

Border-Crossers and Zeroes: Violence and Identity in Elia Arce's performances and Robert Karimi's "Self-the Remix"

*-Dedicated to Elia Arce, immigrant women (who suffer from so many different forms of violence), and "zeroes"*

"La violencia engendra violencia. [violence begets violence]" [my translation] popular saying in Guatemala.

One of the art forms used to present and represent Latino Culture and identity is performance art. This presents a challenge to museums because performance art is not easily collected or archived the way other art forms are. However, performance artists of different ethnic groups increasingly employ performance art in order to represent and interpret their identities. Performance artists of Central American descent, such as Elia Arce and Robert Karimi, continually push the boundaries of representations and identity through works that are held both within museums and in other venues. Arce and Karimi produce work directly tied to a Latino and Latina identity as well as specific Central American experiences as (im)migrants and populations that have settled in the United States. One of the themes that resonates in their respective performance "pieces" is the different types of violence that Latinos and Latinas are subjected to as first and second generation "Americans." The focus of this paper is representations of violence and how they relate to issues of identity, such as gender, within the work of two performance artists of Central American descent working within the United States, Elia Arce of Costa Rican descent and Robert Karimi who is Guatemalan-Iranian.

Central Americans are hardly strangers to violence. The descendants of the peoples of the isthmus connecting North and South America have experienced more than their share of violence for over 500 years. During the second half of the twentieth century the Central American countries became increasingly notorious for its violent U.S.-sponsored death squads and brutal military dictatorships, mass graves, disappearances, military "scorched earth"

campaigns, militant guerrilla forces and skyrocketing post-civil-war murder rates.<sup>1</sup> While not all seven countries comprising Central America have experienced armed revolutionary movements and civil wars, the types of violence that this essay alludes to are not confined to those associated with civil wars and dictatorships. The increased migrations that Central American peoples have been experiencing over the last thirty years have subjected them to other forms of violence en route to and within the U.S. Added to such violence(s) are histories of repression and displacements of marginalized sectors of the population which commonly include a disproportionate number of poor, youth, women, queer and indigenous peoples within Central American countries and their receiving communities throughout the world but particularly in the U.S. Violence, as it will be explored in this essay, ranges from physical aggression to mental and gendered violence often suffered simultaneously.

In their work, Central American performance artists such as Arce and karimi are representing the different types of violence and trauma that centroamericanos and centroamericanas<sup>2</sup> have experienced as a result both of conditions in their homelands and as (im)migrants. This essay delves into the issues that surround violence against members of U.S. Central American communities: violence during migration, rape, sexism, nationalism by other groups in the U.S. and by the U.S.'s dominant political ideology. First, this essay analyzes Elia Arce's work on violence against women during (im)migration and the internalization of sexist rhetoric by the victims. Then, this essay analyzes robert karimi's spoken word pieces dealing with physical violence against women as well as the sexist and ideological violence perpetuated by other groups and the U.S. political machinery in the name of nationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Dunkerley, James. 1988. *Power in the Isthmus: A political History of Modern Central America*. London: Verso.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish terms for Central Americans.

What I refer to as violence within the North has to do with conditions that racialized (im)migrants encounter within the United States' immigrant pockets of the "Third World:"<sup>3</sup> substandard housing, inadequate educational opportunities and other unfavorable conditions for Central American, as well as other Latino, (im)migrants. Since she is a Central American woman living and performing within the United States, it was not surprising to see that Elia Arce's performance at La Peña dealt with many of the issues that Central American women face while coming to and living in the United States particularly violence while migrating and living in the North. Arce is an internationally-known performance artist who has professionally worked with HIV-positive women on the East Coast among other marginalized communities. On September 4<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Arce performed as an artist in residence in La Peña Cultural center in Berkeley.<sup>4</sup> One of the first parts of the performance resembled a children's puppet show. However, even though the voices Arce used and the way she presented the piece at first made it seem like it was for a really young audience, the use of liquor bottles instead of puppets and violence against women as a subject matter made the audience's mood quickly turn somber and quiet. In this piece, we encounter a Central American artist who is ironically using methods associated with amusement and comedy such as that of the puppeteer to bring to light one of the most invasive acts of violence that can be perpetrated against an individual and her or his body. This segment of Arce's performance begins as a Salvadoran woman, Teresa, is forced to immigrate to the United States. Her doctor tells her that she has a heart condition and she needs to go to the United States for an operation. Teresa calls Emilia, her best friend, to see if she will accompany her on her migration. Once they've reached the Mexican border city of Tijuana, the two women hire a couple of "coyotes," smugglers paid to help people that can't obtain a visa

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<sup>3</sup> Ana Patricia Rodríguez eloquently articulates what was formerly known as the "Third World" as the "New South" in her recent essay "Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary."

cross the border without being detected by Border officials. On the night that they're supposed to cross the border, when they get to the border, one of the men tells Teresa to separate from the group and go with him. The other man goes in a different direction with Emilia. Teresa is raped by one of the coyotes while Emilia is sodomized by the other until she's unconscious. "When Teresa saw her friend Emilia, she was horrified and she thought of herself as the lucky one," narrates Arce. Afterwards, the coyotes, knowing that they will not be punished by the authorities for their crime, take both of the women to the police sergeant who is accompanied by his bodyguards. Teresa ends up getting raped by the sergeant as well. Later on Teresa downplays her situation by talking about how handsome the sergeant is internalizing the rapist's attitude and espousing a violently sexist interpretation of the rape, almost excusing his violation of her. However, one has to also wonder how much of this excusing on her part is also related to the stress that follows traumatic experiences such as rape. The attitude that this character within Arce's performance espouses may even be a symptom of a psychological problem that requires mental health therapy, a social service that isn't easily accessible to undocumented workers. Teresa's attitude is also reflective of an internalization of societies blaming the victims of rape, such as is the case in many communities in U.S. and Latin America. During that piece Arce performs what Ana Patricia Rodríguez articulates in her essay "Refugees of the South." Rodríguez analyzes literature that "revealingly collapse[s] fathers, husbands, landowners, employers, priests, soldiers, the police, and la Migra into a combined force of the phallocratic order."<sup>5</sup> Not unlike the literature that Rodríguez analyzes, this piece by Arce identifies a phallocratic order that perpetuates multiple crimes against women. Teresa's acceptance of her rape and her subsequent HIV-positive status as being "very, very, very lucky" is an example of

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<sup>4</sup> Arce, Elia. (2001)

<sup>5</sup> Rodríguez (2001: 394)

how this phallocratic order commits violence even onto a woman's mental health. It is another aspect of this phallogentric order that Arce's fellow U.S.-Central American performance artist deals with, domestic violence.

In "porque bailas como un negrito" Robert Karimi, a San Francisco Bay Area-based, Guatemalan-Iranian performance artist,<sup>6</sup> deals with violence against women while he's reminiscing about hanging out at "La india bonita" Restaurant as a little boy. Ironically enough, Robert Karimi's cousin's "sing-hum" rendition of "I will survive" is "broken up by a big bigote man with salsa on his shirt yelling 'chingada, pendeja, bruta!!... [whore, stupid, dummy!! [my translation]]' raising his right hand to the woman in the booth."<sup>7</sup> Like the children who are witnesses and, by extension, also victims of domestic violence, karimi attempts to hide from the violence when he "ran to the jukebox and held onto it tight to save me from the anger, the screams, the pain,"<sup>8</sup> seeking refuge from the domestic violence and verbal abuse common to many women in the world. Karimi's oasis, the restaurant that he hung out in because it wasn't "cool" to be Iranian and Guatemalan in 1979, is also in one of the pockets of the South in the North that Ana Patricia Rodríguez articulates within "Refugees in the South." This pocket of the South, also referred to as the "Third World," within the U.S., a woman is beaten for something as minor as dropping salsa on a man's shirt which, ironically enough, is reminiscent of many critiques that the political machinery of the United States has made of other countries, such as Afghanistan, and cultures, such as Islam, as recently as a few months ago. Even more ironic is that while women aren't safe in this space, it is in this place that this young boy seeks refuge from a different type of violence inflicted upon Central Americans and other groups living in the U.S., nationalistic violence, the "racialist nationalism, [which has afflicted different communities

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<sup>6</sup> See Calaca press website at <http://www.calacapress.com>

of color within the United States] from the Louisiana Purchase to the Jim Crow South to Proposition 187 and ‘post–Affirmative Action’ culture.”<sup>9</sup> because as Rodríguez also points out, “the United States is the home of equal protection but the guarantor of unequal distribution in all its entailments”<sup>10</sup> This is especially true in times of immigrant scapegoating and political war such as the aftermath of this year’s September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and 1979’s Iran Hostage crisis which holds a special significance in karimi’s work because of the discriminatory reactions people had to him during 1979 as a result of being Guatemalan and Iranian. Two of his poems begin with lines invoking that year, “1979, 1979, the year, the year president, President Carter, President Carter/ was waging a war/ for a few hostages/ in the name of a revolution/ for a man/ that he did not put in/ but the CI[A] placed with puppeteer strings”<sup>11</sup> and because of that hostage “war,” karimi remembers “1979 and little boys and girls told me ‘it’s not cool to be Guatemalan and Iranian...”<sup>12</sup> Throughout his work, karimi continues to make allusions to the discriminatory and violent reactions that people in the U.S. had against him for being of Guatemalan and Iranian heritage, ranging from being excluded from his elementary school class picture to getting beaten by other kids for being Guatemalan and Iranian, a “fuckin’ turban-wearing burrito eater... wannabe Latino.”<sup>13</sup> In his poetry, karimi continually makes reference to the effect that violence, whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual that being Guatemalan-Iranian and growing up in the U.S. has on him. After the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on New York, Karimi sent out an e-mail to those of us who are part of his e-mail list with the title “Time to be Guatemalan again,”<sup>14</sup> realizing that the racial profiling of U.S. inhabitants of Arab descent would rise even higher than

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<sup>7</sup> “porque bailas como un negrito” in karimi CD (2001)

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Baker, (2001: 233)

<sup>10</sup> Rodríguez (2001: 390)

<sup>11</sup> karimi, “porque...”

<sup>12</sup> karimi, robert. “get down w/yr muslim-catholic self (remix)” in karimi CD (2001)

<sup>13</sup> karimi, robert. Performance at La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley, CA. September of 2001.

before and probably be even worse than during the Iran Hostage crisis. karimi's allusion to the need for identity shifting and the denial of a heritage that he portrays through his work as an integral part of his identity is testimony to the discriminatory nativist violence that has taken over the United States since the September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy. His writing was a testament to his foreseeing the proverbial writing on the wall: Arab Americans, and any who looked the way that they're stereotypically characterized, would be scapegoated, rounded up and practically hunted down, not only for their beliefs, but also for their appearance. This resurgence and uncovering of racial hatred and violence against people of Arab descent in the U.S. has led to some really tragic episodes of violence against Arabs, Sikhs, Latinos and other peoples of color. However, while this type of nationalist violence is definitely dealt with in karimi's work, it's not the only type of nationalist violence that he deals with.

karimi also takes on the touchy issue of nationalistic violence perpetrated by subaltern groups in the United States as well. "soul from the asshole" deals explicitly with the type of rhetorical and ideological violence that many nationalistic movements have inflicted upon members of the community that don't conform to their essentialist notions and ideas. "Douglass Lopez" (pronounced by karimi with a heavy anglophone accent) has decided to take on a new identity since he's gained some insights into the revolutionary struggles of movements such as the Chicano Movement and the Black Power movement and takes on a new name, "Marcos-Che-Abu-Jamal-X-Chavez" after the charismatic male icons of the Black Power and Chicano movements. However Douglass makes the same mistake that these movements have been critiqued for since the 1960's, sexism. Furthermore, in this age of consumerism, this new "revolutionary" buys absurd articles that ironically contradict his revolutionary icons' beliefs.

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<sup>14</sup> karimi, robert. "Time to be Guatemalan again" E-mail communication, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001.

For example, this Marcos-Abu-Jamal-X-Chavez owns a pair of Zapata Roller Blade Knee pads which is extremely ironic considering that Zapata's credo was that it was "better to die on your feet than live on your knees." These details only help to inform the reader's perception of a "revolutionary" that is hypocritical in his quest to be essentialist and militant. However, the violent interactions happen when he encounters other people of color who don't agree with his beliefs.

But as Marcos continued to pass out 'Free Mumia' Rally Flyers,/ he took a bite from his revolutionary tested taco/ from the proletariat taco truck,/ when a nubile, nubian, Pilipina/ dressed in smooth summer/ strolled by his eyes. Marcos walked up quick straight/ sensing he could unite two oppressed peoples/ in a night of bliss/ and he said in his finest deep socialistic voice.... 'I would like to break down Marx, Che and Resolve tonight/ and share our body politics/ tu sabes. She replied with forest guerrillera souls in her breath, ' my body/ is not for conquering/ by any colonist/ be it white or brown. I am your sister/, not your political prize.'<sup>15</sup>

So when Marcos-Abu-Jamal-X-Chavez gets shot down and his ideology questioned by a strong woman, he reverts to the typical claim by many nationalists who don't appreciate being criticized.

'you do your people a disservice,/ your words spit acid on the bodies of dead revolutionaries/. Where's your inner consciousness,/ SISTER!?!/ You ain't got no soul./ I got so much soul,/ it's comin' out my asshole.'/ With this remark,/ the young woman stopped,/ stared deeply red to burn his face/ if not melt it/ and let her tongue become a soul scalpel,/ 'asshole yes, soul no/ 'cause all I see is constipation/ and if you need verification/ of my candid observation/ just take a look at your behind.'/ With the wind she whisked away and he,/ Marcos Abu Jamal X Chavez that is,/ began to look for what she said/ and he kept/ turning/ and turning/ and turning/ like a perro/ looking for his tail/... hoping/... Wishing/ to find his soul.<sup>16</sup>

This young woman's intelligence and consciousness outwits this- throwback-to-the-sixties "revolutionary" and he ends up being reduced to a dog, which is also a pun on the term for the womanizer searching for his "soul."

However, within his work karimi doesn't just stop at by offering us a critique of nationalism's sexism, he constructs a new vision for the future, people of mixed culture that he imagines as zeros. The new "zeros" that develop in postmodern places like an "Asian-owned

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

club" in Los Angeles called The Mayan where people of mixed-heritage like himself "mosh" their way into a postmodern zero, the "mosh pit." Spitting out and describing the names and identities of hybrid beings like himself, who appropriately listen to music that doesn't get played by the mainstream radio stations, karimi describes these new people as the future for the world. The aforementioned poem entitled "reinvention of zero," making reference to the invention of zero hundreds of years ago by karimi's Mayan predecessors, ends with karimi stating that he "learned why people fear mixed culture," and zeros like those created by him and his friends, "because you can't package zeros..." In other words, you can't box zeros into one identity into one religion or even one way of dancing.

In "porque bailas como un negrito," karimi comments on the people who were watching him dance in the restaurant and exclaims "pero qué me importa," expressing his disdain for nationalist politics when someone says, "aha, aha, aha, I tol' you que he's not messican"<sup>17</sup> just because of his dancing style. In poems that are explicitly dealing with the issue of hybridity and nationalism, such as "get down w/yr muslim-catholic self"<sup>18</sup> and "[¿]Por[ ]qué bailas como un negrito[?]," karimi takes on essentialist notions of identity as they're articulated through religion "1979 the year mi mamá always took me to Catholic Church... She dragged me, dragged me...."<sup>19</sup> karimi then explains his rebellious conclusion towards religion and identity, in identical style in two of his poems, "I rebel and make a crusade to rid myself of those trying to box me into one religion, one god, one identity... jihad incarnate, jihad incarnate, jihad incarnate... aaaamén..."<sup>20</sup> In his rebellious attitude towards Christianity and spirituality, karimi converts the priest into a DJ who spins and scratches the binaries of Christianity for him "good...

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<sup>17</sup> karimi, robert. "porque bailas como un negrito." In karimi CD.

<sup>18</sup> karimi CD.

<sup>19</sup> karimi, "get down w/ yr muslim-catholic self (remix)" in karimi CD. (2001)

<sup>20</sup> ibid.

evil... body.... blood,” while Jesus tells him to “go on boy, get down with your muslim-catholic self” instructing him to combine the beliefs of his ancestors’ religions ridding him of the need to choose one religion, one identity. Once empowered to take from both religions, karimi lets the audience know his plan- almost a prescription- for the mixture of religions and encourages his listeners to,” get down with yo’ muslim-catholic self, get down with yo’ jewish daoist self, get down with yo’ sarostrian, bahai’ buddhist, african religion, indigenous religion, disco diva, ska, rockero, everything your parent told you not to do, revolution seekin’ question asking, your god, your way self, get down with yo’ self... ” These hybrid religions and identities that karimi is proposing are in direct opposition to the culturally nationalist model because it depends on the individual's background and choices, not something being imposed from above, the U.S. political machinery, or from a dogmatic cultural nationalist model that shuns those who don't follow it blindly.

The preceding examples are works by only two of a growing number of Central American and other Latino and Latina performance artists producing work that deals with identity. Violence affects Latinos, Latinas and other marginalized groups within this country. While violence isn’t the essence of Latino existence, its different manifestations have unfortunately been an overly-important part of Latino experiences, in and out of the United States. These experiences have had and will continue to have a great impact on Latino and Latina identities and, by extension, communities and the works of Central American and other Latino artists in different disciplines whether they can be housed within museums or not.

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