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This work is dedicated to los rasquaches—all those artists who rose from the filthy and un-loved fringes to create their own meaning by repurposing garbage, scraps, and hand-me-downs, but specifically Michele Serros, Lalo Guerrero, Maggie Estep, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Jim Carroll, Amiri Baraka, The Ramones, Mujeres Libres, Gil Scott-Heron, MCA, Phife Dog, Comandanta Ramona, Prince, Tom Petty, Anthony Bourdain and all those others who rocked rebellion and have moved on.

To my first revolutionary teacher, Benjamin Ortiz, Jr.

To all the revolutionaries who successfully articulate their struggles into art and action, and to all the young dudes waiting for your turn—those about to rock—I salute you.





## Introduction: The Making of a Revolution

*Performance art does not subscribe to the tradition of High Culture. It is revolutionary art.*

—Norman Denzin

*The Canción Cannibal Cabaret*, a collection of poem songs and prose poems set in a post-apocalyptic future, tells the story of the revolutionary leader “La Madre Valiente” who aims to incite future revolutionaries to join in intersectional feminism and activism. After an environmental apocalypse, a refugee raised under an oppressive state, La Madre Valiente studies secretly to become the leader of a feminist revolution. Her emissaries, Black Bards and Red Heralds, roam the land reciting her story, educating, and enlisting allies in revolution. This is the premise of my punk musical.

When I began writing, I desired to produce a text which is loud, flashy, and obvious in meaning as a knee-jerk reaction to a literary world where performance poetry has often been accused of being heavy-handed, ignoring craft and hiding behind theatrics. My experiment seeks to build a case for the aesthetics of performance poetry. I intend to use this manuscript for performance, so the text serves both as a poetry collection and as a script. Focused on the theme of revolution, the poetry is decidedly political and influenced by issues of social justice which I feel powerless to change. It is also deliberately theatrical, incorporating costumes, choreography, music, set, video images, makeup, and theatrical lighting during production.

By the time I began graduate school in 2012, I had already amassed a body of work and recognition as a performance poet who came to writing via the world of poetry slams. I began this thesis manuscript before the Trump presidential administration. I mention this because at that time, political poetry was not as accepted in the academy as it has become since the election of a man whose very being stands counter to all that most poets and artists stand for. As Cynthia Cruz argues in her essay, “Where We Go From Here: On ‘Political’ Poetry and Marginalization,” it is Trump’s impact on



the white middle class that has instigated this shift in the literary landscape:

Political, in other words, is work that refers to the lives of those who are not middle class. I imagine that when the editors at *Wave* received my manuscript they did not relate to the work and, as a result, the work was labeled “political.” I see the same dynamic in the classroom. Work written by people of color, women, poor, queer, not-abled or, in other words, work written outside the scope of the middle class experience is deemed “political” and other. (Cruz)

Cruz’s assertions about the literary world’s labeling of “political” poetry mirror my own suspicions, initially felt in my first year of graduate workshops. Cruz observes that the publishing and academic machine is powered by a white middle class. Now that those gate-keepers feel under attack, they have adopted political as the new vogue. Meanwhile, the publishing machine continues to marginalize those of us who have always recognized the need for political poetry:

Now that Trump’s election is infringing on the lives of white middle class Americans, the political is important. But for those of us who were already living marginalized lives, our work was deemed “political” before the election, and now that white middle class American poets find themselves affected, their work is allowed to be “political.” And so we are marginalized once again—our voices left out. (Cruz)

When I began writing this manuscript, I could imagine a post-apocalyptic world because it is a reality that many people are already living on this planet—Syrian refugees, women kidnapped by Boko Haram, sex slavery, people of color (POC) aligning with Black Lives Matter—but in the age of Trump, that post-apocalyptic world feels closer than ever. As Cruz states about her own friends and colleagues, “For us, the Trump presidency means annihilation.”



I arrived at graduate school aware of the criticisms of slam and the academy's disdain for performance poetry:

Slam has its critics, of course; any populist art does. Literary critic Harold Bloom published in *The Paris Review* what is probably the most popular derisive reference to Slam, calling it "the death of art." Famous poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti lobbed his own infamous quote, "Slam kills poetry," in the *San Francisco Chronicle* a few years back. (Woods 19)

Long before Trump, critics argued that performance poetry relied on theatrics, and that political poetry was not subtle enough. Billy Mills argues, "the didactic use of poetry went somewhat out of fashion with the Romantic movement and is still not much valued by many readers." Some even refer to blatantly political poetry as "propaganda" rather than poetry (Breeze 48). But I agree with Forrest Wickman's article, "Against Subtlety: The Case for Heavy-Handedness in Art," who argues, "At worst, this kind of coy pruning makes a false virtue out of forcing readers to guess at the writer's intention rather than making that intention clear."

During workshops, my fellow students' academic training was apparent as they indeed labeled some of my work "heavy-handed," "didactic," or "lacking subtlety." This fixation on subtlety as a distinguishing characteristic of good art is pervasive:

Most of us take for granted that subtlety, in the arts, is a virtue. You can see it in our critical language: It's common to say that a book or movie lacks subtlety—the implication being that subtlety is an essential quality. Other times, we say a song or TV show is heavy-handed, or hits you over the head with its message. Even worse is the rise of the more hair-splitting phrase on the nose, as in, "Wouldn't you say that metaphor was a bit on the nose?" It's become an artistic sin to "hit it right on the nose," to be right on target. We have to be more oblique, less direct, more obscure. (Wickman)



In workshop, my choices as a writer did not always suit academia. Students read and mimicked award-winning poets, lauded by judges who were themselves former award-winners and professors at top universities. Indeed, I was not writing for academics and other authorities. They have never been and will never be my audience.

The argument for subtlety is exposed as classist, however, when the word is directed at an art form choosing to subvert authority. Wickman critiques:

But it's when subtlety is held up as an unquestioned virtue that it does the most damage. Because bluntness is also a virtue. When artists don't muffle themselves in service of subtlety (or in fear of being called unsubtle), they kindle fervor and fire. When we dispense with subtlety, we're rewarded with work that resonates in every seat in the theater, not just in the orchestra section. And the more a work has something important to convey, the more it should not be subtle. Spike Lee, whose messages about race in America could hardly be *more urgent*, has been downgraded throughout his career for being "heavy-handed," "melodramatic," and "not exactly subtle." Even some contemporary reviews of *Do the Right Thing* and *Malcolm X* called them "hardly subtle," "shrill," and "didactic." But if Spike Lee wants to speak to the whole nation, why shouldn't he pick up a megaphone?

Wickman begins to hint at class and power as being factors in who is calling for less artistic shouting from whom. A case is also being made for why the disempowered might *need* to shout louder than others.

As a live performer trying to connect with people, obscuring meaning from an audience does not work. I see nothing wrong with clarity of meaning. But what I see as a strength in my work, other academics have labeled a weakness. These criticisms have not deterred me from trying to create a poetry that is above all else accessible. My poetics highlight the intersection of racial



discrimination, poverty, and gender inequality impacting the lives and identities of people of color. I center and claim space for marginalized voices in my writing, therefore, it must be decidedly political and accessible.

As an activist artist, I believe art can inspire change. When I create art it is a selfish act. I feel immediate catharsis in sharing my art. Yet I also claim space for dialogue for other disempowered voices that do not have my luxury of an audience. My art is desperate. It is crude and angry and bleeding. It is didactic and loud because it cannot afford to go unheard. “Your silence will not protect you,” the great feminist poet Audre Lorde wrote in her rallying essay, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”:

Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak. We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our children are distorted and destroyed, while our earth is poisoned; we can sit in our safe corners mute as bottles, and we will still be no less afraid. (42)

Silence or subtlety will never be my choice.

The seed to create this book and theatrical work was planted in my mind at the 2014 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) Conference in Seattle, Washington. I had been asked to share my poetry on a panel, and I felt myself holding back and downplaying the performative aspects of my writing, because my aesthetics were so different from others on my panel. Performing in my own style at full volume with movement would have only highlighted how very different my work was from the majority of the writing I had heard throughout the conference. I chose to dilute what I am capable of as a performer, to avoid academic criticism of my performance.

Populist poetry slams shaped my aesthetics. I write for people at the street level. The same can't be said of all academic poets, however well-received in polite conferences or classrooms. So, although the audiences at AWP were pleasant, the subtle, dry, or quiet delivery style of so many of the panelists made me feel out of place. Later





# THE CANCIÓN CANNIBAL CABARET

*I see the poets, who will write the songs of insurrection  
generations unborn will read or hear a century from now,  
words that make them wonder  
how we could have lived or died this way...*

—Martín Espada

*Writers are cannibals.*

—Nora Ephron

## **A Message from Las Hijas de la Madre**

Welcome, hijas y hombres. Welcome, fugees and flaggers.  
Welcome, bossholes, broadbacks, and boots on the ground.  
All you civilyoungs and warhorses who daily tow the line.  
Worm workers in low appointments and Elect allies alike.

If you have willingly broke curfew to secret meet and receive  
the herstory of La Madre Valiente, then we salute you. If any  
notes of this testimonio ring bona fide, we hope that you  
not bury these truth bones, but instead ingest them to your  
memory to spit up and feed others in times of need.

So suggests La Madre. So, we swallowed herstory and hid it  
in the safest place where no law can destroy it—deep inside  
our own flesh where only death can pry it from us. And so,  
we now feed you the same nourishment once fed us. And  
you, when you are full enough to rock rebellion, can continue  
the song.



## Before the Fall

Herstory begins before the present-day milking of our fool's blood wiped daily from our exhausted brows. We must recall a time before our worth was weighed in the broadness of our backs and the resources harvested by our bodies.

For we must recollect there was a time before—something more than now. Before the State. Before the Grate State Gates kept life and order in. Before the Grate State Gates kept death and chaos out.

Before the State. Before the yards. Before wandering the fubar—that much many-a-fugee can remember, but we ask you to go to the way, way back.

Before Nomadland. Before the warlords. Before the panic. Before the greedy grabs and hungry mouths. Before the waves of weeping. Before the monstrous meltdowns. Before the reckoning.

To start at the beginning, is to start before the end of times once prophesized.

Before the Fall. Before the salt floods and fire storms.

Before the ground seizures. Before the toxins flowed. Before the droughts. Before the riots. Before.

It is easy for us to forget there was a “time before.” There was a time when living was more than surviving. There was a time the Fall could have been avoided, but the eyes were shut blissful against their own interests, as the body kept walking off the cliff.



## My Destination

Where are you headin', oh my son?  
Where will you be when your journey's done?  
Say daughter, where are you off to?  
Will you sit with me when your travelin's through?

I'm goin' where the first man sleeps—  
where the second man stood diggin' six feet deep.  
I'm headin' to where that second man lies,  
and I pray that I'm goin' where no man cries.

Well, I don't know my destination,  
but I'm in good company.  
So, it's got to be good enough for me.  
Yes, it's got to be good enough for me.

I'm travelin' to a solemn field—  
no plow, no crop, no harvest yield.  
I'm travelin' to where my grandma rests—  
where Grandpa waits in his Sunday best.

I'm movin' to my tribal drum,  
seekin' the source of my rattle and hum.  
And I'm tracin' the conch blower's breath.  
So, you could say I'm dancin' to my death.

Well, I don't know my destination,  
but I'm in good company.  
So, it's got to be good enough for me.  
Yes, it's got to be good enough for me.

Where are you headin', oh my son?  
Where will you be when your journey's done?  
Say daughter, where are you off to?  
Will you sit with me when your travelin's through?



I'm off to where we all must go.  
Can't say where for sure, 'cause I really don't know.  
but goin' to where my judgment waits.  
I can't say if it's Hades or them pearly gates.

'Cause, I don't know my destination,  
but I'm in good company.  
So, it's got to be good enough for me.  
Yes, it's got to be good enough for me.  
Guess, it's got to be good enough for me.



## The Pocked Eclipse, the Rise of the State, and the Birth of the Mujerista Resistance

And for many years did the civilyoungs suckle at her breasts and nest in her embrace into which she had birthed them. And she, the Great Mother, prided in their growth and curiosity. And eventually, their independent spirits scattered the children to the four winds. And contented with what she created, the Great Mother closed her eyes for a spell of peaceful repose.

And she awoke from a nightmare choking on stale air. Steel rods pierced her skin to her core and concrete corseted her round. She labored to name one corner of her form which did not ache, for the entirety of her being was under attack. In her trusting slumber, she had been drugged, despoiled, violated, mutilated—and still the civilyoung ones suckled at her poisoned breasts. But now they warred against each other and hoarded more than they needed.

Heartbroken over the purity of her gift laid waste, the Great Mother released a thundering lament. Her right hand, a riotous ocean, and her left hand, colossal cliffs, curled up into fists and smashed down on her children—silencing the wars against the Great Mother and against each other.

And she returned to a feverish sleep of self-preservation, weeping hot lightning tears and coughing smoke and ash.

The civilyoung ones cried out to the Great Mother in horror. Some were humbled by her awakening. Others cursed her, and like rats on a sinking ship trampled the bodies of the dead and continued to eat and shit their ratfill with no remorse for the fallen, weak, or ailing. Not long after the Fall, the young men resumed their warlording and hoarding, using weak flesh for sex and meat. And so, existence in Nomadsland began and continues to be.

But one zone was least shaken by the Fall. And on



that land the State arose to rebuild, beginning with the construction of the Grate State Gates. The Elect few born within its walls might have sat content to watch as those outside the Gates rotted—had they not been crippled by breeding disease. Not able to overcome this curse and needing more boots on the ground to guard the Grate Gates, the Elect allowed the entrance of fugees willing to give our children and our lives to protect the State.

Milked for our fool's blood in our appointments, we toil to provide unlimited juice to the Elect while we must suffer blackouts, curfews, life in the tenement yards and restricted access to the advanced device learning reserved for the Elect and scholars only. Any who threaten this order are condemned to the fubar, Nomadsland.

And so, warring began anew on a grand scale with new cells from Nomadsland constantly forming and plotting to breach the Grate Gates. But this time it was only the young women—the mothers—who remembered the Great Mother's rage as their own. They alone sought remedy. For years, they and their young shed the most blood and paid the highest prices to the warring and the State.

And so, after work at their appointed posts, mothers gathered covertly with their young. And one among them, La Madre Valiente, spoke out rallying, "We will reject the curse of Eve. And we will not be cast as Lilith to birth demons to destroy us. And we will follow the Great Mother in her rage and recognize her recovery as our own. And like her, we will defend our rights to health and life. And those who threaten us will be met with *our* fists of ocean and stone."

And thus, the Mujerista Resistance was born, united behind a blood red flag reading "¡Mi mamá me enseñó a luchar!"

