Writing, Reading, and Doing Things Together
A Brief Chronicle of an Infected Classroom

Rían Lozano
Institute of Aesthetic Research - National Autonomous University of México / rian.lozano@gmail.com

Translated by Valerie Leibold

Abstract
How can those disappeared by dictatorships in Latin America be presented? How can one make someone who was disappeared present, how can one make them appear? How can one represent those who were always invisible? How can this be done in the classroom? This essay comes out of the collective teaching experience at a Latin American public university: The National Autonomous University of Mexico. I will use the description and analysis of a specific scene to demonstrate how performatic readings (done aloud, in a collective and with the body in the foreground) are an efficient strategy in creating a critical classroom and an “infected” pedagogical praxis: that is to say, a collective one, committed to social urgencies (especially those with approaches from feminisms and descolonial proposals).

Keywords
Performatic Readings; Classroom of Infection; Descolonial Feminism; Radical Pedagogies.

Las Yeguas se levantaron de sus asientos, recorrieron ceremoniosamente el mapa de extremo a extremo, y cuando estuvieron una en frente a la otra empezaron a bailar una cueca. La cueca silenciosa tomó un ritmo zapateado sin zapatos sobre los vidrios. Hilitos de sangre quedaron impresos sobre el dibujo de Latinoamérica.

43 normalistas desaparecieron para cruzar nuestras marcas como heridas en el tiempo: Campesinxs, morenxs, pobres, conservando una lengua madre, trabajadores de la tierra, pero también de la palabra. En caravanas surcan territorio nacional buscando alianzas. Los 43 son puente hacia el Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, la Guardería ABC, Atenco, Aguas Blancas, Las muertas de Juárez, Mujeres violadas y asesinadas del Estado de México, Tlatlaya, Acteal, Migrantes con sueños del sur.

Ana et alii, malmoe: 2014
This essay comes out of the collective teaching experience at a Latin American public university: The National Autonomous University of Mexico. I will use the description and analysis of a specific scene (related to a graduate program)⁵ to demonstrate how performative readings (done aloud, in a collective and with the body in the foreground) are an efficient strategy in creating a critical classroom and an “infected” pedagogical praxis: that is to say, a collective one, committed to social urgencies (especially those with approaches from feminisms and descolonial proposals).⁶

The chosen example (the reviewing and rereading of a performance done by Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis in 1982) has to do with radical and and harsh types of infection: HIV, people’s disappearance, the annihilation of lives. This choice, which might seem like a stretch or excessive, responds to two fundamental motives. First, it understands that these borderline scenes allude to this “fear of infection” that builds up stereotypes, reduces social and cultural programs, distances spaces of knowledge production from their radical tie to the rest of society, and makes collective momentum and social commitment more precarious.

Second, this decision works to serve personal and academic interests, desires, and passions, but also dramas and the huge struggles that many of our students face when they try to make their lives liveable. In an academic context which is interrupted every semester by forced disappearances of students⁷ in different parts of the Mexican Republic, due to the murder of women within and outside⁸ of university spaces, this essay is an attempt at reviewing and reclaiming the public university’s roles and commitments. The classroom, traversed by artistic practices, far from being another space that relegate, silences, and disciplines, should be the bastion, the privileged space where contact intensifies and creates meaning.

The proposed theoretical framework for this essay is a combination of three fundamental tools: the perspective offered by Feminist Studies (especially proposals generated from Latin America); the legacy of “Radical Pedagogy” that we understand, following bell hooks (1994: 9), as the union of proposals from Feminist Pedagogy and Critical Pedagogy; and lastly, descolonial proposals (especially those produced from Latin American insurgencies). Although the specific pedagogical scene described here happened in the 2014 August-December edition of our seminar, the experience started a year earlier and has continued to the present in different versions of the course, using texts and other pieces from different authors⁹.

A stage, the scene is—in a very general sense—a place where things happen. The event, in this case, is precisely a collective, critical, and
feminist pedagogical experience and its connections with artistic practice. The entwined path of these two, as will be seen, highlights the central role of all of the implicated bodies; that is to say, the bodies of the students, facilitators, the text, and knowledge, and knowledge from the body.

It is in this context that performative readings, which are understood as the (collective) embodying of texts and audiovisual pieces from different authors, are presented as a fundamental pedagogic and artistic strategy for the development of our seminar. Furthermore, this exercise also relates to the concern that has led us to pose the necessity that our readings of decoloniality and feminisms from the South have an alternative methodology of teaching-learning. With this, we have found ourselves needing to systematically question and modify our education principles (from the planning of our semesters’ syllabi to the development of their sessions and systems of evaluation): from where we teach/learn (politics of location), what we teach/learn (critical knowledges), and how we teach/learn (descolonial methodologies).

Finally, evaluating the potentials of these types of exercises in the classroom has been a cardinal element in confronting the idea that pedagogical scenes are exclusively spaces in which one transmits knowledge which is already given.

**The Scene: Dancing with those Disappeared**

How can those disappeared by dictatorships in Latin America be presented? How can one make someone who was disappeared present, how can one make them appear? How can one represent those who were always invisible? These are the questions we planned to begin the session on October 22nd, 2014. We were already in the second half of the semester. After having tracked the appearance of what is called Visual Studies in Latin America, we were ready to dedicate the rest of the sessions to analyzing artistic and cultural practices which would help us conclude whether or not something like a “(Critical) Latin American perspective” existed.

To respond to questions of disappeared bodies (a sad frame that connects the histories of many countries in the region), and with the intention of continuing to analyze the potential of performance and that which is performative in relation to Gender and Sexuality Studies, we, the two coordinators of the seminar, decided to start the class with the viewing of the photographic record of “La Conquista de América”: a well-known piece by Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis (Pedro Lemebel and Francisco Casas), which would connect us with political movements (and the use of cultural practices) in Chile under Pinochet’s repression.
On the 8th of March, 1978, in the middle of the military dictatorship, and also on International Women’s Day the Conjunto Folclórico de la Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (AFDD) [The Family Members of the Disappeared Detained People’s Folkloric Troupe] performed for the first time in Caupolicán Theater, in Santiago de Chile. Using the cueca (one of South America's most well-known traditional dances done as a couple; it was declared the National Chilean Dance in 1979), the women of this troupe re-appropriated the dance to denounce the atrocities committed since the military coup, and at the same time, to render the faces of their disappeared family members visible. They "danced alone" while wearing the photos of their disappeared partners, comrades and family members, beginning a tradition of dance as a form of speaking out, which became a symbol of resistance and memory, and this tradition has continued to the present.

A decade later, on the 12th of October, 1989, Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis also took the stage. They laid out a map of South America (whose terrain was made up by the irregularities of Coca-Cola bottles' broken glass scattered on the ground) in one of the rooms in The Human Rights Commission in Chile. Lemebel and Casas positioned themselves one across from the other. They had headphones in their ears connected to walkmans worn on their chests and their dance unmistakably invoked the cueca dance, or, to be more specific, what had been come to known as the cueca sola [lonely cueca].

The Yeguas, with their bare feet, their bare chests, and a white kerchief in their hands, also danced with the disappeared, but in this case, the absent people where those who had always been invisible: those oppressed, assassinated, and harassed all over the continent because of their sexual condition, those who never appear in official death tallies, not even in the most gruesome ones. Thus, the struggle against the HIV epidemic was made visible as some of those persecuted by the dictatorship. While they danced, and the soles of their feet bled, the Yeguas recited the names of lost comrades aloud, almost like a litany: “Compañero Mario, alias La Rucia, caído en San Camilo, ¡presente!” [Comrad Mario, aka La Rucia, lost at San Camilo, present!]. In this way, the performance incorporated, em-bodied, and made these disappearances visible, at the same time that it named those who no longer had a body.

Twenty-five years later, the 21st of October, 2014, precisely a day before our session, the group of Visual Culture and Gender decided (in a collective decision which involved students and us, as coordinators) not to attend class, or, more specifically, not to use the assigned classroom. This was a way to participate in the strike called by the UNAM Graduate Student
Assembly and the proposal to occupy the Graduate Building's courtyard, starting early in the day, to do diverse activities connected to the massive march that would happen in downtown Mexico City that afternoon, to call for the safe return of the 43 students from the Escuela Normal Rural Isidro Burgos [Rural Teachers' College Isidro Burgos], in Ayotzinapa, who had been disappeared a month earlier. It was in this way that the study of the work of Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis which had been planned to interrupt in our classroom in the month of October, was also interrupted by new and terrible contemporary disappearances.

The members of this seminar decided to follow the strike and spend the four hours of class to think about how we could use, and in a way translate, Las Yegua’s performance to name our disappearances: that of the 43 students, added to the other thousands that lengthen the statistics of those disappeared in Mexico in the last decade, connected to what the official story calls “The War on Drugs”.

After having talked about the meanings of Las Yeguas of the Apocalipsis's piece, and among the conversations that were generated with participants of other collective meeting there, a part of the group decided to create its own dance and take up the resignification of dance again, in a gesture that not only connected them with the Chilean artists but above all with the action of the women's lonely cueca dance. In this case, the music was the humming of a jarabe tapatío. Thus, they took up a traditional Mexican dance—originally from the state of Jalisco and internally known thanks to Mariachis— which also symbolizes a man's courtship of a woman. They also made a map to dance on: this time it represented the silhouette of a country that gushed blood from almost all of its states. During the action, the dancers (a group of eight students) began to fall, annihilated by the macabre collusion or courtship between the State and Drug Traffickers (embodied by two others).
Visual Culture and Gender, UNAM Graduate seminar. October 22nd, 2014.
Photograph by Rian Lozano
While this group laid out its choreography, the rest of the participants focused on writing a manifesto that they disseminated through different media and social networks\(^\text{21}\). This text was additionally accompanied by some masks made out of colored poster board with the caption “\textit{lxs feministas con los normalistas y lxs a-normales}” [Feminists with the Teachers’ School Teachers and the Abnormal]. The intention was that these would mark us as a group in the massive protest that happened that same afternoon, in the city’s downtown, and that it summarized our position as feminist university members in the face of crimes perpetrated and unpunished in Mexico. Additionally, the use of these devices, which hid individual faces while also producing collective and equalizing identities, connected us to visual appearance and media strategies used since the 90s by insurgent Zapatista groups: a fundamental reference for political and activist struggles in the country. If the Zapatistas, with the use of ski-masks, took on and reappropriated the non-individuality attributed to those "others" by the colonial power for more than five hundred years, this group of students followed suit by calling for the safe return of both the 43 comrades (whose full names we do know\(^\text{22}\)), as well as the other thousands
of murdered and disappeared women, victims of feminicides and transfeminicides, of whose identities we know very little.

At the same time, the strategy of hiding our faces also connected us with the work of many feminist artists who, since the seventies, had thought about "camouflage" possibilities, anonymity, and the production of collective visual identities as tactical ruptures in the susceptible patriarchal order. In this way, in a sort of visual alliance that reclaimed feminist heritage and Zapatista legacy, student-created masks that produced a collective identity through which the power of "seeing without being seen:" a maneuver that flipped visual forms of control exercised on "dispensable bodies" (Belausteguigoitia: 1995: 310), that is to say indigenous people's, women's, and of course the disappeared's bodies.

Students of the Visual Culture and Gender graduate course-UNAM, during the demonstration "Una luz por Ayotzinapa" ("A light for Ayotzinapa"). Mexico City, October 22nd, 2014. Photograph by Rían Lozano.
Towards a Practice of Infection

The analysis of this scene (in the different versions of the seminar referred to in this paper) has been used to substantiate the description of a metaphor, which for some time now has acted as the name of a type of pedagogical movement produced in these types of spaces: a pedagogy we have named "of Infection." Infection in this context means on the one hand, and thought of in more formal academic terms (curriculum, program requirements, specializations, etc.), thinking about disciplinary contamination in the classroom. This implies considering that a graduate classroom at a university which is truly committed to the public needs to use (theoretical, methodological, and visual) resources from very different terrains; they need to be put to use in a way that helps us resist the paradoxical disciplining operation taken up by institutions (including ones dedicated to education) on a global level.

On the other hand, imagining infection as a pedagogical experience brings us to insist that the classroom, and the university understood as that legitimate space of knowledge, cannot be presented and practiced as an exclusive space. Quite the contrary, the university, its classrooms, and the knowledge developed there, will be indispensable (and therefore legitimate) because of their connection with social and political urgencies that connect, the lives, interests, worries, fears, desires, and passions of those who are within and outside of the academic realm. In a completely opposite direction from that which promotes individual university degrees —those which, among other things, demand one to publish a lot and alone in journals indexed in the Global North— this pedagogy of infection, of infection from contact, understands that the pedagogical scene is only conceivable collectively and from the differences that go through us. A scene which additionally would be difficult to quantify, standardize, according to all of the agencies of evaluation, which currently reduce the potential of collective work to a questionable "impact factor."

Conclusions: For Other Author Policies

In her work When Species Meet (2008), Donna Haraway offers a new conception of that which is human as a species developed in the company of many others. If we transfer her fundamentally epistemological concerns to our pedagogical ones, we discover that the questions this author begins her work with are also useful for our description of the contact classroom: "How is 'becoming with' a practice of becoming wordly?" [...] to be one is always to become with many [...] 'we' are necessary to each other in real time" (Haraway, 2008: 3-4). In this sense, the "we" in the production of this pedagogical proposal is not just a correct grammatical situation (as the
work is “with” students, “with” artists, “with” activists, “with” professors) but it also turns out to be an ontological principle: a sense of community and collective collaborative work. This is a response to the neoliberal approach that subjugates the university to market laws and interests of corporations at the price of disassociating from people’s lives and the possibilities of producing free and transformative knowledge.

That is why, faced with the tendency of Public Higher Education’s corporatization, this pedagogy of infection—located in the context of Latin America and with the ever-present paths of Critical Studies, especially feminisms and descolonial perspectives and with clear connections to cultural and artistic practice—proposes an alternative—in incorporating the body— which restores those disappeared bodies in their different scenes. This also happens in editorial spaces, evaluating research proposals, and other academic activities. Perhaps in this way, “Author Policies” can incorporate, once and for all, the possibility of writing, reading, acting, and listening together.

Bibliography


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**Notes**

1 Even though in English the translation does not work as in Spanish (“Escribir, leer y hacer cosas juntas”), in the original version the decision to use the feminine plural (“juntas”) throughout this text has two objectives. First, it responds to the feminist gesture which rejects using the masculine plural as neutral in our language. And second, it takes up the positioning of the editors in writing the name of the call for texts: “Yo solo escribo cosas que puedo leer con otras” [I only write things I can read with other women].

2 I deeply appreciate Nina Hoechtl’s thoughtful reading of, comments about, and valuable contributions to this article, as well as her generous company, in the classroom, all these years. I also thank Valerie Leibold for her always loving exercise of translation.

3 “Las Yeguas [The Mares] got up from their seats, ceremoniously walked across the map from one end towards the other, and when they were in front of each other they began to dance the cueca. The silent cueca took a shoe-click rhythm without shoes over glass. Threads of blood were left on the drawing of Latin America.” Our translation.

4 “43 normalistas [university students training to be teachers] to cross our marks like wounds in time: brown, poor, peasants, holding onto a mother tongue, workers of the earth, but also of the word. They navigate national territories in caravans, in search of alliances. The 43 are a bridge to the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional [Zapatista Army for National Liberation], the Guardería ABC {ABC Daycare}, Atenco, Aguas Blancas, the feminicides in Juárez, raped and murdered women in the State of Mexico, Tlatlaya, Acteal, Migrants with dreams from and of the South.” Our translation.
This seminar, coordinated and facilitated by Nina Hoechtl and myself, in collaboration with other professors like Coco Gutiérrez Magallanes and Marisa Belaustegui Guitiúí and the student group MANU(EL)(LA) in some of its other editions, belongs to the UNAM’s Art History Graduate Program’s academic courses. At the same time, it’s also an elective in other graduate programs; this means that enrolled students come from disciplines as varied as Art History, Latin American Studies, Pedagogy, or Visual Arts. Since 2015, the seminar is also part of Campus Expandido’s courses, part of the Museo Universitario de arte Contemporáneo-MUAC [University Museum of Contemporary Art]. This new position at the university campus has allowed the seminar to also be made up of other members, who are not necessarily enrolled in any Graduate Program. Therefore, there have been actrices, housewives, engineers, mathematicians, writers, psychologists, activists, performance artists, etc. in our classroom (whose number of participants has ranged from 20 to 30 students in each semester’s edition). In each edition, the seminar maintains the generic name from the Course Catalog (Visual Culture and Gender), but each semester adds a different subheading based on the work planned to be taken on.


I am writing these pages almost three months after the forced disappearance of three film students in Tonalá, Jalisco; and two weeks after the disappearance of Bruno Avendaño, brother of the artist Lukas Avendaño (a collaborator with the current edition of the Visual Culture and Gender Seminar), in Tehuantepec, Oaxaca.

I am also writing this text a year after the feminicide of Lesvy Iván Rivera Osorio, which happened on May 3rd, 2017 in Ciudad Universitaria [University City - UNAM’s central Campus].

Some of the pieces used in our readings and performative practices, which cannot be analyzed in this article, due to lack of space, have been the text “Evita Vive” written by Néstori Perlongher in 1975; the manifesto “Hablo por mi diferencia” by Pedro Lemebel (1986) and Mexican artist Lukas Avedaño’s version of the latter (available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwnKhSho1vU), María Galindo’s conference “Así como tú me quieres. Yo no quiero ser de ti” (1999); the text “Tlili, tlpalli. El camino de la tinta roja y negra”, by Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), among others.

As bell hooks reminds us, one of the main premises of critical feminist pedagogy aims to eradicate Western Philosophy’s metaphysical dualism which demands the relentless separation between mind and body.

In this search, in April of 2015 we decided to open the seminar’s conceptualization, production, and facilitation processes. To do so, we invited students who were interested and enrolled at that moment in our classes. That is how the research and work group MANU(EL)(LA) was formed; it was made up of several people (Axler Yépez Saldaña, Valerie Leibold, Alejandra Gorráez Puga, Amor Teresa Gutiérrez, Toño Hernández, Nina Hoechtl, Rían Lozano, Coco Gutiérrez Magallanes, Mauricio Patrón, and Ariadna Solís) from different disciplines, levels of education, and also some who were officially part of any education system. The group worked with Visual Studies, artistic and cultural practices, feminisms, and Descolonial Studies as a foundation. Its members engaged in a collective process of (un)learning which led us to coordinating and imparting two editions of the seminar, collectively: “Cultura Visual y Género: Traducciones descolonizadoras I” [Visual Culture and Gender: Descolonizing Translations I] (fall semester 2015) and “Cultura Visual y Género: Traducciones descolonizadoras II” [Visual Culture and Gender: Descolonizing Translations II] (spring semester 2016).


I use the term employed by Diana Taylor to cover the not exclusively discursive dimension of performance and the performative: "Despite the fact that it might be too late to recover the term "performative" within the non-discursive terrain of performance (that is to say, to refer to actions more than effects of discourse), I would like to propose that we resort to a word from the same time as performance in Spanish, —performatic— to refer to the non-discursive adjective form of "performance" (Taylor, 2011: 24). Our translation.

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www.re-visions.net
14 This type of couple's dance is done, with variations in the steps and different names, in different countries like Colombia, Chile, Argentina, Bolivia and Perú.

15 This work has been analyzed previously, in the context of the pedagogical experience in the article: Lozano (2014). “Contagios y Saberes Incorporados. Feminismo, pedagogía y prácticas culturales”. In: Grupo de Investigación FIDEX (2014): El aula invertida. Estrategias pedagógicas y prácticas artísticas de la diversidad sexual”. Facultad de Bellas Artes de Altea. Universidad Miguel Hernández de Elche. pp. 22-26. This text presents Las Yeguas' piece as a useful metaphor for the description of the type of pedagogical movement produced in our classroom: infection through contact. Against the pathologizing discourse that in the eighties and nineties condemned those who were infected with HIV to the most absolute invisibility and abandonment, the idea of infection through contact in the classroom, leads us to consider the need to think about the production of knowledge as something which is mediated: that is to say, through contact between all of those who make up pedagogical scenes.

16 The simultaneous use of the map, the cueca dance and its reference to courtship, the broken glass from Coca-Cola bottles scattered on the floor, as well as the name that the artists gave to the piece (The Conquest of America) make one think of a simultaneous reading between two Conquests and their more recent imperialist forms: that of the territory of the Americas and that of invadable bodies (women, native peoples, non-heterosexuals), and U.S. imperialism and political and economic interference in the Southern Cone of Latin America. See: http://www.yequasdelapocalipsis.cl/1989-la-conquista-de-america/


18 In the words of Fernanda Carvajal and Fernando Nogueira: “As Derrida points out, every name seems to be "a priori the name of a dead person." Saying the name of someone who was disappeared may be a way to take a stand on that which, beyond the spell of official cut and dry policies, will never be completely dead. And although the body dies, what cannot die is the name, and in that way, if the bearer "returns" to life, "it will happen to the name and not the living, the name of the living [will return] as the name of the deceased" (2012: 103). Our translation.

19 Between the night of the 26th and the early hours of the morning of the 27th of September, there were various episodes of violence in which municipal and state police, as well as members of the Army, persecuted and attacked students from the Rural Teachers' School, of Ayotzinapa. This attack ended with the death of 9 people, 43 students who are still disappeared, and more than two dozen people injured. For more information, see: https://www.proceso.com.mx/category/caso-ayotzinapa

20 This is how the violent campaign was known, which began with the name "Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad” [National Security Strategy], led by President Felipe Calderón de Hinojosa’s administration (December 2006- November 2012). This plan consisted of the authorization of the presence of the military on the streets throughout the country, as the main tool in the fight against drug trafficking. This resulted in a massive increase in the number of people murdered and disappeared, as well as systematic violations of Human Rights.

21 This manifesto gave rise to the writing of “Una carta desde México” [Letter from Mexico]: a collective text which was translated into German by Gudrun Rath and published at the end of 2014 by malmoe, an independent magazine edited in Vienna. To consult the Spanish version, see: http://malmoe.org/artikel/widersprechen/2896

22 Alexander Mora Venancio, Abel García Hernández, Abelardo Vázquez Penitent, Adán Abrajan de la Cruz, Antonio Santana Maestro, Benjamin Ascencio Bautista, Bernardo Flores Alcaraz, Carlos Iván Ramírez Villarreal, Carlos Lorenzo Hernández Muñoz, César Manuel González Hernández, Christian Alfonso Rodríguez Telumbre, Christian Tomas Colón Garnica, Cutberto Ortiz Ramos, Dorian González Parral, Emíliano Alen Gaspar de la Cruz, Everardo Rodríguez Bello, Felipe Arnulfo Rosas, Giovanni Galíndez Guerrero, Israel Caballero Sánchez, Israel Jacinto Lugardo, Jesús Johany Rodríguez Tlatempa, Jhosivani Guerrero de la Cruz, Jonas Trujillo González, Jorge Álvarez Nava, Jorge Aníbal Cruz Mendoza, Jorge Antonio Tizapa Legideño, Jorge Luis González Parral, José Ángel Campos Cantor, José Ángel
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25 Following chicana feminist thinking around their own teaching: “Each of us first encountered a blueprint for dialogue across the boundaries of difference, one that could “coax us into the habit of listening and learning each other’s ways of seeing and being” (Bambara) […] Our attempt to imagine “something else” a shared utopic space where difference is recognized not only between and among established categories or race, class, gender and sexuality but also in-between these categories, have made us comprehensible to our colleagues” (Cervenak et alii, 2002: 343).