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Performing Hospitality, Speaking Solidarity

by Zoë Heyn-Jones with Celeste Mayorga Urbina

Hospitality: a question of responsibility—both material and spiritual. Its French root (*hôte*) translates as both *host* and *guest*; hospitality is a complex relationship between these positionalities, and the obligation to attend to these relations.¹ Complex and radical notions of hospitality ask us to consider how it exceeds generosity; while generosity might be an ethics we can (attempt to) put into practice, hospitality is not a choice. Rather, “an infinite hospitality surrenders us to others before we even have the option to choose whether or not we want to act ethically” (Heard 327). In short, “hospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethic amongst others” (Derrida 16).

Complicated notions of solidarity resonate strongly with the complexities of hospitality. Solidarity as union or fellowship—these terms imply labour struggles and faith communities. Solidarity itself as *community*: community of responsibility, community of feeling; this having-in-common of interest or affect, and the relations of networked bodies that result. Solidarity, like hospitality, is enacted, embodied, performed; often preceding the conscious decisions of individual social actors, and always exceeding individual choices or ethics. Always relational and affective,

hospitality is sometimes inscribed in materiality; containing joy, discomfort, uneasiness, and myriad other complicated and contradictory affective registers within the network of relations.

Tensions inherent in hospitality and solidarity have led to

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my work in Guatemala, and have engendered fruitful encounters and collaborations.² Most recently, this has manifested in the project *al lado, afuera*. // *beside, outside.*, my dissertation research on performances of solidarity and the hemispheric networks that enable it. The titular essay video looks at human rights accompaniment in Guatemala, the practice of living and working side by



Two hundred thousand Guatemalan refugees living in camps three kilometers from the Mexican border in Chiapas.

Still from video *al lado, afuera*. // *beside, outside.*; Guatemalan women's demonstration with subtitle "Two hundred thousand Guatemalan refugees living in camps three kilometers from the Mexican border in Chiapas." Source footage from *When the People Lead* (Dir. Merran Smith & Michael Simpson, 1993)

side with social activists under threat of political violence, in order to deter violence, bear witness, and activate international solidarity networks.³ While this practice began in the 1980s as a result of Guatemalan refugees who requested international accompaniment as they returned to their traditional lands from across the Mexican border in Chiapas, most current requests for accompaniment come from primarily Indigenous communities in resistance to multinational (mostly Canadian-owned) resource extraction projects. In accompaniment work, citizens of the global North literally embody and mobilize their privilege in order to ‘do good’ while perhaps also reinforcing and perpetuating structures of social inequality and white supremacy. This physical manifestation of privilege is inextricable from the gendered body: A significant majority of accompaniment volunteers are women, but what little literature there is on accompaniment does not take up this line of inquiry.

The script of the *al lado, afuera. // beside, outside.* video is the result of interviews that I conducted with companions in Guatemala in 2016, discussing their lived experiences of human rights accompaniment. All the companions I met were white women; it followed that our discussions explored how gendered and racialized bodies enact solidarity in different spaces and contexts. Hospitality, care, and affective labour became central—both in accompaniment itself and in my research. Companions share meals with the families they accompany in order to share news from other families and communities. Accompaniment itself provides an affective sense of moral support in addition to the potential deterrence of physical violence; the presence of companions embodies the idea that the local activists are not alone in their struggles. Affect, too, is said to be a way of assessing the effectiveness of the practice: While it is impossible to quantify the violence that might have been deterred by the presence of companions, instead these individuals and communities are asked if they feel safer.⁴

The interviews I conducted in Guatemala City in 2016, while initially guided by academic social science research methodologies, were more substantively imbued with friendship and hospitality. Because having these conversations in public spaces like coffee shops or parks posed a security threat to the women and

to the larger project of accompaniment, we conducted the interviews at my apartment. In order to show my gratitude for their participation, I would make a meal to share during our conversations, often my *plato típico* of a huge salad with lots of fresh veggies, cilantro, and eggs from the market and pastries from the vegetarian restaurant up the street. Domestic spaces and the sharing of meals while sharing information were therefore things we discussed, as well as things we animated and enacted; hospitality as participatory research method. Guesting and hosting were enacted simultaneously in a complex choreography. As companions and researcher-artists, we were all (sometimes perhaps unwanted) guests on Guatemalan land, while in other contexts, like meals and meetings, we were the hosts. Sharing meals created a convivial and informal atmosphere in which difficult conversations took place and the dynamics of both accompaniment and research-creation methodologies were explored.

Another space crucial to the development of the *al lado,*

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afuera. // beside, outside. project is Fundación Yaxs.⁵ Through word of mouth, in 2016, I discovered the newly opened contemporary art research centre; their library became my sanctuary amid the din of Guatemala City. Through Yaxs I met artist-sociologist Celeste Mayorga Urbina as we worked together on a project in which we collectively mapped cultural production spaces in Guatemala City.⁶ In September 2017, I returned to Yaxs for a month-long research residency. Celeste had been awarded Yaxs’s fellowship to produce her project *44-16* and was also in residence. Through cooking together, sharing meals, and sharing a bedroom at Casa Yaxs, we got to know each other and our respective artistic research practices.



al lado, afuera. // beside, outside.

A project initiated by Zoë Heyn-Jones

al lado, afuera. // beside, outside. exhibition documentation, as seen through window.
Photo by Eva Kolcze



al lado, afuera. // beside, outside. exhibition documentation (projection).
Photo by Eva Kolcze



44-16 walking tour invitation card held over Guatemala City.
 Photo by Celeste Mayorga Urbina, Laura Arzú, and Emelyn Barahona



Documentation of 44-16 project sacred fire event.
 Photo by Celeste Mayorga Urbina, Laura Arzú, and Emelyn Barahona

44-16 is a long-term research-creation project in which Celeste has been gathering oral histories in public spaces in Guatemala City in order to explore the question, “Entonces, cómo construimos memoria?”⁷ The title references the year 1944, the beginning of what is commonly referred to as the “Ten Years of Spring,”⁸ and 2016, the year in which she began the project. To date, 44-16 has taken on several incarnations, including a participatory oral history walk throughout the historic centre of Guatemala City, and an open studio event at Casa Yaxs in which Celeste created a cantina space in Yaxs’s entrance and opened her bedroom-studio to the public in order to initiate discussion. Pasted on the sidewalk in front of the building were the words “PUBLICO O PRIVADO,” inviting visitors to consider the nature of the public-private spaces in which the collected/collective oral histories were displayed and enacted. The open studio culminated with a sacred fire on the roof of Casa Yaxs, in order to honour the ancestral power of fire and its specificity in Guatemalan culture,⁹ and to serve as a collective point of encounter and a space of healing.

While emerging from wildly divergent positionalities—myself as a Canadian person of European descent on Guatemalan land, Celeste as a Guatemalan person who identifies as *mestiza*¹⁰—our respective projects both grapple with reconciling, in some way, with Guatemala’s post-war present. I asked Celeste to collaborate on the *al lado, afuera*. // *beside, outside*. project through recording a voice-over and consulting more generally on the script, which has led to conversations about solidarity, voice, performance, hospitality, and hemispheric collaboration. What follows are some excerpts of these conversations.

Zoë: Please tell me about yourself. How do you identify? How do you describe your artistic research practice?

Celeste: I identify, biologically, as a woman (according to science) but as a human without gender as a political position. Lesbian feminist, sociologist, visual artist, and activist. My personal practice is focused on the body as the primary territory of memory, and my research begins from there. Activism¹¹

follows as a means of transformation and social healing. I am a sociologist, and am therefore constantly trying to make the link between the social sciences as research methodology and artistic pedagogy in popular education.

Popular education¹² is built without hierarchies of power; we all contribute to and improve educational models. The social sciences, however, are [historically] result-based. I have been continuously reviewing what has worked and what hasn’t, how to implement both in my practice, how to improve. This has been the result of a collective analysis. My biggest achievement has been recognizing that it is not the result, but the richness of the processes, that is most important. It is the greatest gift: growing and transforming as an activist, woman, feminist, and, collectively, society.

I have been working at this for ten years, leading workshops on gender and the prevention of violence against women. My overall goal is empowerment, visibility, and the search for ways to heal the body. Not only has this work impacted me personally, but it has contributed a great deal to me professionally, as a researcher and artist. From developing these workshops to performing my personal [oral history] listening exercises. By listening, we can understand the reality, the context; from there, we can evolve in other ways, professionally or humanistically. In my case, art serves as a tool for popular education and a window onto other ways of doing and proposing.

Initially, I thought of empowerment as being strong, hard, behind walls. With time, I understood that empowerment is more akin to allowing oneself to be visible. This brought personal and collective healing.

Zoë: I love how you say that you identify as a woman—according to science—but as a genderless human as a political position. What does it mean to you to think of being a human without gender? How can we perform ourselves as social beings outside of the performance of gender? Can you elaborate a bit on how you simultaneously inhabit both the political position of genderless human and the political position of lesbian feminist?



Documentation of 44-16 project open studio event at Fundación Yaxs.
 Photo by Celeste Mayorga Urbina, Laura Arzú, and Emelyn Barahona

I would imagine asserting the position of lesbian feminist is quite intertwined with gender—or maybe inescapable from the constraints of gender . . . ?

Celeste: My personal processes are inextricable from my artistic processes; I am a social being, but one built with the privilege of deconstruction. Gender is a social, political, power-based, and economic construction. Performance, however, is an open door: We can do and undo how we were built—but with a freedom to experiment, to live, and to question others. Naming myself as a human without gender as a political position has been my way of resisting the imposed system; a creation of new routes to allow myself to exist and coexist.

To arrive at identifying as a genderless human, I passed through bisexuality, feminism, and lesbianism, as theoretical bases and as physical, embodied experiences. I began to understand that one of the most important factors in understanding the struggle for equity and gender equality in organized society is typecasting: naming ourselves as something, which divides us, separates us. To refer to myself as genderless is to allow myself to be whatever I want to be. Gender limits us to other possibilities.

Zoë: How do concepts and methods of performance and embodiment manifest in your life and work? How does your research extend from your own body—or embodied memory—as its primary territory?

Celeste: The body is one's first inhabited space, in which personal processes take place, and in/through which we construct our identities, beliefs, customs, sexualities, emotions—the psychological and, therefore, the political (whether conscious or not). If I am aware of the value and power of my body as a territory, I can question (myself) and continue to find routes of inquiry.

The main problem I face as an artist and researcher is being of the post-war generation.¹³ Being both a feminist and a lover

of this country's history, I realized that the body of Guatemalan society, above all women, has been violated, defiled, and dispossessed. Embodied memory (feeling, connection, understanding, living without consciously or unconsciously violating it) has therefore been erased.

It is a challenge to make artistic proposals or performatic¹⁴ acts without relapsing into perpetual pain. How do I talk, research, and look for other routes toward collective healing through art in a country that still recoils from speaking about its civil war? In a country where the social fabric is so fragmented? A place where we have been taught to distrust and victimize each other? In this place, my first performance must be the healing of my body/territory.

Zoë: What interested you about collaborating with me on the *al lado, afuera*. // *beside, outside*. film project?

Celeste: My artistic, investigative, and feminist political commitments make it vital to create bonds of trust and creation with other women, whether on Guatemalan land or beyond borders. I am also interested in working with artists and researchers who work on issues of memory in any discipline; those who have an awareness that we urgently need to combine our efforts and walk collectively. Walking alone is not the same as with others. And it demonstrated that one not only migrates from the country but also from the body, and that our body remains the first territory where we go and come when we start to heal from within. The first place where we live.

Many aspects resonated with me, especially the notion of accompaniment. The act of accompanying implies personal experience, the act of listening and processing. It makes me think about who has lived the experience, and who recounts it. Who listens to it? Who writes it? Who reads it? Who re-edits it? And who will listen? The work of art is inherent in being able to listen to, and transform through, another's experience.

Zoë: What was the recording process like for you? Was it difficult? How did you prepare? How did it feel in your body?

Celeste: The body is experience and has memory. Therefore, it took me a while to record. I began by reading, and I was filled with an incredible nostalgia. I thought about the times I have accompanied women who were victims of violence, the times I might have faltered in the practice of accompanying. Because to accompany is also to live, and if the body is memory, in some way I also lived those processes.

Over the past few years, I have learned, through other women, tools to prepare for a performance, project, investigation, presentation: meditating and taking breaks to allow me to process. Not only my voice went into this reading-narration, but a responsibility toward the many who have shared their experience.

Zoë: How would you define ‘solidarity’? How has solidarity manifested in your personal experience?

Celeste: [My understanding of] the term ‘solidarity’ has changed based on my personal and professional experiences. Before I thought it was to accompany; now I understand that it can also be simply present without necessarily having to act.

For me, solidarity begins within. I stand in solidarity with this body in order not to victimize myself, but rather to look for other ways to embrace myself. It is understanding that ‘solidarity’ with others does not mean ‘saving’ them, but rather growing together.

Zoë: How do you describe the *44-16* project? I understand that the project investigates historical memory in/and public space. Can you tell us about this project and how historical memory was activated and public spaces were inhabited in this project?

Celeste: *44-16* investigates artistic, historical, political, and cultural actions and the use of public space in the historic centre of Guatemala City, from 1944 to 2016. Throughout the research process and the materialization of the project, I discovered that its importance lies in the strength of collective listening in narrating the history of space. Anecdotes, stories, moments, historical actions, emotions, bibliographical and visual collections, latent and present memories. The spaces were, and will always be, inhabited. Public space is a living space.

44-16 therefore has been a tool with which to gather the collective voice and create an archive of Guatemalan history in the post-war present.

Zoë: I’m wondering how you might relate the *44-16* project to the notions of relapse and perpetual pain. Do you feel that this long-term project worked toward opening dialogue about the war and healing the collective body, that fragmented social fabric?

Celeste: Absolutely, yes, *44-16* began with the recuperation of memory, including my own. But another memory, one that no longer hurts, will serve to encounter new routes of approach, of investigation into history. *44-16* began with the face of a disappeared person on the wall,¹⁵ without knowing what it was, without knowing why it was there. Today, the project’s first phase has resulted in an intergenerational encounter of collective listening. We saw each other; we met once again. A door has opened to heal, little by little; to continue rebuilding and healing as a society.

It is a challenge to make artistic proposals or performative acts without relapsing into perpetual pain. In this place, my first performance must be the healing of my body/territory.

Zoë: Creating links and bonds with other women across the hemisphere, beyond borders, is vital to my artistic, investigative, and feminist political commitments as well. Collaboration is crucial, and thinking of it through the idea of the body as the starting point, and what happens when bodies come together in social choreographies in public spaces . . .

In having this conversation, I am thinking a lot about how hospitality is performed or enacted in our day-to-day lives, and in our artistic and research practices, how the idea of ‘hospitality’ manifests in collaboration. What does the idea of ‘hospitality’ mean to you, and how does hospitality—or inhospitality—manifest in your lived experience?

Celeste: Hospitality is spatial—the safe places where we can live. Without those safe places—people, places, spaces, circles—I would not be who I am, nor could I do what I do. Hospitality is growth; it allows us to inhabit spaces both without and within.

Zoë: How have you accompanied—or been accompanied by—others in your artistic research practices and lived experience? Can you elaborate on these experiences, and how these experiences were useful in your self-reflective processes?

Celeste: The realization of my artistic creations always starts from a place of collectivity, from an analysis or an encounter where, through a collective dialogue, I share my idea and then it transforms through the perceptions of the others present. The result is a round-trip creation.

I want to reiterate that it is not only about ‘accompanying,’ but more so about learning to listen to others. In the past, I did not listen; I created, and creating from a place of my individuality was selfish. Knowledge is enriched when it is shared, when it is opened up to other voices, when we allow ourselves to evolve.

I have had many experiences of accompanying, and I have learned that, for example, you cannot accompany a woman who has been raped by telling her what to do. Instead, we must *listen* to her, and ask her *how she feels*. Accompanying is an act of love, not of imposition.

Zoë: Thinking about the meaning of solidarity—and how we enact solidarity in all facets of our lives—is something I am very interested in. I love how you talk about being in solidarity with yourself, with your own body. This brings me back to the idea of hospitality, to the question of whether, or how, solidarity and hospitality are connected?

Celeste: Hospitality is to inhabit. Solidarity is to accompany, to be.

If I live as I am, first, I have the strength, the tenderness, and the tools to accompany. And again, I repeat: To live is to love ourselves, and to accompany is to share that self-love with

others. And this offers us the gift of reconnecting with ourselves and with the world.

Zoë: I am thinking a lot about translation, too. Working between Spanish and English in these collaborations means that there are spaces of incomprehension, of misunderstanding, of rupture—but also spaces for a certain kind of hospitality that we show each other. What are your thoughts on working between the two languages, and how translation has manifested in your previous work as well?

Celeste: In my personal, artistic, and professional processes, I have understood other languages more than those of words; languages of sensation, feeling, affect. Languages are political, economic, geographical, and historical walls. We have to reinvent the world and return to the root of feeling before the action of opening our mouths.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to Matthew Heard's article "Hospitality and Generosity" for an entry point into the discussion of the complexities of hospitality informed by readings of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.
- 2 The experience of having lived in Guatemala as a child for a couple of years (1986, 1990–91) during the internal armed conflict led me to a research-creation practice that has endeavoured to understand my personal positionality and family history through auto-ethnography, moving images, installation, and performance. See *Domestic Product* (2013) and *Atitlán* (2015).
- 3 This type of activism has also been called the 'human shield' in some contexts, and accompaniers have been referred to as 'unarmed bodyguards.' See Mahrouse; Mahony and Eguren.
- 4 This question is posed by accompaniment organizations themselves as they attempt to structure their placements. In some cases, as funding is limited and accompaniment organizations must make difficult decisions on how to allocate their resources, asking community members if they feel safer with accompaniment is part of a complex process of trying to determine the efficacy and sustainability of accompaniment.
- 5 See Zoë Heyn-Jones's *Atitlán* (2015), and "The Performatic Archive of Fundación Yaxs" (2018).
- 6 The Curiosidad cartográfica workshop was part of the Universidad de Verano: Métodos de investigación en las prácticas artísticas seminar at Fundación Yaxs (Guatemala City), 30 August–2 September 2016, led by Lima-based artists Gilda Mantilla and Raimond Cháves.
- 7 In English: "So, how do we build memory?"
- 8 During this period, the democratically elected governments of Jacobo Árbenz and Juan José Arévalo enacted land reforms (among other social reforms) before being ousted in a CIA-backed coup in 1954.
- 9 Celeste points to fire's centrality to both Mayan and Christian spiritual traditions in Guatemala, for instance.
- 10 A person of mixed Indigenous and European-descended background; in the context of Guatemala, this population is known as *ladino*.
- 11 The merging of artistic and activist practices.
- 12 See Freire.

- 13 Guatemala withstood a brutal civil war from 1960 to 1996 during which over 200,000 people, mostly Indigenous Maya, were killed or disappeared. The CEH (Historical Clarification Committee) found that over 93 per cent of this violence was committed by the state. Cf. Rothenberg, ed. *Memory of Silence*.
- 14 Following Diana Taylor, we use the word 'performatic' as the adjective for performance. The word 'performative,' while sometimes employed, has a specific linguistic meaning, following J. L. Austin, as an instance in which language becomes action, for example the declaration of 'I do' and 'I now pronounce you . . .' at a wedding. See Taylor 118–20; Austin.
- 15 Guatemala City, especially the historic centre (Zona 1), contains many buildings that have been covered by wheat-pasted photos of the disappeared. This intervention has largely been carried out by activist group HIJOS (Hijas y Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio; in English, Sons and Daughters for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence).

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About the Authors

Zoë Heyn-Jones is a researcher-artist, educator, and cultural worker who grew up on Saugeen Ojibway land in Ontario (Canada) and on Tz'utujil/Kaqchikel Maya land in Guatemala. Zoë is currently a post-doctoral fellow with the Canadian Consortium on Performance and Politics in the Americas.

Celeste Mayorga Urbina: I was born in Guatemala City and grew up during the Peace Accords of a war that does not end. I'm mestiza, according to colonialism, and a feminist in constant transformation. As a researcher and visual artist (photography and performance) my emphasis is on social issues and activism as political resistance.