Fig. 3. Photograph courtesy of ANCCOM (Agencia Nacional de Ciencias de la Comunicación, UBA)¹³

Now, “poner el cuerpo” in the feminist strike (as in other mobilisations of *Ni Una Menos*) refers to living and absent bodies: a peculiar presence between gathering and convocation, contestation, and mourning. In a passage which rings of Sharpe’s wake, Gago writes:

La asamblea se produce al ocupar un espacio en términos corporales, de modo que permita mostrar que la performatividad política no es solo discursiva o pre-discursiva. Puede ser una marcha, una vigilia, la ocupación de una plaza o un edificio, un duelo público o una huelga de hambre [...] para referirse a la asamblea como ensamble de cuerpos. Lo que importa es la materialidad del cuerpo que se arriesga y se exhibe con otr*s. Es eso lo que propiamente *dice*. Más allá de los enunciados lingüísticos, aparece una enunciación de otro tipo. Poner el cuerpo es decir. Pero decir de otro modo. (188)¹⁴

¹³ I thank Paola Cortes Rocca for pointing me to this collective.

¹⁴ Trans: The assembly happens when a space is occupied in bodily terms, in a way which shows that political performativity is not merely discursive or pre-discursive. It can be a march, a vigil, the occupation of a square or building, a public wake, or a hunger strike [...] referring to an assembly as an ensemble of bodies. What is at stake is the

The materiality of the body and the bodily terms which figure prominently in this passage are not to be confused with a stipulated immediacy of bodies coming together. Instead, the presence of “poner el cuerpo” is lent contours through theatrical expressions like “ensamble” and “exhibirse con otr*s.” The presence through which the feminist strike brings women together, onto the streets or in kitchen assemblies, convokes performatively: it dares a public to come into being as it is enacted. It dares because it comes into being in putting the body on the line, despite the risk. In this sense, Palmeiro and Cortes-Rocca write:

It was less a representation, a visibilization of the demands to pass the law of interruption of pregnancy—the political pressure that it effectively had aside—and more a **laboratory of collective conceptualization** arising from the very practice that brought us together before, during, and after this operation (2022 14).

Rather than representing or visibilising an already present identity, Cortes Rocca and Palmeiro’s formulations further underscore the experimental, performative, and collective invocation of a public which was not formerly present but which comes into being together, in contestation, but also in rehearsing a different possibility. In this sense, alongside its critiques of mandatory motherhood, marriage, and unpaid women’s work, I think we can see the feminist strike as a denunciation of the marriage of representation and disappearance in patriarchy’s charge of women. “Poner el cuerpo” does not simply visibilise but gathers the visible and the invisibilised, the present and the disappeared in an equivocal and ephemeral presenting which is profoundly proper to theatrical and performative presentation (fig. 4). This way, the strike enacts a public by composing and gathering it, but not without gathering in the folds of its public, the dead, the absent, and the invisibilised. In this wakeful gathering, the feminist strike is articulated with movements against the Argentinean dictatorship (1976-83), against its forced disappearances in their ten thousands, as well as with turn of the century mobilisation against neoliberal austerity. Paola Cortes Rocca’s words echo both Hartman’s *detritus* and this wakeful, compositional proceeding when she describes the feminist tide as a tide of sediments: feminisms, vocabularies, legacies, agendas, libraries of their own which are “read, ordered, transformed” (Cortes-Rocca, Palmeiro, Graff-Zivin). The wake gives the feminist tide a weight which it drags behind it, or an echo, perhaps a reflection proportional to the violence the movement is up against. The wakeful tide, then, allows us to think of the contradictory forms of presence which the feminist strike is able to convoke. Gathering

materiality of the body which is putting itself at risk and exposing itself with others. That is what it actually *say*s. Beyond linguistic enunciation, an enunciation of another kind emerges. To embody/put the body on the line is saying, but saying otherwise (Pare).

living and disappeared bodies, this strike and the strike's study dwells at the same time as it performs its publics.



Fig. 4. Image courtesy of MAFIA (Movimiento Argentino de Fotógrafxs Independientes Autoconvocadxs)¹⁵

IV. Virality of *Un violador en tu camino*

Las Tesis, a five-headed performance group based out of Valparaíso, Chile, conceived of *Un violador en tu camino* (A rapist in your path) when a longer, theatrical version of it could not be staged. It was thus a compromise formation specifically tailored to the context of multitudinous protests rocking Chile in October 2019. The allusion in the title, “a rapist in your path,” is completed, so to speak, by the performers’ chanted denunciations of the complicity and responsibility for femicides across the Chilean state. This complicity soon becomes site-specific and personal when the performers repeat its famous chorus, “el violador eres tú,” pointing fingers at onlookers.¹⁶ When pointing fingers, the performers are blindfolded, underscoring how arbitrary the personal message is, since political complicity with

¹⁵ I thank Cecilia Palmeiro for pointing me to this collective.

¹⁶ Trans: the rapist is you (Pare).

femicides is engrained on personal and everyday levels of (Chilean) patriarchal society.



Fig. 5. Photograph of one performance of *Un violador en tu camino*. Image courtesy of Rocío Álvarez

The virality of the video, followed by its infectious restaging around the world, took the group by surprise (2019). Even so, we might ponder that *Un violador en tu camino* became viral not just because it explicitly summons and rides on the feminist tide in Chile, but also because of its modularity and repeatability. The simplicity of *Un violador en tu camino*, in chanted word and choreographed movement, provides a strong material reason for the song's infectious and global reception. The six verses repeat words and phrases, although “la culpa no era mía, ni donde estaba ni qué vestía” is repeated most often,¹⁷ conforms a strophe of its own, and is musically set apart from the rest (2021, 101-03). Its convocation of a public grafts itself like a virus, revealing something crucial about the performative public sphere in which it proliferates.¹⁸ The simple, repetitive choreography emphasizes

¹⁷ Trans: and it was not my fault, nor was it because of where I was or what I wore (Pare).

¹⁸ Here, I refer to Las Tesis' *Un violador en tu camino*, but these reflections should also extend to of the slogans or “consignas” which Mell Rivera Díaz writes about in his submission for this special issue as well as of Ni Una Menos's hashtags, of which poetry and

the validity of the verbal critique, apart from also highlighting how exhausting and demeaning it is to have to repeat that a feminized body does not deserve being raped for who they are, regardless of what they wear or where they are. The repetitive language and choreography also draws attention to its performed-ness and reproducibility, thus attracting attention to its pointed formalisation. The pointedly performative and staged denunciations support the performance piece in destabilizing the clarity of binomial you (aggressor) and I (victim). Then, like Tsang's performance piece above, the formal and viral repetitions puncture patriarchy's binomial line. This does not relieve (male) onlookers from their interpolation. But onlookers will be interpolated from a stage where gender differentiation—and the violent enforcement of that differentiation through femicides—is at stake.

Analogous to how “poner el cuerpo” referred to living and absent bodies, Las Tesis convokes a public which is at once present and absent: a viral public. In their article for this special issue, Paola Cortes-Rocca and Cecilia Palmeiro write of the repetition, citation, and appropriation of the hashtag in ways reminiscent of virality: “it is a citation without a center, without degree zero, without authorship or authority, whose strength comes from collectivization” (2022 13). In this vein, the virality of the hashtag or performance piece invites us to focus on its transmission and reproducibility, the life of the piece “after” or beyond the piece. Musing about the plasticity of COVID-19, Catherine Malabou adverted recently: “Remember that the virus is not a living being. It is constituted by the addition of molecules. In speaking of the ‘life’ of a virus, we are actually referring to the propagation of infection” (my translation, par. 4).¹⁹ Virality thus draws attention to a life which is not individuated but resides in its transmission. If virality *is* life, it is not a life of living beings alone. Susana López Charretón recommends that we “abandonar la dicotomía vivos/no vivos y entender su naturaleza dual” (26).²⁰ For López Charretón, too, viral “life” is transmission or multiplication. It follows that the viral public sphere is not simply alive. Like the recombinant wake, or like the strike's contradictory gathering, the viral publics of Las Tesis' *Un violador en tu camino* are alive and dead but swept up in the propagation of something other-than-life.

The shared and interdependent life of virality, which I think we can track through Las Tesis' and their global publics' uses of it, make the binary camps of

propagation Cecilia Palmeiro has written suggestively (2020), and which operate in similar terms of virality as Las Tesis' piece. In my dissertation, I study feminist virality more extensively.

¹⁹ “Rappelons que le virus n'est pas un être vivant, il est constitué de molécules qui s'agrègent. Lorsqu'on parle de la “vie” du virus, on fait en fait référence à la propagation de l'infection” (par. 4).

²⁰ Trans: abandon the dichotomy of living/non-living viruses and understand their dual nature (Pare). For López Charretón, too, viral life is multiplication.

the so-called war on the pandemic unstable and mutually permeated. Instead, the virality of Las Tesis' performance piece joins other Latin American (feminist) thinkers in understanding bodies and their connection through contagion (Galindo 2020, Las Tesis 2021, Valdetaro 2020).²¹ In experimenting with the language of virality and contagion, these thinkers spin the gathering that is needed for moments of study like the feminist strike and viral propagation to take place. But the spin had already been forming with the entrance of epidemiological language to public debates: femicides had been called a pandemic long before the COVID-19 pandemic by Rita Segato; more recently the supposedly protective measures of isolation and confinement hurt women at the same nexus of gender, race, and class oppression which the feminist strike attempted to visibilise. Not just could certain gatherings of resistance, like the feminist strike or *Un violador en tu camino*, not be performed alone. Survival amidst a palimpsest of pandemics could best be protected in common.

Un violador en tu camino is not least a digital phenomenon. Multimedia technology is central to many liminal performances which arise as early as the turn of the century (Broadhurst 1999). But when Susan Broadhurst writes of the digital as dependent, she lends further clues about virality and its publics:

The digital, like all formal systems, has no semantics unless one is added, which means that its digitally processed contents require different habits of reading that can accommodate thinking in terms of indifferent differentiation. (177)²²

These remarks on the digital condition of presentation remain suggestive for virality and *Un violador en tu camino* today, not only because the dependence of the digital in Broadhurst echoes the dependence of the virus on living organisms in Malabou. Further, from the very address of "Un violador eres tú," the recourse is to performance publics infected by the piece, charged with a working out a repertoire or an extra-digital habit of reading. I am tempted to suggest that the piece itself enacts a study towards a repertoire or habit of reading less reliant on patriarchal violence. To be tasked with "indifferent differentiation" means that the performative study of Las Tesis' piece diffracts the binomials of patriarchy — through

²¹ In their article for this special issue, Paola Cortes-Rocca and Cecilia Palmeiro prefer Suely Rolnik's term of pollination over contagion (2019, 81), because the latter rings of pathology and pathologisation. I acknowledge and value the difference Rolnik is making, after all pathology has been a powerful instrument at the service of the racialising and patriarchal differentiation of bodies. However, in my work I am specifically interested in how the ways in which pathology is attributed is problematised and mobilised for transgressive uses in what I am calling feminist virality.

²² I have José Eduardo Valades to thank for the recommendation of Susan Broadhurst's *Liminal Acts*.

its global propagation, through its small repetitions, through its pointed formalization. The digital and physical publics which *Un violador en tu camino* convenes are performing habits of reading patriarchal violence and resistance to it. They are performing how performative gender is, but also resistance to it. The virality of their performance piece harnesses digital and physical bodies to the task of enacting habits of reading beyond a patriarchal organisation of gender. Habits of reading return me to Cortes Rocca's account of the feminist tide, weighed down by sediments, archives, and libraries, but still rising. They evoke the archiving archive in Cardona's article for this special issue, which activates a "[m]emoria transmedial y transsubjetiva que, como una onda que rebota, se afecta y se transforma" (2022 17).²³ They mirror Wu Tsang and Moten's study which winnows spaces of freedom amid and across the line of assembly, not by completing its penetration, but through repeating and incompleting it—a performative study. The habits of reading which *Las Tesis* challenges its publics to muster, must also, virally or wakefully, carry the unweight of absent and violated bodies, in the folds of their new habits. The wake holds together a mournful and fiduciary moment which dwells with dead and disappeared bodies, on the one hand, and the divergent recombinations of an awake consciousness which can prying itself loose somewhat from the violence which caused the wake.

Sharpe's wake and the studies I've studied in this essay thus shift into view a tired yet persistently death-driven politics which can be contested by bodies alive and dead, but most of all by the consciousness and study which emerges in their gathering. That this gathering is aware of its performativity is at the same time a testament of the bankruptcy of prior identificatory pulls of politics, but also a study and rehearsal of other forms of enacting and gathering politics. Thus, in remapping the terms of political debate on performative, theatrical stages, they profoundly alter *how* we study—politics, performance, "we," and "study." As we have seen in Wu Tsang's, *Ni Una Menos*' and *Las Tesis*' different uses of performance, "we" is splintered open both because "we" is mediated and technological and because it is processual and connective. Since their performances study, at least this article suggests as much, this splintering extends to the "we" who study in academia, art criticism, and journalism. As Christina Sharpe's concept of the wake enables us to see, the "we" involved in the performances studied in these pages, among others, is also always both more and less than the aggregate presence: set in motion by a now absent body, the wake is residual in Hartman's and Cortes-Rocca's senses, mourning the absences produced by police killings and feminicides. Sharpe and Cortes-Rocca both point out the performativity and emergency of the wake/the residual since these movements are not determined by the body which occasioned them. This indeterminacy is palpable in the explosive

²³ Trans: transmedial and transsubjective memory which, like the percolations of a wave, affects itself and transforms (itself) (Pare).

and hard-to-predict virality, of which “Un violador en tu camino” is a recent example. The concept of study which opened this article, indebted to Wu Tsang, Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney, is indeed indebted to indeterminacy—something they call “incompleting.” I hope in this article to have laid out some ways how in studying performance, we are and should be contaminated by recent performative studies in the Americas.

Not confined to the Americas, the performative studies I discuss in this essay articulate and move in the wake of representative politics. There is a perhaps more than coincidental convergence between the declaration of post-politics and the demise of groups or identities available to be represented in the classical social contract of liberal representative democracy. Ni Una Menos and Las Tesis are performative not only when their skits catch attention or a choreographed demonstration raises awareness for injustice. Theirs is an inherently performative enacting of politics (with Gago’s *poner en acto* and Palmeiro’s *poner el cuerpo* in mind) which amounts to a non-instrumental, repetitive, yet experimental re-activation of the political moment. Horacio Legrás writes about this re-activation when he writes that the post-political “stage” of contestation begins to behave poetically (68). This moment is not reducible to a critique of representation—indeed revealing a performative, disavowed truth of representation—nor does it provide an alternative model in lieu of representation. What it does is enact a vision and practice of politics which returns to the experiential and aesthetic questions of living together in a *polis*—inessential, of course, feminist, perhaps—and abandons momentarily the idea of a given *demos* or an ideal state to be represented. In this return, the moment which is performative and choreographed yet as open as the wake, repeats and revises, moves and is moved, offers itself to (digital and mass) mediation and proposes the collective body as a medium insubordinate to its representation.

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