



by Ana M. Vernia

PRISCYLL ANCTIL

BODY AS A LOCATION FOR POLITICAL RESISTANCE \\ Interview with Priscyll Ancetil Avoine

Priscyll Ancetil Avoine is a researcher in Feminist Security Studies. Her work focuses on embodiment and emotional processes in contemporary wars and in the reintegration of female ex-combatants. She is a PhD candidate in Political Science and Feminist Studies at Université du Québec à Montréal (Canada) for which she received the Vanier Graduate Scholarship. Previously, she completed an MA in Peace, Conflict and Development Studies from Universitat Jaume I (Spain). Her doctoral thesis, *The Body as a Location of Political Resistance: The “Re-in-corporation” of Farianas in the Northeastern Region of Colombia*, takes a critical look at embodiment, affects and emotions in the context of the post-peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Farc-ep). She has published various articles in renowned journals, and she has conducted research in Spain, United Kingdom, Colombia and Canada. She is actively involved in the NGO Fundación Lüvo, promoting feminist and antiracist creative actions towards peacebuilding.



INTERVIEW

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Ana M. Vernia (AV): You may wonder why an art journal wants to carry an interview with you. But we are interested in discussing your view on embodiment, especially drawing upon the work you are conducting in your PhD Thesis about embodiment in the process of reincorporation of female ex-combatants of the Farc-ep¹ in Colombia. Starting from the very notion of embodiment, have you ever thought about using art for your projects aimed at social transformation?

Priscyll Anctil Avoine (PAA): I think that art, especially dance, has been very determinant in the construction of my identity as a person and, is at the center stage of my epistemological interrogations. Through many years of dancing, I feel I have learned to understand my own body as the extension of the body of others and vice-versa. “Speaking” with the body is a powerful sentiment, and I feel it reflects the “sentipensar” idea suggested by the Colombian author Arturo Escobar. Thinking and feeling are not divisible, and their union in epistemology is a profound revolutionary act. It is the very sign of our social interdependency.

In the work I conduct for my PhD thesis, the notion of embodiment is central as it is a way for me to debunk the traditional analysis in Political Science by taking the body as an analytical and practical category. The results of the research show that the reincorporation programs

have taken a disembodied stance regarding the passage of female ex-combatants from the military scenario to the civilian society. Therefore, those programs do not consider the embodied and emotional rupture that occurs with disarmament. As such, my thesis seeks to interrogate rage, nostalgia, care, love and anxiety as central embodied political experience of the transition to civilian society.

So yes, I have been using art for my projects and I consider it proposes a never-ending set of possibilities for social transformation. Mostly, my projects are all related to the embodied character of our political bounds. I inquiry into the political power of embodied emotions and affects with the aim of demonstrating the centrality of what happen, politically, between bodies. Equally, I focus my social engagement with Fundación Lüvo, a feminist collective, around constructing projects based on love, friendship and alternative pedagogies. We have used art methodologies in different ways, both for knowledge production and project proposals, creating alliances with other feminist collectives.

AV: Could you briefly define what are the methodologies you use?

PAA: I use different methods in my research processes, mostly related to feminist epistemologies and methodologies. My main field of inquiry is International Relations where I tried

¹ Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo (Far-ep) was a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla in Colombia. The Farc-ep has signed a peace agreement in La Havana (Cuba) in 2016 with the Colombian government, laying down arms and reincorporating to the civilian society.

to question the androcentric and colonial legacy of the field with innovative methodologies. Taking the body as a central concept in my research has allowed for the working of methods based on embodied processes, affects, emotions, etc. As such, I have used body mapping methods, emotional cartography, autobiographical methods, narrative analysis and methods that centers around drawing your own life trajectory.

Equally, our collective work with Fundación Lüvo, a feminist and antiracist non-profit organization, is impregnated with artistic methods to promote social change. We are actively working with alternative pedagogies focused on Afrocolombian music, body mapping, laboratory of social innovation, communities of practice, autobiographical narratives and emotional cartographies. As a matter of example, we closely work with Enkelé, a music group based in Colombia and composed of 9 women artists. Enkelé is working to revive oral tradition and sounds from afrodescendant heritage. With them, we are trying to propose new methodologies for cultural and social change, mostly regarding women's political participation and with regard to anti-discrimination stance in political, intimate and artistic spheres.

AV: Why would you take the body as the site of resistance instead of the mind?

PAA: In my research, I actively try to engage with poststructuralist and feminist theories about embodiment and, therefore, I wish to question the legacy of Western binaries such as emotion/reason, body/mind, vulnerability/resistance, etc. In consequence, I do not see a division between mind and body; rather, I understand embodiment as a social process, as a place to understand political collective struggle – even though, throughout history, the body has been comprehended as equivalent to biological matter. In feminist account, the body is a social entity: following Judith Butler, there is no “self” outside power relationships, which means that we can question the premise about “individual autonomy” in politics. Politics is rather what happens between bodies, and accepting this very interdependency – and the common vulnerability that sustains it – might change our view on resistance.

As such, embodiment is a site of knowledge production. For feminists in International Relations, researching on violence and armed conflicts imply the rethinking of embodiment, affect

and emotions. Violence is experienced every day, in the “matrix of violence”, as affirmed by Swati Parashar, a brilliant IR feminist scholar. In my research, I rely on the contributions of IR Feminist scholars to comprehend female ex-Farc political participation and resistance at the intersection of various identities, such as political agent, combatants, women, mothers, victims of sexual violence, activists, etc. The discursive, material and affective dynamics female ex-combatants experience in their return to civilian society poses different challenges to our analysis of political orders and contemporary wars. Their embodied narratives are powerfully challenging the theoretical frameworks in International Relations.

AV: Although much progress has been made on gender issues, obviously, we are far from gender equality. For example, in the artistic world, we still face certain differences. What actions should be taken, from your point of view?

PAA: This is a huge question! I would say, almost impossible to answer in few lines. We can say we have made very few progresses with regards to gender issues, but in my point of view sexist oppression, coupled with other forms of oppression, such as classism and racism, is very far from being eradicated. We still have so much work to do and I would even say that we are witnessing a backlash globally: women's lives, safety, bodily integrity, are under attack everywhere. Women's bodies and feminized bodies are constantly being expelled from the political sphere, feminicides are on the rise globally and antifeminist campaigns are growingly gaining grounds. At the same time that we are witnessing movements such as #MeToo, or Las Tesis, as well as feminist protests throughout Latin America for example, we are facing the rise of extreme-right movements and a return to conservative views on women gender roles and violent actions against LGBTIQ+ groups.

The denunciations made by women against gender-based violence have also showed that the artistic world is no exception: here in Montreal where I am currently based, we have seen that power relationships in the media, artist scenes, on television, etc., are omnipresent and sexual violence against women as well. Oppressive visions on women are everywhere in the showbusiness and we must start a collective interrogation about the way we relate to one another, about consent and power relations.

When I first make consciousness about feminisms and their impacts in my life, I felt that my entire world has changed and I must say I felt sorrow, pain. But as I understood everyday a bit more about my positionality, my own experience and when I started to share thoughts and feelings with other women and allies of the feminist struggle, I could see that it was a healing path for me. So, as bell hooks rightfully argued, “feminism is for everybody”; I would say that a first step to take action is to comprehend sexist oppression as a problem that concerns everyone, and as a matter of social justice. And this means becoming conscious of how we reproduce gender hierarchies and gendered privileges. So one concrete action is also to change our very understanding of power, from *power over* to *power with*: how will we relate to others on a everyday basis? How can we give up on privileges? We should, as a society, start to listen to feminist activists and scholars, from different embodied geographies, and deliberately questions our relations of power, every day. It is a revolution that happens daily, constantly; it is a critical endeavor.

AV: Returning to art, and combining the field of Humanities with your studies in Conflict and Peacebuilding, would it be necessary to rethink the current school regarding its humanistic content? What is your opinion on this?

PAA: I would say that my opinion is modelled by the fact that I have conducted research in the field of Peace and Conflict Studies for several years now, and I had the chance to work two years in a Department of Humanities in Colombia. I consider that we really need to rethink how schools and universities are engaging with humanistic content. For me it is impregnated by colonial and religious legacies that are perpetuating so many systems of oppression, mostly racial, classist and gendered ones. But it also reconduct different form of hierarchies that contribute to viewing schools and universities as disciplinary institutions, where students come to “receive” and “absorbs” values, but always, a certain form of values, framed under universalistic points of view, mostly Westernized ones. So yes, definitely, we need other forms of knowing the world, and we need to insert the intersectional analysis of structural and systemic violence into the curricula in Humanities, otherwise, we are missing the whole point about what it means to be “human”.

AV: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are on the political agenda of governments. How do you see the application regarding SDG number 5?

PAA: I must say that I have many critics regarding the SDG, as they are what they are: institutional takes on global problems that have been denounced by activists from so many years. While we definitely need international conventions, texts and agreements to sustain the struggle for gender equality (SDG #5), I do not think that this is where we can really have an impact. This frame is still looking at gender as a “mainstreaming” tool and as a way to “develop” (a concept that is very much impregnated by Western colonialism) and guarantee “progress” (also a concept framed through an idea of linear and modern progress that has been widely criticized by decolonial authors).

Take for example the idea of “empowerment” explicit to SDG #5: empowerment can be a radical concept, but when taken by global institutions and countries assuming positions of power in international affairs, then you get a very disempowering concept of empowerment. Who has the “tools”, “power” and “capital” to empower whom? How are we reproducing paternalistic view on women? So, honestly, I see the application of SDG #5 as very problematic and difficult. Where I see it can foster spaces for rethinking gender relations, it is in the possibilities of translocal, transborder, transnational alliances between women activists, scholars, public officers etc., where they can actively engage in changing the dominant frame of analysis and praxis.

AV: Linking with the SDGs and connecting with Human Rights, we see that there is still a clear social and educational exclusion unresolved. What solutions or actions, from your point of view, could improve or reduce this situation?

PAA: I think that this interrogation needs to be connected to our educational systems that reproduces the colonial, racist and sexist frames that perpetuate, in turn, systemic violence and political exclusion. Education tend to be disconnected from the lived reality of most of the students both in basic education and at the level of undergraduate and post-graduate studies. We still see education as the transmission of knowledge instead of seeing as a process of co-construction.

Therefore, the task is huge because, we are facing here millennial entrenched ways of seeing how to “educate” people – as a matter of example, universities have not changed a lot since their foundation as educational institutions. Decolonizing those institutions is a structural challenge so, we cannot think of doing this decolonization as an individual task, but a collective one, where institutions themselves should clearly take stance for pluralism, antiracism and antisexism.

In my point of view, linking the academia with praxis, or practical knowledge, recuperating the forms of knowledge that have been historically erased (women’s knowledge in many countries have been completely erased and tagged as non-scientific for example), and challenging our pedagogical tools might help us to engage in different paths of deconstruction of our educational systems. That is mostly what we are doing with Fundación Lüvo: we create our own media content, propose resources for alternative pedagogies and methodologies, rely on art as tool for change and engage in constant dialogues between the academia and activism.

AV: Under the pandemic situation that we are suffering, from your point of view, what are the most vulnerable groups?

PAA: Historically marginalized groups have been further exposed to precarity and vulnerability in these hard times of pandemic. As human beings, we have had so many difficulties in recognizing what feminists have long said: we share a common vulnerability, and if we do not face it, we are clearly missing a point, as Judith Butler argues. The pandemic has showed that we are globally all exposed to the virus, but that social inequalities have exposed differentially some populations more than other in many different geographies.

I think that it is still difficult to evaluate all the social consequences of Covid-19 pandemic. As social scientists, we are confronted with theorizing at the same time that we are every day, witnessing disease, deaths, disastrous political decisions, and so on. What can be said for now is that historically marginalized groups are facing conditions of precarity that are getting worse every day. That our health systems are not able to respond the crisis, and that women have been sustaining the economy of care without any historical recognition. That we can no more ignore our deep interrelation with

wildlife and the necessity for recognizing, as human beings, of our interdependency.

AV: ARTSEDUCA is a publication aimed at artistic environments and contexts, from education and research. Do you believe that Art and Culture can be tools to change the world for the better?

PAA: I definitely consider that art and culture are fantastic tools of change. But they are also vectors of domination and violence. Let’s consider gendered-based violence. For example, many songs have hurtfully imposed gendered stereotypes on women and they have been widely reproduced worldwide. This has a truly long-standing impact on the vision women have on themselves, and how men can project hegemonic masculinities. Gender-based violence, and symbolic violence that sustains it, is everywhere : art, media, television, and cultural practices all around the world (even though they take different forms and shapes).

But if culture and art are sites of oppression, they might also be the sites where we can subvert violence and domination. Since art and culture are at the core of identity processes, of subjectivity constitution and because they act upon feelings and emotions, they represent interesting possibilities for social change. But we also need to interrogate, what we mean by “the better”; and precisely, it means asking for domination, power relationships, oppressions and privileges. We need to address systematic forms of oppression that are perpetuated through cultural signs, customs and traditions.

AV: To conclude this interview, what advice would you give to current students and future arts professionals?

PAA: I think it is a great occasion to retake the words of Cynthia Enloe, a prominent scholar in my field of research: be a curious feminist. I guess that is what I suggest to my students, when I begin courses and seminars: we want to be questioning, all the time. Be curious about feelings, emotions, and embodied sensations that further push the boundaries of your theoretical interrogations. It looks simple, but it is a life-time project.

AV: From ARTSEDUCA, we really appreciate having shared your time and knowledge.