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ANT 391: Narratives of Space

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[]'s Audio Description as Radical Representation

February 18, 2022–

David Rubenstein Atrium,

Zoom,

Lincoln Center,

My apartment,

San Juan Hill (Demolished by Robert Moses)/Upper West Side,

North Loop,

Manhattan,

Austin,

New York City,

Texas,

on shared screens.

We are fluid bodies pushing to define our borders.

I describe to resist the lines that attempt to divide.

From darkness, we enter --- emerging just behind the shoulder of a woman draped in dark fabric. She turns, arms twisting from behind, extending on a long downward diagonal.

I watch. My trained eyes focus. What is witnessed is refracted through two glass lenses—first my computer’s camera and then Adrienne’s. Despite the physical distance, my eyes gather visual information. I fill the sense’s capacity to the rim and then I begin to write. Words flow from my fingertips—but of course this process cannot just be visual.

Revealed behind her, low golden light catches the arm of another woman.

And another.

Movement imbibes all.

As I write, I feel myself begin to dance.

Muscle memory takes over.

Will you come with us?

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I am in the creation process for Angélica Negrón and Adrienne Westwood’s newest work, []. The work is a site of radical collaboration between the two lead artists, who after knowing each other for several years, came together with a goal to create a sonic-visual-kinesthetic experience to reckon with the lost histories of femme ancestors. Negrón is an experimental composer working with found instruments and electronic processing. Westwood is a contemporary choreographer whose work focuses on the quotidian, domestic tasks of female labor. Joining them are performers, Katie Swords-Thurman, Laura Witsken, Marissa Truitt Gū’ Nū’ Kū, Amanda K’mett-Pendry, Solana Hoffman-Carter, and myself. Video dramaturg Kathryn Nusa Logan, set designer Seth Easter, instrument creator Nick Yulman, and production manager Lilach Orenstein round out the community of makers. I also serve as []’s resident writer and

audio describer for the process. We are in year three of creation with about one period of intense making each year.

*The first two women. Amanda. Laura. Their feet slide across the floor, shifting back and forth
against a dark background.*

Angélica and Adrienne describe the work as one of bodies and objects, a layering of multiplying processes and elements to conjure stories that have not been recorded.

[] uncovers lost tales and celebrates the liveness of ancestors. Adrienne believes that performance's hyper-attentive care calls in and holds experiences of private and personal memories of real/imagined family histories, past/present connections, and women's visible/invisible labor. Angélica creates a sonic landscape built from processed audio recordings of our storytelling that the dancer movement creates and exists within. Together they ask, "what is long ago, but still right now."

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The camera, supported by Kathryn, shifts too. She catches glimpses of other women in the space.

*Katie. Solana. Rebecca. All dressed in dark colors and matching black kn95 masks. Between
them, space.*

Adrienne is the reason we are here. We, a collective that is usually physically widespread and distanced by the border lines. We, Kathryn, me, Amanda, Laura, Solana, Katie, Marissa, Lilach, and Angélica— choreographed by Adrienne to gather together, in-person and virtually, to pay homage to ancestors past.

We gather.

We remember.

They are together; I am thousands of miles away, tethered by umbilical, white cords that hold me to the core of the work, to the bodies who dance. Watching. Adrienne's computer runs an open, continuous Zoom meeting. When she moves the computer, she disconnects the device from the white power cords and so often, her machine's battery dies. I disconnect and text her, hoping that if she has not noticed my absence, she at least has her phone on her.

I wait.

Eventually, I reconnect.

I think this is our fourth round of rehearsals. Honestly, I've lost track. The group—six dancers, one videographer, one production manager, one composer, one choreographer—we've gathered infrequently since 2019. We return to each other only when necessary. Our time together punctuated by
sickness (me),
children (Adrienne and Lilach),
school (me, Kathryn, Solana, Adrienne, Angélica),
other jobs (everyone) &
COVID (everyone).

The creation of [/] draws from the dancers and their engagement with a sonic sculpture built by instrument designer, Nick Yulman and Adrienne's partner, set designer Seth Easter. It's a fairly convoluted, circuitous process, here is my work-in-progress description of the sculpture itself.

Aircraft cable is key according to Seth. The thick, black, shiny cable suspends five circular steel frames, each about three feet in diameter from the ceiling. Wires follow the cable and steel up and down and eventually to the power source on the floor—a malleable-sturdy web. The celestial sculpture is further supported by slender poles that reach down (and sometimes screw) into the ground. Support systems take center stage...

there is currently a fair amount of dodging in the choreography in order to not disturb the aerial mechanism.

The dynamics of the sculpture radically changes underneath the bold, black circles. Dangling from various nodes in the sculpture are a variety of two-dimensional copper figures. They range from four to twelve inches, hang about six to twelve inches from the circular frame, therefore suspending them about six feet off the ground. I'm five foot three inches and I can reach up and touch them. The copper sheets of metal have been stamped out to represent objects from the collaborators various homes. A teapot, fan, trees, schoolhouse, table, and cabinet are scattered throughout the space. When the lights are off, the objects look as though they are floating mid-air. The objects are made out of copper because of the metal's conductive properties. When the performers' hands, which naturally conduct electricity, touch the figures, we close an open circuit, which sounds the instrument. A tone emerges from a nearby speaker.

The whole sculpture is a musical instrument.

The instrument only sounds when it is touched. The touch emerges from the choreography.

Witness copper figurines emerge from above. The women's hands occasionally reach up to caress the forms, which are seemingly suspended out of the darkness. They are small, only a few inches, cut from sheets of silky metal.

circles, within circles, within circles...

The sounds that ring from the choreography, are Angélica's work. In the first stages of []'s creation process, she watched rehearsal with her audio recorder in hand. She captured our conversations, about what we did that day prior to rehearsal, about our relationship to and knowledge of our families' maternal lines, about the work of this piece, about the choreography. Then, she processed the tones, making some legible, some illegible, some tonal, some atonal. Eventually, Angélica accumulates enough related tones to create what we are calling a "sound bank." For example, the processed sounds of our conversation about the dancers' maternal family lines creates one sound bank, another is created from the ambient noises of the rehearsal in progress and the sound of our shoes sweeping across the floor.

As of this moment, I think there are five sound banks. Angélica adds more each time we are together.

Angélica watches the rehearsal. She watches us move, talk, dance. She changes the sound banks based on the choreography, in collaboration with Adrienne, in collaboration with the dancers, who are the sound bank, who sound the sound bank, who create sound. At this stage of rehearsals, the sound banks are in flux and change the choreography/changes us as Angélica changes her mind.

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The women's legs circle away from their bodies along the floor.

It would be exhausting if not for the people, if not for Adrienne's way of working. She works with the pace of life. Inclusive of life. Because of life. In spite of life.

For me, the experience is complete.

I am there, but not there. I was once there. I am there no more.

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Step side and side and side again.

The Zoom meeting glitches—unstable connection. If someone was watching me watch, maybe they would just see a pixelated Zoom meeting, seemingly static, with truncated sounds. The process of glitching

My experience of this Zoom meeting is vastly different. I can see and hear in between the glitches. I imagine what is said in the moments of technological disconnect. I connect the group because part of my story is what moves them.

Co-choreographers of [].

Don't ask me to say the title out loud, we haven't figured that out yet. But to me, it feels like a moment of silence... to recognize what is lost, found, and yet to come.

In a tiny, dark room in my apartment, I perch on my desk chair, almost two thousand miles away from the rehearsal I watch. I interject into my peers' conversations as they try and puzzle out the choreography that we last rehearsed in March 2021, the source of the audio description that is scattered on the left side in italics. Laura, our faithful notator, asks me a question. We try to remember 2019's choreography. Adrienne is no help, she admits. There were no camera lenses then and our eyes are deceiving our memory.

Realizing it will be easier to answer the question by moving, I untangle my legs, push my cumbersome chair away from my desk and pace out the choreography in the distorted L-shaped space. "It's two steps, not three," I confirm and away my friends dance from the computer that beams me into the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center in New York City. Their shoes occasionally squeak against the hard floor, my socks act as a dust mop along fake wood linoleum. Suddenly, they move out of my limited frame. The body remembers longer that the mind sometimes.

Reaching up into the constellation again and again. The silky metal forms are a teapot, building, moon, tree. There are others, to the side, to the back, in the shadows. The women's warm touch against the cool metal ignites the sound.

The pandemic has forced us to become even more flexible with our labor. We stretch our bodies in between the legible lines of the state, redefining who serves care

(read unemployment benefits, health insurance). In this moment, the group has molded a public lobby, a cold and vast atrium into a workable rehearsal space. Gone are the sprung floors that are kind to the knees. Absent is the memory of one studio in upstate New York with its customizable, heated wood floors. The surface here is marble. Its distant and impenetrable, its once earthly history/family stripped from its being with violent stakes. The ceiling feels miles above, or at least it seems that way from my vantage point. Sound echoes, travels, and loses itself in the space. This is pseudo-return of people to what should be a public lobby. Instead of passing through on the way to somewhere else, instead the group stays, for a week, makes their mark.

Interspersed with the playing of the instrument continues the wash of movement from the dancers and Kathryn. Their arms and legs swirl around their torsos. Their feet carry them across the floor. They look at the constellation above them, sternums lifting upwards. The ambulatory pattern carries us like a wave, back and forth and back and forth, reaching a different crest each time.

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I watch “Making A Dance.” I document the process of dancemakers. I write descriptions of the women’s movement for our future blind and visually impaired audience members. I attend to slow and careful labor practices. I witness the women take up space in an arts institution defined by its male founders. The women dance with each other, build a celestial-sound-altar, celebrate in-draft creations, and ask each other to remember who was left out by history. Solana tells a funny story, though I just hear Laura’s laugh as it cuts through the vast space.

Is this the moment when we remember “her-story,” an utterance of a wave of feminism? I don’t remember which one. Though it will return—isn’t that what waves do?

Rebecca, slightly separated into the darkness, catches ahold of the fan, pushes away the summer’s hot air, and pulls out a new sound.

I could do without the pink hats next time though.

As the dancers reach up to play the suspended metal instrument-sculpture, their arms half extend, palms flat. In my own tiny, dark bedroom, I mirror their movement as I watch them through the screen. My room is a cramped space. The only window faces north, and potential light is blocked by another stone-walled building. I fit a lot in the room, I’m flexible. My bed is pushed up against the wall. A ridiculously heavy bedside table I found when I lived in New York City rests alongside.

It’s traveled across fourteen states by now.

A sideboard-turned-desk-turned-altar holds a position of honor next to a group of plants kept alive by a clip light-turned-grow light attached to the desk leg. My desk chair blocks the entrance, the door is shut anyways. My bookshelf is cluttered. A tiny mirror just big enough for a solo face hangs on the wall.

I dance a perpetual solo.

My air purifier, an anxiety-driven purchase, squeezes between the edge of the bed and the closet. The floor is bare, though in the mornings there is often a yoga mat slipped perfectly between the desk and bed. It is in this distorted L-shape, I dance.

The women continue their steps, turns, and arches, but move together with more urgency.

Arms scoop, pierce, and stroke the darkness around them.

I’m caught in mid-wave. Hand up, elbow bent, fingers drift.

Without the sounding instrument hovering about me, as it does for the others, without the suspended objects that remind us of family, of home...

I'm stuck in-between memory and reality.

Kathryn's presence, miles away, behind the double camera lenses of computers, is umbilical-like. She connects me to the outside world, to the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center in Manhattan. She sinks into her knees, training her eyes through yet another lens, this one from a camera. The camera is tethered to a series of machines, just outside of my computer-defined periphery. From my vantage point, the cords extend infinitely. Thick and black, like a roots system that started many years ago and still alive, wrapping its life around Kathryn's feet, torso, arms, as she gently migrates through the space.

*They fall in and out of time which each other to call in sounds. Their heads drop, arms swing,
and legs extend.*

Wave caught.

Do you see me here?

Am I coming or going?

Will I get to say goodbye?

I slowly drop my wave, the dancers in the studio have moved on, but the tones they activated ring solemnly through the room, through my speakers. Voices now. Yes, we did see you. Yes, we hear you. Yes, we are recording your presence here through our presence here. Your body matters to us and here we are.

Amanda, Solana, Rebecca, Laura, and Katie suddenly shift, their movement becomes bigger, more expansive, they are dancing underneath the instrument's full width and at times, exiting the

sculpture's shadow completely. Their spinning, space grabbing movement mirrors the metal circles above them that anchor our copper figurines in place. The metal spokes from above.

Arms spoke below.

I stay on Zoom most of the day. Zoom meeting etiquette is no longer new now that I'm three years into the pandemic. My eyes do not appreciate the sustained attention on the computer, so I take screen breaks to practice the previously known-to-me dance, improvise in response to new prompts, make endless cups of just-warm-enough tea, and write new audio descriptions for this rehearsal process. I sit at my desk, I dance in my living room, and I listen on my patio. I don't pick up every word said—low tones are lost in the cavernous room turned into the week's creation space. Woven into my activities are also moments of rest away from the process in order to recuperate my waning energy. I do not feel this way after an eight-hour in-person rehearsal. The energy of being together in person buoys the fatigue. As the sole participant in the Zoom meeting and in my apartment, I find myself taking more physical breaks than I anticipated.

It doesn't matter to me that I'm not receiving a meticulous recording of what transpires. What is important is that I'm still here, witnessing and processing in my own time. Zoom, despite its two-dimensional presentation, offers me a multitude of connection points. When I watch dance, I feel my attention pulled in every direction. It is one of the reasons I am so drawn to dance as an artistic medium, scholarly method, and intervention technique.

Each witness can ascertain what they need from the movement.

Zoom is not much different. Sure, the delivery differs, but still I find myself pulled in. I'm curious to engage. How does the chat intervene with the video? How does the size of my video change what I see? Does my fatigue increase when I maintain the mirror self-view?

I play with potential answers to these questions. I share draft audio description narration in the chat, though I'm the only active participant. I distance myself further from the work by making the Zoom application on my computer smaller, or at times even disappear when I pull up my Word document populated with my writing. I exit out of the self-view mode, so I do not have to see myself think, write, and dance. I decided not to look in mirrors while dancing long ago, now is not the moment to retract that promise.

Caught! Our five women fall into sounding. A table, ribcage, bike, star.

They move together, slower now, walking and reaching to create chords with their bodies.

The last group work I participated in was over six years ago. In the intermission I created my own work. Solo work. It is expensive to pay collaborators, it is cost-effective to make work on your own body. I'm not sure I know how to rehearse together anymore. The current set of tones is organ-like. Deep bellows intermingle with bright chimes. Cavernous in sound and style, this group is building a tonal/movement prayer for our ancestors.

We reach into the past, conjuring ghosts.

Reaching through a soft familiarity with each other and the mobile.

Kathryn slows with the women. She is inquisitive.

Their arms continue to outstretch and find chords.

Rebecca in silhouette. Reaching.

Her final reach falls slowly from the objects as the light begins to fade.

[cut to black]

My ghost is Vera. I don't know her Chinese name, though I should. I call her Por-Por, or mums mum in Teochew, or maybe Cantonese. I should call my mum to ask.

Por-Por drank the hottest tea to cool down. She tapped her hands like I tap mine when we are anxious. Her hands danced across the table the last time I saw her, tracing the distance between me and her. She passed along her ability to sketch simple figures quickly to both my mum and me. She thought in movement, and it translates to the paper and through the generations.

She was a dancer.

How do we remember?

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Slender spokes washed in indigo light.

Celestial bodies above.

Interwoven metal, wire branches.

A friend asked me recently how I remember choreography. I was a lot a loss for words.

The process is so ingrained in my being I don't know how to not remember.

It is in my blood.

My mother was a dancer.

My Por-Por was a dancer.

My great-grandmother was a fighter.

As part of the creation process for [], Adrienne asked each collaborator to share a little history about their maternal line. Many folks know a lot, a few know nothing and I'm somewhere in between ... mixed. This was during our first residency,

April 2020. I was at my parents' house and so I took advantage of the opportunity and conducted a brief, informal oral history with my mum.

I told her I was going to record our conversation, but at the end of the forty-five minutes she asked if I was ready to start the recording yet. It was interesting to learn what information she thought would be valuable to record, clearly it was not the conversation we'd been having previously.

A small chair emerges, encased in purple light.

A hand catches it, covers it.

Her fingers on the metal, wooden chair.

We found Por-Por's journal where she documented the Kwan family history for posterity, for passing down the family line. There is a lot of information I don't know, though certainly there is a history of repeated evacuation and immigration among the generations, first from north China to south China after the Song dynasty, then from south China to Singapore and Malaysia in the 1920s, from Malaysia to England in 1974 after affirmative action in Malaysia meant many ethnically Chinese Malays were sent abroad by their well-intentioned (read Western-idealizing) parents for their education, and most recently from England to the United States because of my father's job.

My Gung-Gung, mum's Dad, was an evacuee, but from southern China to Singapore's Clarke Quay. Body scrunched, a stowaway on a junk boat, only to re-emerge on the humid, busy banks of the island-country.

Fingertips on a bicycle wheels,

First, we see her fingers, arms,

Black shirt pushed just below her elbows.

In contrast, I made my first trans-Atlantic trip at six months old. I flew across the ocean, strapped into the plane's bassinet, and accompanied by my dad, mum, and two-year old sister. When we landed in Appleton, Wisconsin in early February, my dad slipped on the ice and dropped me on the tarmac as he deplaned.

We see her whole face, uplifted and curious.

She is alone in the forest.

It's a surreal experience hearing my mum read and read between Por-Por's writing. We learn I am a member of the Kwan's twenty-fifth generation.

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My mum, Soh Chee (or Susie), starts describing my great-grandmother's story, as written by Por-Por, which starts with my great-grandfather dying young. Together, the couple owned a Chinese medicinal herb shop on *Jalan Petaling*, the main street in Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown. When she died, she took over the shop, first with the help of a male family friend and then by herself.

... she was widowed young... when you understand what pain and suffering is, there is a kind of revelation that comes out of it and some kind of resilience about yourself, so, so that was very cool. It showed courage.... [long silence as Mum read's Por-Por's account of the story]... never forget her courage and wisdom.

My mother denies that she is Buddhist, she is a Christian convert, but after twenty-six years of teaching yoga, I wonder...

She plays, faster than any of the women before her.

She conducts the space.

Turns, spirals, catches, sings with the instrument.

Finally, we reach the part I really wanted to hear, my grandmother's recollections of her dance history, of our dancing bodies. Here Por-Por speaks directly to me and my Mum.

Before I was married, I was a member of the Chinese music and drama team of the Chen Woo Athlete Association in Kuala Lumpur, which still exists. All members of the dramatic group were female. That means the male parts were acted out by women. We used to perform shows about Chinese historical stories to help our welfare centers in Malaysia. We performed the show only once a year because we were amateurs and needed time to learn how to sing, to walk, to act and mostly we were housewives and schoolchildren. I joined the team from 1950 to 1954. Within the four years, I performed five shows...

Por-Por's account of her dance career is brief and leaves me with numerous questions.

How did she learn the choreography? Who were her friends in the group? What was the

process of putting on the elaborate makeup and costumes? Did she dream of becoming a professional? How did her experience impact how she raised her children?

When my mum was sent to England for her secondary education, my grandparents placed her in a ballet boarding school near Chester. My mum was a semi-professional ballet dancer by the time she entered university. I knew of my mum's background growing up, but never felt pushed towards a career in dance, though both my parents are supportive of my decision.

I haven't heard a lot of this story or my Por-Por's story because my Mum gets sad when she remembers. I only learned of my grandmother's dance history ten years ago, when my decision to pursue a professional career was already in motion. My mum though brushes our questions off, claiming that she has a bad memory, but my sister and I disagree, we think she still isn't ready to talk about her trauma from moving away from her familial and cultural home at such a young age. After moving to England, she did not return to Malaysia for nearly a decade and after that only intermittently during my childhood. Her last visit to the region was in 2016. She and I went to go visit my Uncle Sonny and Por-Por, who has relocated to Singapore after my Gung-Gung's (grandfather) death in 2012. Por-Por passed away only a few months after our visit and my mother did not return for the funeral. She will likely never return in her lifetime.

She finds herself at the table, pausing through, witnessing those around her, even if they are invisible. When we can see where she conducts, we see her cross, rock back and forth, catch the wave.

It is easy to be disappointed with the lack of information about my maternal family line. As [], develops however, I find joy in returning to the tiny treasure chest of source material. I hone my description skills by practicing on the images of my Por-Por in costume for her shows and allow my words to trace her body, a verbal hug in place of physical touch.

*Leather boots skim on the floor, pulsing her body through the space as she floats above.
Encountering the constellation along the way.
She arcs, waterfalls herself with child-like wonder at the world she builds.*

The world-building for [] is far from complete, in fact, it is very much in progress. In less than two weeks, I fly to New York City to start the second residency of 2022 for the work. The entire creative team will finally gather in person; Adrienne, Angélica, Seth, Nick, Lilach, Kathryn, Solana, Katie, Laura, Amanda, Marissa, and myself will congregate at Lilach's new artist-run space in Brooklyn, MOtiVE. During a short ten-day period, the sculpture will be installed, technical questions will be addressed, and dance rehearsals will commence. The residency will conclude with two informal public showings. It will be the first chance to share [] in person and allows myself and the performers to test run not only the work's overall concept, but also my audio description narration. It will be a period of questions, remembrance, and ultimately a chance to honor our ancestral lineages that bring us together.

We are caught in movement and shadow, nearing the edges of our world. Shadows on shadows multiply, dissolve and divide into generations of herself to dance with each other, returning to each other over and over again.