

Rocío León

“The Season of Occupying Space”: An Interview with Marcela A. Fuentes

Marcela A. Fuentes is an associate professor in the department of performance studies at Northwestern University. Her work centers on uses of performance and performativity within social justice struggles across media platforms. Her book *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* (University of Michigan Press, 2019) has been translated to Spanish and will be released by the Argentine press Eterna Cadencia in December 2020.

In February 2020, I interviewed Marcela Fuentes, an Associate Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. Marcela was the Keynote Speaker for the First Forum 2019 *Conference on Constellations: Connections, Disruptions, Imaginations in Cinema and Beyond*. We met a month before shelter-in-place went into effect to talk about her first book, *Performance Constellations: Networks of Protest and Activism in Latin America* (2019). *Performance constellations* describes tactics of disruption and worldmaking made through body-based protests and digital networks against neoliberal regimes in Chile, Mexico, and Argentina. The oscillation between the grief, rage, and hope brought on by 2020 guides the curation of this interview. The COVID-19 public health crisis, the Black Lives Matter uprisings, and the continued cruelty of states across the American hemisphere against stateless peoples and their citizens alike has altered modes of socialization and imagining what's possible. As such, I highlight three key themes in Marcela's work to guide us through the current moment: the sociality of performance within digital networks, archiving dissent, and affect within activism. I edited the interview with the purpose of maintaining meaning, both deleting and adding words to make what was a conversation between two people legible to a wider audience. TW: femicide.

RL: *One of the points you make in your book is on the temporal and spatial arrangement of performance constellations within the neoliberal era. You begin with the Zapatista uprisings in 1994 and end with Ayotzinapa and Ferguson in 2014 and*

the feminist reproductive rights “green wave” in 2018.¹ You also focus on Argentina’s 2001 economic crisis and activists’ use of digital storytelling and digital protests. And student activists in Chile’s viral flash mobs in response to debt governance. What was your process of choosing these specific movements?

MF: I gravitate toward artistic works that are politically engaged and toward activism that utilizes aesthetics as a tool for intervention. Works that give people hope without playing around. Works that really try to get to the core of things. Initially, what drew me to performance studies was actually live performance. Face-to-face encounters. I would say even the theatrical moment in which we are together in a space watching a play. The closeness that you feel. Even sometimes in movie [theaters] but particularly in the theater. In the early 2000s, I was drawn to performance studies because I felt the elements I mentioned were being lost to the virtual and theater was losing relevance.

I grew up in the post-dictatorship in Argentina. That was my exposure to performance art actually. When after many years of authoritarian rule people were finally able to take over public space and also enjoy queer clubs and warehouses, which were vibrant venues for interdisciplinary, experimental art. It was like post Franco-Spain where people celebrated actually being able to be together in groups without it being a dangerous event. And so, performance there was “solo performance” mostly, queer artists. It was interdisciplinary because dance, clubbing, music shows, fashion, were all mixed. There was aerial work and image

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theater. There was environmental theater. Theatrical ways of symbolizing the past, of understanding the past that we had lived through sci-fi and through image theater and the like. Naked bodies. Bodies rubbing against each other. No seating. Almost rave-like most of the time. That was actually where I was "oh, this is called performance, performance art. I want to learn about it".

When I joined Performance Studies at NYU, I was drawn to those aspects: live, body-based, solo or ensemble work that didn't rely on a spoken text. But then, in school, I met people like Ricardo Dominguez from the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT). I learned about Coco Fusco's work. Some of Guillermo Gomez-Peña's work and the Surveillance Camera Players. All works that were technologically mediated and that had that element of eventfulness I had enjoyed in post-dictatorship performances in Argentina. What we now would call *affect*. These technologically mediated performance I was introduced to in the early 2000s (following the 1990s digital experimentation era in the arts and the dawn of the massification of the Internet) made me think about embodiment in a different way that wasn't just live flesh. And so, I was like, "I have done theater already (I was a theater director in Argentina), I know what it is, and this [technologically mediated work] sounds like the newest thing that I can learn here." Those works, in my view, had that edge I had been drawn to in my country as someone moving from text-based theater to the performative or live arts.

I learned about the Zapatistas in New York. I learned about a lot of Latin American collectives in New York because Argentina can be pretty Eurocentric. Jill Lane was one of my mentors and I wanted to build on her work but also go a little farther in terms of claims and research. But her work on EDT was definitely highly influential for me. One aspect of the Zapatistas story, that was very compelling to me were Marcos's *comunicados*, speeches that circulated in written form and that had a poetic quality similar to Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches. But in the case of Marcos and the Zapatistas, *comunicados* and insurgent actions also have what I call sometimes a *delirious vulnerability*, a kind of out-of-the box *hasta* crazy approach to confronting those in power, including military forces, via symbolic actions that

strove to highlight humanity, perhaps even what we might call "empathy".² This thing about the paper airplanes was very inspiring, very innovative as political discourse at a time when politics rarely inspire/d anyone and anything beyond business as usual.³ But I also like that in actions like that you could see the importance of the poetics of indigenous storytelling, of other ways of understanding and affecting politics and social struggle.

RL: *Who is the audience for Performance Constellations? How do you see activists engaging with your work?*

MF: I don't like the idea of thinking this book as "instructive" because I actually *build on* activists' work. Some of my students, the younger ones, did not know there was an anti-globalization movement. So, first, it is about historicizing and doing an intellectual history, a cultural history of resistant and insurgent movements. I love the part where I analyze the Power Point as part of post-Argentina 2001 economic crisis activism. Telling the story of how the crisis came to be, through a basic Power Point. How can you even analyze this in the era when we are talking about virtual reality, augmented reality? Still, I went and took seriously the Power Point to think about not just the story that it communicated, but to also reflect on how that story was told and what that tells us about activists engaging transnational audiences.

In a way, documenting work—working with *Ni una menos*—I realized that activists many times just do stuff.⁴ They don't document their actions; they don't keep track of them. They do a lot of reactive work, I mean, work that responds to an exigency. So, contrary to what I (and many) think, most of the times activists appreciate sitting down with us to reflect on what they have done, to add perspective into the mix. I am not saying that they need us to do that, but sometimes that deep look, even that refractive opportunity that researchers offer, is welcomed and valued. Many of them thank me because [they say] you are making me think. You are giving me space to stop a minute, to think, to chat, to discuss.

This book is going to be translated. For the U.S. (we could say English-language public), the case I am making here is to take to the streets. Fight for your rights. It's important. For Spanish-speaking

Latin American audiences, I have to talk about something else. I have to talk about [these audiences] already having been there, because there is a long and sustained tradition of street protest and public dissent and resistance. Popular politics is made among other spaces, in the streets. You have radical cases like the Chilean youth--La Primera Línea Chilena—[saying] we don't care.⁵ Until we have dignity—I could die. I am going to fight with a cop. I don't care. What can you say to those people? How can you understand what you are doing?

RL: *In 2014, the year you focus on in your last chapter, there were many protests happening. I marched for both Ferguson and Ayotzinapa, whose cross-movement solidarity and hemispheric resistance you talk about in your book. Most noticeably through the hashtag Fergusoninapa. But remembering these deaths still brings a lot of sadness and pain. If you are thinking about violence, resistance, and digital protest, how do you take into account that remembering these events still hurts?*

MF: I have been to different protests for Ni Una Menos. They emphasize the right to pleasure, the right to desire, even the right to party. Because the media says, “she was killed because she was a party lover. She was out at three...she should have stayed at home.” Femicide is a complex phenomenon because you can stay at home and still be killed. Family, romantic relationships and the home are actually dangerous spaces in many cases. We need to emphasize joy and vitality rather than victim-blaming. We have to also fight for that. Not just that we want to be alive but how. You see that Ni una menos is less interested in mourning per se--that's how they started--they started with mourning. But then they were like: let's do colorful stuff. That is feminism too. Again, politics and aesthetics. And affect. What you want to emphasize, especially as death, violence and pain surround us but we need to continue living, to make life livable, desirable.

I talk to students a lot about hope. My Puerto Rican doctoral students before this summer [2019] were like “we don't think protest is worthwhile.”⁶ We are not interested in going to the streets. What would we be fighting for? We have no energy for that. There are other ways to resist colonialism and oppression.” Because it takes a lot of energy to take to the streets and remain there as

long as it's needed. Well, this summer everything changed. People built on feminists who had been on the streets already because of the femicide crisis. They had inaugurated this season of occupying space, of being together, even mourning together.

In Argentina, I also went to one march that was completely different in terms of affect. The march was organized by--I get goosebumps--the classmates of a young woman who had been killed. The Ni Una Menos collective showed up to the march with their banner. We wanted to support the kids. It was mainly high school students, so it was incredibly sad. When we arrived, they were marching. They were cutting traffic. Organized and strong. But their sadness was palpable. I had been asked to cover the demonstration. So, at some point I started impromptu-interviewing people. I didn't want to disturb them but I was curious about how (or if) the feminist movement that has been popularized lately in Latin America had made an impact on them. I asked them if they were feminists. They all said yes, that is our tool. That is our mode of empowerment. We talk about hope, we have to have hope. I don't know if they believe that we can transform things but at least they have the conviction that things cannot remain the same.

That is a strong start. And, like performances, revolutionary processes start and end, and they start again. Radical transformation is a long-haul process, like Patrisse Cullors once told me when I asked her how she responds to questions about the efficacy of the movement for Black Lives. We are in for a long haul. And performance help us stay, rest, and come back re-energized. Performance constellations is also about that, about building on legacies, learning from each other, and, as we discussed in the conference, sometimes even breaking with the old and opening a new cluster, inaugurating a new cycle. I am glad I got to witness a resurgence of dissent this summer. What I learned from observing movements and the latest developments is that you cannot take democracy for granted. You cannot take the streets, or technology for that matter, for granted. And the activists and artists that I engage with in my work teach us how, even in the most challenging situations, they always found a way to keep fighting, *hasta que valga la pena vivir*, like Chilean activists told each other during the 2019 revolt.

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Notes

1 The Zapatista uprisings occurred in response to the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. Ayotzinapa is a rural town in the southern Mexican state of Guerrero in which forty-three student teachers went missing. The feminist “green wave” refers to the protests featuring green bandanas, the symbol of the National Campaign for the Right to Legal, Safe and Free Abortion (La Campaña) in Argentina and other Latin American countries.

2 *Hasta* means ‘even’ in Spanish in this context. Marcos refers to Subcomandante Marcos, a Zapatista leader.

3 The paper airplanes refer to a “Zapatista Air Force” attack on Mexican federal soldiers in January 2000. The Zapatista “air force” fired paper airplanes over the barbed wire of the military encampment. Each paper airplane carried a written “missile,” or rather messages and poems for the soldiers. This event was described in an article by Jill Lane, “Digital Zapatistas” (2003).

4 Ni una menos is a feminist collective in Argentina that mobilizes against the violence of femicide and misogyny. More information about them can be found at <http://niunamenos.org.ar/>.

5 The Primera Línea is a collective of protestors during the 2019-2020 Chilean protests, which were ignited by an increase in public transportation costs in the nation’s capital, Santiago. The protests retaliated against increasing inequality and privatization. The Primera Línea is known for its direct confrontation of police forces during a time of generalized human rights violations and police brutality, including torture and sexual assault.

6 In summer 2019, hundreds of thousands of protestors marched to demand the resignation of Governor Ricardo A. Rosselló after close communication between Rosselló and his aides was leaked through an 889-page publication. This tends to be referred to as the final straw to decades of austerity measures and impunity that have hurt Puerto Ricans.