

Ambos lados: deconstructing identity, performing memory

Rakel Marín Ezpeleta
Henry Daniel

Project Barca's central research question – how can embodied personal and collective memories be shaped into new architectures of identity and belonging in the form of innovative performance works that speak to wider sections of society? – has so far generated a number of mixed-media performance outcomes in its two research locations; Barcelona, Catalonia, and Vancouver, Canada. Some major works are the video essay *Encounters 3*; *Barca-El otro lado* – a performance work that utilizes dancers, actors, musicians and media designers resident in Barcelona, Spain; *Here be dragons* – a work staged exclusively with performers in Vancouver, Canada; and *Here be dragons/Non plus ultra* (HBD/NPU) - which brings together separate casts from both cities. HBD/NPU was premiered in Vancouver on January 10th 2013 at the Fei and Milton

Wong Experimental Theatre, Goldcorp Centre for the Arts. All three stage works draw generously from the performers personal stories to articulate the research objectives. This paper addresses the 're-routing' thematic of the Barcelona 2013 conference by problematizing the phrase 'going west to find east/going east to find west', a direct reference to Christopher Columbus' 1492 voyage across the Atlantic. It also uses Performance Studies and PaR as navigational constructs in a parallel voyage of exploration and discovery. We present here an abridged version of the mixed-mode paper created for the Performance as Research Working Group, within the IFTR 2013 conference.

Keywords: Memory, Performance as Research, Rearticulation, Historiography, Identity.

Introduction

Project *Barca* is a three-year Research/Creation initiative funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Its overarching concept is defined by the phrase 'going west to find east/going east to find west', a direct reference to Christopher Columbus' 1492 voyage across the Atlantic in search of a new trading route to the so-called Orient. The project boasts an international team of artistic and academic collaborators based in Vancouver, Canada, and Barcelona, Catalonia, many of whom have backgrounds in countries as diverse as Italy, France, Algeria, Iran, Chile, French Guiana, Brazil, Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago, Japan, China, and Hong Kong. The question that lies at the heart of the research is framed as follows: how can embodied personal and collective memories be shaped into new architectures of

identity and belonging in the form of innovative performance works that speak to wider sections of society?

This question clearly identifies a set of issues meant to problematize notions of identity and memory against the backdrop of history. Having grown up in a former colonial country, and with the experience of being an immigrant in lands located on both sides of the Atlantic, Dr. Daniel is sensitive to the complex issues that immigrants, aliens, outcasts, self-exiles, illegals, and generally people who do not readily 'belong' or 'fit in', experience on a daily basis. We refer here to their attempts to negotiate the 'I', 'me', 'we', 'you', 'us', and 'they' in communities where space is shared by both 'natives' and 'non-natives', 'strangers' and 'estranged'. Project Barca concerns itself with the dynamics of interaction between people who identify as such, which, in one way or another, includes many of us.

The decision to use the historic events surrounding August 3rd 1492, the day Columbus left Spain on his cross-Atlantic voyage of discovery, is deliberate. This journey not only changed the face of international politics, entire economies, and territorial borders, it also kick-started a period of immigration, forced migration, economic and human exploitation, genocide, and slavery that was perhaps unprecedented in its scope. Project Barca is interested in gathering together a group of performers on both sides of the Atlantic who had something to say about their own personal routes and were willing to do a bit of creative research in this regard. The 'impossible task' Dr. Daniel gave all of them was to retrace their family histories and/or ancestries from the present (2012) back to the date August 3rd 1492. Through a careful manipulation of their stories, we wanted to problematize the very concept of identity and its relation to memory.

A Barca

Barca means boat in both Spanish and Portuguese, a structure capable of accommodating a small crew for an extended journey. The phrase 'going west to find east/going east to find west' speaks to the paradox of going in one direction to find the other, of starting out with one intention and ultimately having the opposite of that intention manifest itself, and most importantly, the attempt to resolve this paradox as part of an artistic process. Part of our intention here is to explore parallels between, first, the relationship between the 'self' we protect and the one we present to the public – an idea inspired by Goffman's *Forms of talk*; second, the exploration of new 'territories' that Columbus went in search of, and third, our explorations as artists seeking to understand our own encounters with 'otherness'.

Project *Barca* therefore aims to collect the perspectives of those affected by Columbus' 1492 journey across the Atlantic. This includes looking at the descendants of those who left the Castilian Kingdom, those encountered on that historic journey, as well as those who followed on subsequent journeys, either by choice or through force. We are essentially looking at the implications of over five hundred years of history on a group of people. Project Barca's premise for making this explicit connection is a belief that everyone who made that 'crossing' then, and subsequently, became implicated in a journey that asks for some kind of resolution. Our project acts as a ship on a journey, promoting artistic encounters with 'the other' and by doing so suggesting new perspectives on notions of identity.

The notion of identity we work with concurs with Bakhtin's definition, as described by Auslander. This claims that the individual is essentially a merger of the many voices and languages, past and present, that constitutes him or her as a subject (Bakhtin, 1990; in Auslander, 2008: 41). Stimulated by Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, we also endorse that such identities are constructed in opposition to what surrounds us. And furthermore, we add that there is a peculiar pathology that emerges as these two identities, inner and outer, literally fight for our attention. This idea of an internal/external conflict is related to Levinas' conception of *alterity* in the face-to-face encounter, understood as 'the ultimate situation' (Levinas, 1969: 81 and 194). In this context, we claim that it is especially in the encounter with 'the Other' that is beyond us, exterior to us and outside the reach of our own system of thought that we are obliged to open up our self-contained identities and feelings of security and at-homeness.

However, we strongly assert the 'other' here has both an internal and an external face, the latter often overpowering the former. The encounters between the external self and its 'others' (the other culture, the other race, the other religion, the other nationality, the other dancer, the other artist-kind and even the other knowledge-kind), and the possible mediation of these encounters by the deeply hidden internal and unconscious 'self' in all of us provides the fuel that drives Project Barca's engine, so to speak. As the reader listens to the stories of the dancers playing witness to the unresolved conflicts of the past in the makeshift vocabulary generated by their own bodies¹, we hope that he or she will understand why the research is titled *Barca: New Architectures of Memory and Identity*.

1. Watch the Video *Encounters 3* at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cqNQYSTbSw>. Other outcomes and excerpts of Project Barca mentioned in this paper are visible at the following link: <http://projectbarca.blogspot.ca>

Considering that the 'New World' opened up post 1492 was the consequence of an apparent miscalculation, it is not surprising that great 'wars' of identity and other major 'misunderstandings' followed. Columbus calculated that if he sailed west across the Atlantic he would eventually arrive at his desired destination in the east. He was interested in establishing a new trading route to India, China, and Japan, and in setting up trading posts along the way. The mandate given to him by the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile was to acquire new territories, bring back riches, and spread the Christian faith. In short, he was to find new sources of wealth for his employers and convince the people he encountered there to adopt the customs and beliefs of complete strangers.

One could say that the urge to adventure and to be excited about the results of one's discoveries is innate to human behavior. However, the unanticipated and sometimes unintended results of these adventures and discoveries manifest in a particular pathology that we see in the repeated colonization of various new territories, physical, psychological, and otherwise. This 'taking possession of' continues to appear in our actions five hundred years later and it is with some irony that we reiterate the ideological stance 'we only know ourselves through our encounters with others' almost to monotony. This statement is central to Project Barca's creative research, and we believe it is aptly articulated in the phrase 'going west to find east/going east to find west'.

Our navigational strategies are informed by Performance Studies as a discipline and Practice-as-Research as an approach with a set of tools - a methodology if you wish. For both personal and historical reasons, the first part of our journey links Barcelona, an 'Old World' city at the edge of the Mediterranean, with Vancouver, a fast growing metropolis that sits on the edge of the Pacific at the limits of the 'New World'. The journey is trans-hemispheric², since it has trans-Mediterranean antecedents and trans-Americas consequences. In truth, one could say that Columbus literally stumbled upon the notion of the 'trans-hemispheric'. We know that he never made it to the fabled 'Orient' but his miscalculation opened up an entirely new world, not the one he nor anyone else had imagined, but another that proved to be far more problematic and with far-reaching implications for both the descendants of those he encountered as well as everyone who subsequently made that crossing.

Columbus and others flying the standard of the Catholic Monarchs could not travel south around Africa because a papal bull of 1481 (*Aeterni Regis*, Trea-

2. The term 'trans-Americas' should be understood here as the entire continent that stretches from Canada and the USA to Argentina and Chile and includes the islands in the Atlantic, the Caribbean Sea, the Gulf of Mexico, etc.

ty of Alcáçovas, 1481) granting all lands discovered south of the Canary Islands to Portugal (Wernhan, 1957, p. 424) forbade them to. Although this changed four years later in the Treaty of Tordesillas (Treaty of Tordesillas, 1494: 84), Spain could still only lay claim to lands along an imaginary north/south line east of the Cape Verde islands which, co-incidentally, ran straight through territory that we call Brazil today. Because the Crusading wars of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries had long since prevented Christian traders from travelling freely through Asia, one could say that the Castilian Kingdom had no place else to go in order to establish itself as a 'power' but West. History was being made on August 3rd 1492, but as historiographer and literary theorist Hayden White (White, 1987: 26-57) remarks, history is a product of historians' discourse. It is also an interpretation of sources and evidences that are naturally partial and fragmented. What historians do is to construct the 'truths' of the historical past through narratives. We, as White, approach history through language, through stories, and we articulate artistically the narratives of the performers. Also, following Michel Foucault's (Foucault, 1977: 139-164) argument, we seek to interpret the past in ways that highlight the ambiguity, fragmentation and struggle that accompanies any historical analysis.

Encounters 3

The video-essay *Encounters 3* explores the diversity of voices and bodies contributing to Project Barca's (2011-2014) research objectives. It allows viewers to get a better sense of how some of our processes were and continue to be articulated. During the week long Barcelona 2013 IFTR 're-routing' conference colleagues and other conference delegates also had the opportunity to see the full production of *Barca: el otro lado* at Theatre Nau Ivanow, a local performance facility.

Contentiously, perhaps, the research deliberately conflates Columbus' 1492 voyage with another journey that is concerned with addressing the historical instability of the arts as a platform for academic research. It also recognizes the enormous attempts made by both professional artists and academics to address this issue. Our decision to conflate the two has much to do with establishing a broader and more in-depth approach to understanding how identities are constructed against the backdrop of history and how both are subsequently re-presented across disciplinary platforms.

We are not only investigating the role that history plays in the formation of identity, we are also attempting to examine the events surrounding 1492 using the framework of artistic disciplines that have their own individual arising and

trajectories of development. In using movements, text, sounds, and music to create a complex kind of ‘dance/theatre/sound/film art’ concerned with narratives of the colonization of body, space, territory, and personality, we are in fact making an ‘artifice’ of the one, i.e. narratives of colonization, that both mirrors and contradicts the use of the other, i.e., the framework of artistic disciplines. We are manipulating disciplinary frameworks and crossing a number of delicate ‘borders’ that we hope will provoke new questions regarding the ethics of representation as well as the ‘truth’ and/or ‘validity’ of one ‘historical’ perspective over the other. In Project Barca we dynamically deconstruct the architectures of the performers ‘stories’ and then try to reframe them through a manipulation of the fragments. Our argument is that this offers a unique opportunity to ‘know’ ourselves and our inherited pasts from quite a different perspective and to begin to construct a different version of ‘self’ in the process.

As mentioned earlier, Performance Studies and PaR form the skeleton of the vehicle we are constructing for this journey. How we understand the constituent parts of this structure is crucial. Performance, for example, is defined here as acts of embodiment and disembodiment that we engage in for the excavation, recovery and analysis of personal and collective memories. We seek to accomplish this using a range of strategies that involve different technologies. For example, we utilize film, video, sound and other potentially interactive technologies during the creative studio process as well as in the live and post-production phases of the research. Since the narratives of the performers necessarily jump in and out of present and past, the editing process gives us an opportunity to re-organize a well-known historical timeline into one where the audience is never completely sure exactly who and where the ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘they’, and ‘us’ are located. The dancers’ performance images are almost never concurrent with the text heard. When dancer Arash Khakpour speaks of his Arab ancestors having to leave Spain exactly at the time of the conquest of Granada, we also hear a text linked in the narrative to his family moving to Vancouver, Canada in 2005. However, Arash is nowhere to be seen. Here we are using film and text as technological vehicles to connect events that are ‘historically possible’ but also partly imaginary, and to displace the identities of the people seen on film.

In 1492 my family had to leave Spain
 The other option was execution or worse still conversion
 So we went back to Persia through Africa; exiting Granada to Iran,
 The longest way you can ever imagine.
 We moved to Vancouver in 2005.
 Freedom in the woods of the west!

In another 'true' story, dancer (Julia Carr) speaks of her distant relative, a Norwegian sailing ship captain, who would take his young daughter on sailing voyages with him. Julia problematizes, among other things, the overwhelmingly masculine presence in these early explorations and its consequences for subsequent relations between peoples.

In 1492, Columbus left Palos with 3 ships and 90 men and boys; no women, all stories of men! [...] September 4th 1850, Gunder Mauritz Erichsen was born and a tradition of Norwegian sailing ship captains continued. Mauritz shares my September 4th birthday. He took his youngest daughter on a couple of long voyages. She wrote a journal. Finally, a female protagonist! Can you imagine a young girl as an explorer in the 1880s?

These examples may well contextualize the multiple dimensions of certain technologies employed in journeys - then and now - and the idea that 'technology' itself participates in the institutionalization of our collective memories as a particular kind of historical 'truth'. In the case of the 15th century colonization, the primary technology that Columbus and others utilized to access the New World were ships and weapons (Morison, 1974: 4-6, 342-343).³ *La Santa Maria*, *La Pinta*, and *La Niña* became symbols for the opening up of new possibilities as much as they were symbols of the exploitation and colonization of peoples throughout the Americas (Morison, 1974: 93-100). The same can be said for Francisco Pizarro's and Hernan Cortes' efforts later on to conquer and lay claim to territories in the Americas with their 'guns, germs, and steel' (Diamond, 2005: 74-81).

PaR, Performance Studies, and the genetically, racially, and culturally informed bodies of the performers constitute a different triad of vehicles that allows us to navigate a new kind of territory. The flexibility and utility of Performance Studies, a discipline that arose from and continues to draw on areas of study as diverse as sociology, anthropology, psychology, cognitive science, media studies, law, biology, neuroscience, history, computing science, and history of science, and PaR as a set of practical and creative skills and strategies, assists us in investigating and rearticulating a number of precepts, concepts, percepts, affects, and functions (Deleuze, 1994: 66-68) that seek to address the complexity of our trans-hemispheric embeddedness (Daniel & Ezpeleta, 2013: 7).

3. Additional material by Keegan, W. F. and other authors, (1991) at <http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/caribarch/columbus.htm>

Conclusion

Concluding, we propose a discourse that is transdisciplinary by nature, engaging movement as a function of bodies, presenting concepts through a choreographic articulation of movement structures built up around the performers' identities; body types, gender, race, nationality, and cultural backgrounds, and challenging notions of scientific logic by utilizing seemingly digressive, passing, and unmethodical strategies in its attempts to reverse-engineer, destabilize, and eventually re-present ideas that are crucial to our human existence. We believe that the exploration, presentation, and articulation of performance using defined PaR frameworks give us sufficient flexibility for the task of trans-hemispheric circumnavigation.

The apparent paradox that shapes much of Project Barca's research and enables us to embark on our journey has much to do with this trans-hemispheric predicament. As performers and scholars we are also part of a curious trade that traverses the Atlantic. In the Americas we straddle spaces Columbus never explored but which others subsequently plundered. We are the products of journeys that brought our ancestors in contact with one another and which we must retrace, rewrite, and revitalize before we can approach some metaphorical 'east'. We are the inheritors of voyages we may not have asked for, perhaps never wanted to be a part of, but which we are somehow destined to complete. So, in pursuit of these 'voyages of the unwilling', we are building a boat, a barca, one that utilizes a conceptual framework designed with the timbers of Performance Studies, guided by practices of embodiment and disembodiment, and destined to continue travelling west to find east and east to find west.

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