**Creative acts of citizenship: Performance of activist citizenship by migrant artists**

**Introduction**

The winner of the World Press Photo 2019 contest was John Moore. The winning photo shows Honduran toddler Yanela Sanchez crying as she and her mother, Sandra Sanchez, are taken into custody by US border officials in McAllen, Texas, USA. The image captured the public imagination and provoked an outcry against the Trump administration. The photo was emblematic evidence of the controversial practice of separating children from parents during illegal crossings of the US-Mexico border. After the photo was seen all around the world, US Customs and Border Protection confirmed that Yanela and her mother had not been among the thousands who had been separated by US officials. But public outcry over the controversial practice resulted in President Donald Trump reversing the policy on 20 June 2018[[1]](#footnote-1).

Despite the small victory in the USA, the contradictions surrounding this picture capture successfully some of the larger issues connected with illegal border crossing. The fact that the mother is not visible in the picture and the focus is on the child points to the fact that the actual illegal migrant is kept outside of the frame. In the media and wider cultural discourse, illegal migrants and unauthorized border crossers are usually portrayed as polluted because of their very unclassifiability (Malkki 1995a; 1995b). Through the legal system and legal regulation, the state creates a politicized human being (a citizen of a nation-state) but also a by-product, a politically unidentifiable ‘leftover’, a ‘no-longer-human being’, a non-citizen (Schütz 2000, 121). Sent back and forth between sovereign states, humiliated, and represented as human dirt, stateless asylum seekers and irregular migrants are excluded and become the detritus of humanity, leading wasted lives (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004). This specific image and the reality behind it also tell us is that migrants are often depicted as outsiders. This reinforces the story of migration as a story of people without agency. This process of dehumanisation is presently at the forefront of mainstream politics.

Many myths about the migrants’ journeys are perpetuated and over-exaggerated in the media. Unfortunately, the actual stories of what it means to transverse these borders without the right passport are rarely heard. So, how to promote a narrative led by migrants. How to encounter the story of migration told from the migrant’s own perspective? As argued by Sellars :

None of us are the picture in our passport. When a border guard looks at us for ten seconds or for ten minutes, who do they see? What in the computer file that they consult as they pass your documents through their system at a checkpoint would begin to say anything about the courage, the love, the vision, the generosity, or the potential of the human being who stands in front of them? (Sellars in Cox 2014,viii)

Therfore, in this chapter, I am looking at how migrant artists tell stories about their precarious experience of border crossing and their life after this act. I am interested in what strategies migrant artists use to claim agency and to act as citizens of their host countries. I will apply Shahram Khosravi’s argument that auto-ethnograhic approach to studying borders and migrant lives is useful and enables research that can “explore abstract concepts of policy and law and translate them into cultural terms grounded in everyday life” (p. 5).

The artwork that I will analyse is created by artists who are first generation migrants, and who use their personal journey as a starting point to create a story for their audience. These stories are complex and transgress many physical and psychological borders. I will analyse two specific art projects: La Pocha Nostra’s *Mapa/Corpo* Series and Aram Han Sifuentes’ project *Official Unofficial Voting Station*. I will argue that art work informed by auto-ethnographic research can empower the artist to fully engage their audience in an authentic portrayal of migrant experiences. Towards the end of the chapter, I will also explore how these creative interventions can be seen as performative acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008).

**Whose stories?**

Stories of migration are often told through the lenses of the receiving country, and many details about the journey and life after the crossing are lost. As argued by ~~Shahram~~ Khosravi, there is a tendency in migration studies to rank migrants along a continuum of choice, ranging from free (voluntary migration) at one end to not-free (forced migration) at the other. In migration studies, he further argues, forced migrants are usually represented as without agency. Lacking any kind of choice or option, they are looked at as victims of socio-political structures that force them to move. Khosravi further argues that:

Studies of migrant illegality are often written by people who have never experienced it; my aim has been to offer an alternative, partly first-hand, account of unauthorized border crossing that attempts to read the world through ‘illegal’ eyes. (Khosravi 2011)

Similarly, in art, the stories of migration that we usually see in galleries, on screens and theatre stages, are mediated by artists who haven’t necessarily experienced migration in their lives or who act as witness of the migrant journeys. However, this act can inadvertently objectify the subject matter and the stories can easily become appropriated through the host country lens.

I aim to demonstrate how migrant artists use autoethnography as a method to activate their personal experience, personal writing and art-making to: (1) purposefully comment on/critique cultural practices; (2) make contributions to existing research; (3) embrace vulnerability with purpose and (4) create a reciprocal relationship with the audience in order to compel a response (Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis 2013). I am particularly analysing how La Pocha Nostra and Aram Han Sifuentes adopt and perform autoethnography to explore migrant experience and their contribution as (non)citizens. How do their performative acts become creative acts of citizenship? Added to this, the chapter contains a layer of personal reflections on my own experience as an artist~~s~~ and an overseas migrant in the UK during the ‘hostile environment’[[2]](#footnote-2) period, between 2008 and 2018. You can read this reflective section on its own or as part of the chapter narrative. These vignettes meander and expose the complex act of becoming a UK citizen. This non-traditional methodological approach invites readers to engage with the chapter content in unconventional ways. I attempt to present my migrant existence in contested liminal spaces. I rarely talk with anyone about my experience with the UK Home Office system. It is difficult to say for sure after 10 years of insecurity that my memory of my interactions with this system is fully accurate, although I still pedantically keep all my applications and communication. My journey through this system was certainly far less traumatic than many other individual experiences during the hostile environment period[[3]](#footnote-3). But I thought that it is important to offer you my reflective witnessing, the accounts of real-life experience: in somewhat disturbing, private moments of realisation of my powerlessness, the embarrassment, the reality of being a ‘non-citizen’. I see this writing as an act of defying what constitutes a ‘good citizen’s’ narrative in the UK today.

**Different kind of Europeans**

I was born and raised on the edges of what geographically constitutes Europe. My childhood and youth was marked by wars and social and economic deprivation, due to the fall of Yugoslavia in the ‘90s. Very early in my life, I understood that I am not welcome in certain parts of the world. Of course, this stimulated my imagination and desire to visit these places. The lure of freedom and liberty associated with the western European countries was something that occupied my generation’s imagination. We used any means possible to reach these places. Illegally, legally, semi-legally. We married and divorced, we faked documents, we studied very hard, we lied, we were resilient, we gave up big parts of us to become Western. We were so wrong. We were never European enough.

When I arrived in the UK in 2008, the hostility against Eastern European, especially against Polish citizens, was palpable. Very often I was asked where I came from. When saying that I am from Macedonia, there was almost a relief in the voices of shop owners, taxi drivers and public servants. They always complimented me on my English and said that they wished there were more migrants like me. I still struggle to accept this as a ‘compliment’. The narrative of ‘good migrant’ never chimed with my experience in post 2009 UK. Government policies sent me constant reminders that if I overstep my welcome, I might not be perceived as a ‘good migrant’ anymore. My time was limited, with a high price tag attached to it.

*Foreigners are the undesired ones who never stop being seen as foreigners, no matter how long they have lived in the country, no matter how integrated they are into society, regardless of whether or not they were born in the country.*

**Autoethnography of borders**

Many artists and ethnographers alike, have dealt critically with various migrant stories in relation to broader questions of migration, borders and identity. Their work has creatively engaged with the complex web of interrelations and transcultural entangelments that is integral to how we perceive migration today. In order to explore this transcultural axis, I will foreground an analytical and theoretical framework around the the intersections of two areas of scholarly and artistic exploration: auto-ethnography and autohistoria (Khosravi 2011, Anzaldúa 2015, Denzin 2018) , as creative strategies used to re-consider migration journeys;and act of citizenship, an as an alternative way to investigate citizenship (Isin, 2008; 2012). Navigating this field in the next two sections, will provide me with a vocabulary for a close-readings of two artistic projects in the later parts of this chapter.

Shahram Khosravi is one of the first anthropologists and ethnographers who, based on his own illegal journey, wrote an (auto)ethnographic observation of crossing borders (2011, 4). Khosravi rightly states that studies of migrant illegality are often written by people who have never experienced it (2011, 6). Khosravi explain his decision to use autoethnographic approach:

Based on my own journey and my informants’ border narratives, I will tell of the nature of borders, border politics, and the rituals and performances of border crossing. Auto-ethnography lets migrants contextualize their accounts of the experience of migrant illegality. It helps us explore abstract concepts of policy and law and translate them into cultural terms grounded in everyday life … Border stories reveal the interaction between agency and structure in the migratory experiences. They offer a human portrait of ‘illegal’ travellers. (Khosravi 2011, 5)

Unlike depersonalized narrative, autoethnography asks its ‘readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually’ (Ellis and Bochner 2000, 745). Autoethnography links the world of the author with the world of others and it keeps alive a sense of what it means to live in a world one struggles to understand. Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text (Reed-Danahay 1997, 6).

The use of autoethnography in art goes beyond autobiographical practice. The migrant artist is not just telling their personal story, but comments on a wider context and culture in which they are embedded. This is what Gloria Anzaldúa calls autohistoria-teoría (Anzaldúa in Keating 2009, 51). Anzaldúa describes autohistoria-teoría as a blending of life stories, self-reflection, and ‘cultural and personal biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth and other forms of theorizing paired with lived experiences’ (Anzaldúa in Keating 2009, 9). Autohistoria-teoría thereby creates an interlinked landscape that fuses personal experience with theory, cultivating spaces of (re)membering and imagining and ways to ‘make knowledge, meaning, and identity through self-inscription’ (Anzaldúa 2015, 6). Anzaldúa explains this function of autohistoria-teoría in the following way:

I cannot use the old critical language to describe, address, or contain the new subjectivities. Using primary methods of presentation (autohistoria) rather than secondary methods (interpreting other people’s conceptions), I reflect on the psychological/mythological aspects of my own expression. I scrutinize my wounds, touch the scars, map the nature of my conflicts, croon to las musas (the muses) that I coax to inspire me, crawl into the shapes the shadow takes, and try to speak with them. (Anzaldúa 2015, 4)

Anzaldúa’s autohistoria-teoría and autoethnography as a method in art practice offer to the audience a space to understand the ways in which some of their worldviews are interconnected with the one deemed The Other. As argued by Andrea J Pitts, autohistoria-teoría foregrounds the fundamental interdependency between authors/speakers and readers/audiences that is necessary for any form of self-knowledge/ignorance to emerge (2016:365).

Performance autoethnography is something that extends the concepts explored by Khosravi and Anzaldúa into performing arts realm. According to Norman K. Denzin, performance autoethnography allows the performers to bring the world into play, to make it visible, to bring it alive. It allows them to forge a link between themselves and the world, to make fleeting sense out of a world gone mad (2014, 89) As further argued by Conqergood the [auto] ethnographer ‘is a co-performer in a social drama, a participant in rethorically framed cultural performances, enacting rituals, writing fieldnotes, recording interviews, videotaping, observing, talking, doing the things ethnographers do, turning research into performative inquiry (2006,360) . By following closely Denzin and Conqergood argumentation, we can conclude that performance autoethnography is not per se involved in studying the other. It is rather a process that allows the artist to reflexively write~~s~~ themselves into their performance text, into those fluid spaces where they interact with others (audience). The ultimate aim is to make the migrant artist complex world visible through their performative acts.

**Performing activist citizenship as a migrant artist**

Acts of citizenship are defined by Engin Isin as those moments when individuals, beings and groups claim, assert and impose rights through which they define themselves as active in their ways of being with others(2008, 44). The concept of acts of citizenship seeks to address the myriad of ways that human beings organize, remake and resist their ethical-political relations with others (2008, 44). Melanie White extends this definition and explores the creative apsects of becoming political (2008, 44). White reflects on Henri Bergson and suggests that as a society, we still look at citizenship as relatively homogeneous, and define it as an expression of citizens’ location in a system of obligations (2008, 48). Citizenship is traditionally organised by habits and we have limited ability to challenge, debate and critically engage. However, White argues that we can also witness profound and fundamental breaks from this traditional logic: creative acts of citizenship that engender profound ruptures in how we conceive of citizenship. These creative acts of citizenship transgresses the confines of habitual practices and consequently reorganize and reconstitute those very habits in the process (White 2008, 55). Theorizing of these acts of citizenship is a complex process, as argued by Isin and requires identifying events through which subjects reveal themselves as claimants agains injustice. Investigating the consequences of the event actions come under the description of acts of citizenship (2012,187). According to Isin:

this is where theorizing acts perhaps borrows most from the dramaturgical or performance features of acts, where it is the performance of actions that makes scene. Such scenes depend on bodies, which must collude, collide and contact each other and things that create a site. (2012, 187)

Isin therefore contrasts ‘activist citizens’ (the ones engaged in writing scripts and creating the scene) with ‘active citizens’ (the ones that follow scripts and participate in scenes). Isin defines the activist citizens as creative and as ones that perform ways of being political (2008, 39).

I am attempting to investigate what constitutes an activist citizen in the creative sector, through analysing the work of La Pocha Nostra and Aram Han Sifuentes. And while their art work and storytelling strategies can be illuminating, I remain mindful that migrant artists do not come to this process easily. Being vulnerable and open to the audience while sharing traumatic stories can be a difficult act. This kind of work can also be seen as a provocation to mainstream art institutions and audiences (as I will discuss later in the chapter, when reflecting on the work of La Pocha Nostra). The artwork that I will analyse exposes the fact that the migrant journeys doesn’t stop after they cross the physical border. This can present a challenge for artists going through the difficult process of settling in to a new environment. This is what Natasha Davies in a recent interview calls the unbalancing act as a method, but at the same time reflects on how precarious this position is. Davies says:

[This kind of work is] a very new process for me. It’s a bit unbalancing, which I

welcome, because placing myself out of balance has become my methodology for developing new work. Being out of balance is an incredibly fertile space, so I think working with participants also very much taps into that feeling, recognising the value of being thrown out of balance, as we are crossing borders.

It is worth remembering, however, that finding comfort in being out of balance is now obviously for me grounded in a more permanent place of stability, in which I now exist. And I can experiment with it. I don’t think I would’ve thought about that place of being out of balance as comfort in 1992 when I got out of Yugoslavia, when everything around me was falling apart. (2017, 42)

White similarly states that the power of social authority surrounding migrant artists and the pressure contained within the obligations associated with the processes of becoming a citizen are in contradiction with the necessity for endurance and stability over time (2008, 54).

**What is the Home Secretary responsible for?**

Are you…? Where do you…? Why do you…?

Do you speak good English?

Do you know what created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland?

Do you understand?

Who is travelling with you?

Are you the mother of this child?

When is St David’s day?

Who is the main applicant?

How much money is in your account?

How do we celebrate Christmas?

Where do we go from here?

What do we get from this?

Do I look them in the eyes?

What if I make a mistake?

What if I made a mistake?

What if there was a mistake?

**Body as a border: Mapa/Corpo**

As Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis (2013, 50) argue, autoethnographers study culture at ‘ground level, in the thick of things’ through the empirical (observation-and experience-based) method of fieldwork. Like autoethnographers, La Pocha Nostra study culture; their work often focuses on the collective relational practices between migrants and host communities. Moreover, through their pedagogical practice they explore common values, beliefs and shared experiences of artists who come from migrant backgrounds.

La Pocha Nostra was formed in 1995 by Nola Mariano and Guilermo Gómez-Peña. The objective was to create a loose interdisciplinary association of rebel artists interested in collaboration. They were inspired by Zapatismo and created a collaborative model of what they called concentric and overlapping circles, which function as a means to create ‘ephemeral communities’ of like-minded artists. For Dana Cole, the performance art of La Pocha Nostra utilizes the body to depict borderzones, a kind of corporeal intertexuality, by blending symbols, genres, gender associations, cultural icons, and historical time, which serve to dismantle hierarchy, binaries and static definitions (Cole 2014).  As an example, one of La Pocha Nostra’s most significant early pieces is Borderrama, a proscenium piece that subverts and parodies talk shows and self-help seminars and merges them with an ethnic fashion show. The collective invites the audience into the show and encourages them to arrive in costumes, dressed as their ‘favourite cultural other’. They also invite ‘special guests’ from local communities to participate in the show. In the past, these have included a drag queen and Mexican wrestlers, among others. This format is what La Pocha Nostra call *live art laboratory* in their most recent Manifesto iteration:

We are also a ‘live art laboratory’, from an international “loose association of rebel artists” thinking together, exchanging ideas, aspirations, music scores, playlists, props and creating on site projects. The basic premise of these collaborations is founded on an ideal: if we learn to cross borders on stage, in our bodies, in the gallery or museum, we may learn how to do so in larger social spheres and transgress what keeps us apart. We hope others will be challenged to do the same. This is our ultimate radical act. (2018, online)

This live art laboratory format has become a matrix for their future work and brings to the fore the two most important elements of their autoethnographic approach: the use of insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon/experience and constant seeking for a response from audiences. This overlaps with what Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis define as a common set of priorities, concerns and ways of doing research when using an autoethnographic approach. (2013, 26)

Gómez-Peña’s work has, for more than thirty years, challenged and realigned borders, not solely geographic borders (although he does address the US/Mexico border and ideas of transnationalism) but the borders we have erected around social categories that construct identity. His work embraces, art, performance and the body as means of opening up in-between spaces and exposing their inherent possibilities. The body becomes a site of representation, signification and re-signification through which identities are depicted as fluid, porous and heterogeneous. In an interview with the philosopher Eduardo Mendieta, Gómez-Peña defines the source of his inspiration in the following way:

I am interested in the culture generated by the millions and millions of uprooted peoples, the exiles, the nomad and migrants from so-called Third World countries, the orhans of crumbling nation-states who are moving North and West in search of the source of their despair. In the process, they are redefining both the North and the West. In the process, they are creating a new culture that is anti-authoritarian and anti-colonial … We really see our work as part of a much larger project involving artists, activists and intellectuals from all over the world. (Gómez-Peña and Levin 2011, 112)

This quote also addresses an important element of La Pocha’s methodology and how the collective uses insider knowledge to address migration and borders. It is very important to clarify here that the artists are reflecting on their own experience as migrants, but do not create autobiographical work as such. Gómez-Peña specifically talks about how he detests the ‘confessional’ and says:

I hate diaries and autobiographies. I have always found the ‘confessional’ tone a bit foreign. The spectacle of my own pain and (anti)heroism is strictly reserved for my beloved ones … I only write or make art about myself when I am completely sure that the biographical paradigm intersects with larger social and cultural issues. (2000, 7)

Since his early work with the Border Art Workshop (a binational collective of artists and activists that worked in the Tijuana/San Diego region between 1984 and the 1990s), Gómez-Peña has defined himself as a migrant provocateur and border crosser. He describes this process-based identity as something that he created while travelling in search of the many other Mexicos, his other selves, and the many communities to which he belongs; while travelling, he makes art, writes, theorizes and edits his memories (2000, 9). This clearly outlines the process that underpins La Pocha Nostra’s creative outcomes. The work starts from the individual artist’s lived experience on the border, but then engages with various perspectives that different contributors bring and is kept open for the audience to contribute their perspective as well.

This is evident in the piece *Mapa/Corpo*, which started in 2004 and is still an ongoing experiment. Gómez-Peña and Emiko R. Lewis began workshopping the piece as a response to the invasion of Iraq after 9/11. The group defines the piece as a performance installation, which is a poetic, interactive ritual that explores neocolonization/decolonization through ‘political acupuncture’ and the re-enactment of the post 9/11 body politics. The first iteration was only presented in Latin America, Europe and Canada, since producers in the United States found it too risky. The second iteration of the project ‘Mapa/Corpo 2: Interactive Ritual for the New Millennium’ was created and toured between 2005 and 2007. This piece has become one of the company’s most significant and lauded pieces.

The performance is usually staged in a gallery or black-box space emptied of seats, allowing the audience to circulate throughout, mingling with each other and the performers. There are focal points of varying heights located at cardinal points of the space. The main protagonists usually appear on an elevated surface, laying on a gurney. There is a man's body (Roberto Sifuentes) on one gurney and he shares the space with props such as a gas mask, a whip, and a gun, among others. The objects are placed next to him as if on an altar and suggest a story of systematic violence. On the other gurney a woman’s body (Violeta Luna) is covered with the UN flag. A trained acupuncturist inserts needles topped with small flags of occupier countries, and her body immediately becomes a metaphor for colonized and occupied territories. But then the audience is asked to ‘decolonize the Mapa/Corpo’ by carefully removing the needles with the assistance of the acupuncturist. Parallel to this, the body of the ‘the universal immigrant’ on the other gurney is exposed as a canvas and the audience members are invited to write on his body ‘a poetics of hope’.

The performers' bodies in Mapa/Corpo 2 become La Pocha Nostra's artistic canvas. As argued by Seda and Patrick, they function as instruments of artistic agency to talk about the personal experience of migration? and the wider context and effects of colonization and violence; they create a narrative of resistance to violence and colonization (2009, 139). As Mendieta observes, La Pocha performances are about marking the body, the marked body, the branding of bodies (2011, 113). But the performance starts from the lived experience of the performers, in the context of global migration politics that surrounds them and the audience members. By inviting the audience to contribute, La Pocha engages them in a ritual of healing the wider body politic, empowering them with a greater awareness of their position in the migrant-host duality. As Gómez-Peña poetically summarises:

When we perform, we are not actors, not even human beings with a fictionalized individuality. We are more like Mexican Frankenstein, artificial freaks or what I term ‘ethnocyborgs’. In other words, we are one-quarter human, one-quarter technology, one quarter pop culture stereotype and one quarter audience projection. In fact, the audience completes or alters our identities in situ with make-up and costumes. We even offer the audience the opportunity to directly intervene in our bodies and alter our identities on site. We give them permission to cross that dangerous border. (2011, 114)

Gómez-Peña’s role in the piece is to give the final monologue. He takes the role of shaman, someone who can see beyond the immediacy of the body. Melanie White talks about the importance of this role in establishing the act of citizenship as disturbance of habituated norms. She argues that the mystic (shaman) serves as a vehicle of change, but one that is also rooted in the habitual practices of everyday life(2008, 52). S/he helps us to ‘see’ that we must leap without explicit direction, without knowing where we will end up. The act that La Pocha offers represents an encounter where one opens oneself to the unknown. In this context, encounter is defined as the meeting or confrontation between people and things; and this encounter poses the problem of how to act. This last act of the shaman poses the question of why one might act one way and not another. This choice disrupts one’s habitual tendencies and ultimately opens the audience to a) the complex choices experienced by migrants in their everyday life and b) to the choices they (the audience) have - particularly in the way they engage with migrant ‘bodies’.

**Activist citizenship: Voting as an act of disobedience**

Autoethnography gains its narrative power from the process of witnessing. The significance of the voice of the witness is that the witness has been there, has seen what happened. Witnesses have themselves lived the disaster and might themselves be victims. They can retell the story and unfold the events with first-hand authority. The witness’s narrative is only one of many, albeit one that is less frequently heard. This is the context from which Aram Han Sifuentes when she creates her artistic installations. She carefully observes the political processes in her host country, the United States, from the sidelines, witnesses the injustice, and acts on it in coalition with her collaborators.

Sifuentes was born in [Seoul, South Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seoul) and immigrated to [Modesto, California](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modesto%2C_California) in 1992. She talks eloquently about the transition and the changes she witnessed, the changes in her parents’ lives when they arrived in the United States. In an interview with Kathryn Hall, Curator of the Houston Centre for Contemporary Craft,she says:

I use sewing, because it is linked to my identity politics as an immigrant of color. My mother is a seamstress, and I learned how to sew when I was six years old, the year that we moved to the United States. It was not a choice for me but a necessity to help my parents make a living as new immigrants in this country. I use sewing to create space within dominant culture for immigrants of color, particularly to insert and reclaim traditions of sewing as immigrant traditions and labor. (Han Sifuentes 2018)

Aram Han Sifuentes is aware that even though she had spent most of her life in the United States, she will be always perceived as being foreign. This is what she tries to challenge and re-order through her socially engaged practice. As an artist, she uses the needle and thread to mine from her own experiences as an immigrant and address issues of labour and identity politics. She carefully unpacks complex labour and immigrant histories by engaging with people through long-term projects utilizing varied social practices. Through this process, she creates autoethnographic performances that, according to Denzin, have the potential to intervene in and interrupt public life:

Such interruptions are meant to unsettle and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions concerning problematic issues in public life. They create a space for dialogue and questions, giving a voice to positions previously silenced or ignored … This performance aesthetic values performance narratives that reflexively go against the grain and attack the dominant cultural ideologies connected to nation, race, class, family and gender. (Denzin 2014, 73)

This potential is most visible in Han Sifuentes’ piece, [*The Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can’t*](http://www.hullhousemuseum.org/vox-pop-the-disco-party/)*.* As a legal alien of the United States who is barred from voting, Aram Han Sifuentes found herself witnessing one of the most polarised presidential election campaigns in recent American history. As argued by Jake Ladd in his comment on USA election for Chicago Reader: But most of us at least had the catharsis of casting a ballot. Millions of people living in the U.S., however, didn't have that option. Whether they're formerly incarcerated, immigrants, citizens in U.S. territories, or too young, millions of people here don't have the right to vote. ([Chicago Reader, Jake Ladd. Nov. 9, 2016](http://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2016/11/09/an-election-night-event-for-those-who-couldnt-vote%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank)) Han- Sifuentes used the frustration arising from this imposed passive position, which presumes inaction, to create the *Official Unofficial Voting Stations* to insert an unsanctioned voting process into the 2016 election season. This project was conceived as a citizen objection to the exclusion of herself and others from the central democratic processes of voting. *Official Unofficial Voting Stations* were hosted by 15 artists and radical thinkers all over the United States and in Mexico. They each created voting stations that were open to all, but particularly to the disenfranchised. To engage the various communities, the project was taken out of the traditional art spaces and even beyond US borders. Han Sifuentes invited Mexican artists to also create voting stations, since the flagship promise in the presidential campaign is a physical wall between Mexico and the USA. This means that the results will implicate the people on both sides of the border, so she offers them a chance to voice their concerns around these elections. She justifies her choice to do this by saying that:

National issues are not always local issues, and vice versa. Specificity is really important to me, since any type of generalization and abstraction becomes a violence in the ways in which it makes people and experiences invisible. I aim to make as many fights, protests, and specific concerns as present as possible. (Han Sifuentes 2018)

Image 1 here: *Official Unofficial Voting Stations by Aram Han Sifuentes (2016) . Courtesy of Aram Han Sifuentes.*

All of the voting [stations](http://www.hullhousemuseum.org/official-unofficial-voting-station-collaborators/) took on a different form depending on the collaborator. They ranged from participatory public artworks to radical performances to pedagogical tools. For example, the collaborators in Mexico City, Tijuana, and Acapulco, Cecilia Aguilar Castillo and Erick Fernández Saldaña, created a station where participants voted with fake blood then drilled screws and Mexican flags into styrofoam heads of Trump and Hillary to vote against them. Aram hosted a big public program at the Hull House with DJ Sadie Rock playing music, and Yvette Mayorga and Han Sifuentes facilitating a workshop on how to build a piñata wall. When the wall was completed, the audience was invited to help bash it. On results night, Roberto Sifuentes, DJ Sadie Rock, and Aram Han Sifuentes performed and asked the public to fill out ballots at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. On the days leading up to the election, ex-offenders, permanent residents, tourists, disenfranchised voters, Mexicans and immigrants who couldn’t legally vote were able to cast their ballots in unofficial voting stations. On the night that Donald Trump became president-elect, Hillary Clinton won the unofficial election in the installation. All ballots cast at these voting stations were returned to the Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago to be counted and were later displayed in the final project installation at the museum. So, like La Pocha Nostra, in her autoethnographic approach, Han Sifuentes used insider knowledge of a cultural phenomenon/experience to challenge dominant notions of who has the right to participate in the democratic process, and invited a response from audiences and participants to make sense of a wider political context.

Aram Han Sifuentes talks about the difficulty of remaining an active observer/witness during the moments of adversity or violence, when your fears appear to be justified and says:

…as a non-citizen and a new mother, I do not always feel safe going to protests. At the official election on November 8th, 2016 Trump won the U.S. Presidential Elections. Personally, I was devastated by the elections, as many were. Coming from a place of great anxiety and disorientation, I found the only thing I could do was make. I started to make protest banners in my apartment. (Han Sifuentes 2018)

She used the material and anxiety coming out of Official Unofficial Voting Stations to start her most recent project, *Protest Banner Library* (2016). This project enables her to protest against Trump’s political agenda in a number of meaningful ways. Aram Han Sifuentes conceived the Library as a space for people to gain skills to learn to make their own banners, a communal sewing space where they can support each other’s voices, and a place where people can check out handmade banners to use in protests. She is keen to develop a communal space where people can see, talk and sense solidarity. The library holds banners that will be used and re-used which recognises that there are no quick fixes to the political struggles we face today. Both projects were brought together at Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago for a final installation (more about this in the interview at the end of this article).

Aram Han Sifuentes’s work possesses an incredible amount of depth, detail, emotionality, nuance and coherence, which all permit the formation of a critical consciousness, or what Paulo Freire terms *conscientization* (2000). Denzin claims that through this critical consciousness or *conscientization* the oppressed gain their own voice and collaborate in transforming their culture (2014, 73). The project *Official Unofficial Voting Stations* enacts an ethic of care and an ethic of personal and communal responsibility and empowerment. Sifuentes’s project celebrates difference and the sounds of many different voices.

According to Nielsen, as events ‘acts of citizenship’ are unique moments where local and/or transnational actors ‘claim the right to claim rights’ or impose obligations with respect to injustices and already instituted practices (2008, 268). Such acts, Nielsen argues, improvise creative and convincing arguments for justice against unjust laws as well as their intended or unintended exclusionary consequences. Voting is an act that Aram Han Sifuentes and her collaborators creatively appropriated, and gave to the people that are most implicated by the outcome of the election. This indeed might be only an act of citizenship that aesthetically shapes the political moment, but it certainly offers the audience a way to think about how they can transform the administrative, moral and legal imperatives that regulate non-citizens.

**Becoming British**

Waiting has been a part of our life for ten years. Waiting for documents to arrive, waiting for approval, waiting for the change in circumstances to be logged. A decade of our lives in waiting.

In a small waiting room. We arrive and sit next to another family with two young children. We know that we are in a similar position. But we chat about the weather, food and lack of catering facilities. We despretely try to normalise this process, which tests our ability to remain human, to be human. Hours pass by, the children are restless, we can’t leave the room until our biometric data is logged. I try to watch television, endless programmes about how government successfully manages benefit fraud. I wait patiently, although deep down I know everything is wrong with this situation.

I sit in front of a Home Office clerk. Again, we discuss the weather, school runs and bank holidays. I wonder how it feels to assess human beings in the name of the state, day in, day out. I guess it’s a job, something that feeds the kids. A tick-box exercise. We just have to fit in the right box, so we can go on with our lives.

We leave the building with the permit. It is a strange relief, like somehow, I have been seen. It is strangely reassuring. In the car, my daughter says: *Well, I guess we are Brit(ish)[[4]](#footnote-4) now…like that book that sits on your desk…*

The rain outside becomes heavier, I look at the horizon, silent. I am a citizen of nowhere, trapped in endless procedures, I don’t belong anywhere. *I guess we are…*

**Citizens of nowhere**

This chapter looked at performative acts by the artist group La Pocha Nostra and the artist Aram Han Sifuentes. I analysed their work and how they tell stories about their precarious experience of border crossing as migrant artists and their life after this act. The text also analysed their auto-ethngraphic strategies and how they use their performative acts to claim agency and to act as activist citizens of their host countries. There are certainly limitations to these performative acts. They are small, insignificant performative interventions and can easily be lost and forgotten in the sea of information that we all swim in. But, as a migrant artist, I find comfort in their existence. I revel in their capacity to question what is happening in my life and in the lives of millions of others who are citizens of nowhere. In the current moment, where citizenship is again reframed and used by nationalistic and fascistic forces, it remains imperative to think beyond dominant definitions. It is imperative to be comical, open, disruptive and creative as a citizen; to tell the story of the ones who are experiencing institutional abuse because of their (non)citizenship.

I also want to highlight that these kinds of performative acts can only be retrospectively constituted and perceived as creative interruptions. If we return to White’s argument, the creative act of citizenship is one where the answer to the question of action is not already assumed, but one must pose the question and leap in uncertainty (2008). Due to their scale and locality, the work of the artists that I analysed, can easily remain unrecognised as acts of citizenship. Also, the work is underfunded and has a DIY element to it, due to the fact that the work does not ‘appeal’ to mainstream audiences in large cultural institutions. However, the performative acts of La Pocha Nostra and Aram Han Sifuentes come from a place of questioning and the structure is kept open on purpose. This allows them as artists to find a way to make the audience understand what it means to be on the other side. According to Denzin, politically, these kinds of projects use auto-ethnography to imagine what a truly democratic society might look, including one free of racial prejudice and oppression (2003, 113). Both La Pocha Nostra and Aram Han Sifuentes acknowledge that they sometimes feel lonely as voices of migrants in the wider cultural sector and that change is necessary. White argues that creative acts of citizenship engender profound ruptures in how we conceive of citizenship (2008, 55). And the work of La Pocha Nostra and Han Sifuentes allowed me to think through this ruptures and through the complex circumstances of migrant artists, who need to constantly question and reassess their position as citizens in their host countries. For better or worse, their precarious citizen migrant status puts them in direct confrontation with the habitual tendencies of the host community.

Citizenship is not only a legal status; it is also enacted through practices and ritualsm through being an activist citizen. Consequently, acts of citizenship compromise not only the establishment or challenging of rights and obligations, but also the construction, interpretation and reinterpretation of those practices and rituals that act to sustain the myths underlying particular conceptions of citizenship. It is clear we need to reinvent how migrants conceive citizenship in the countries where they reside, even if they are non-citizens. Or, as has been argued by Marsili and Milanese, what constitutes the citizens of nowhere is their potential to act in the name of that which is not yet actual, perhaps as yet not even fully thought out (2018, 12). The performance work of La Pocha Nostra and Aram Han Sifuentes can therefore be seen as an ‘autonomous border zones’ where the transit of ideas, radical art, and human bodies is not only allowed but encouraged. As Gómez-Peña pointedly reflects:

The goal for us nowadays is to welcome all demonised others into our performance universe, and this includes all the trans-national (occupied) spaces we work in and treat young artists from all communities as true peers and first-class citizens, even if only for the duration of the workshop or the performance. In our performance universe, there are no passports, no border patrolmen and no social classes. We know, it is an imaginary space, but we also know that it exists, even if only for the duration of a project. (2017, 57)

This imaginary space is where migrant artists can question what it means to be an activist citizen. Also, this is a place where we can all escape from the ‘good immigrant’ narrative and allow ourselves to play out migrant political contributions in all their nuances and complexity.

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**Interview with Aram Han Sifuentes and Roberto Sifuentes**

This interview was first published as part of *The Displaced & Privilege: A Study Room Guide on Live Art in the age of hostility* in 2017, publication commissioned by Live Art Development Agency.

I am sitting outside of Jane Addams Hull-House Museum in Chicago, where I just saw the *The Official Unofficial Voting Station: Voting for All Who Legally Can’t*. In this piece Aram Han Sifuentes welcomes anyone to vote, but it is made especially for those who are discontented and the disenfranchised. I am completely shocked by the numbers. In the piece, Han Sifuentes underlines the fact that there are 91.2 million people in the United States and its territories who cannot legally vote (youth under 18, non-citizens, the incarcerated, ex-felons, residents of US territories, and people without state IDs). This means that 1 in every 4 people cannot legally vote. 1 in 10 people who are over 18 years old cannot vote. We sit in the Hull House dinning room with Aram and Roberto, while the museum buzzes with people who are attending Open Engagement in Chicago. The atmosphere of despair, but also hope for change, is palpable in the room. We discuss Trump, voting and displacement for an hour, before we go to see some more work at the conference.

**Elena:** I just voted in your piece, but as an immigrant I can’t vote in the UK. I was really

moved by the piece and by your talk yesterday, because I think voting is a process that we don’t discuss enough. In the UK, European union citizens were not allowed to vote during the Brexit referendum. Those are people who have lived in the UK for 20, 30 years. So, they were excluded from a vote that would determine their future.

**Roberto:** They are excluded from a vote that pertains to their existence…

**Elena:** Exactly. So, I felt that your piece is so important, in both the American and European context. Can you tell me how you came up with the idea?

**Aram:** I am a Korean, non-US citizen and I’ve been here for 25 years. I have my personal reasons for not applying for citizenship. But I desperately wanted to vote in this election [2016 US Presidential Elections] mostly because the stakes are so high. Of course, it didn’t turn out the way I wanted it to, but I was thinking out loud. I really want to vote. How do I do that? How do I open up a space where everyone can vote, particularly the disenfranchised. So I did some research and initially it was really hard to find actually how many people can’t vote. And then when I found the actual data, I was astounded at how many millions of people are excluded from the voting process. It is almost like one in four people. I felt like I couldn’t do something small in scale after knowing this. I really wanted to create as many voting stations as possible to collect as many votes as possible. I invited different collaborators to create voting stations with me. The actual act of creating is a part of this project.

**Elena:** I agree, the space is very performative and it demystifies how the voting process works.

**Aram:** So, each collaborator did their own thing. The process took on many different formats. It all depended on the collaborator and their work, and what they wanted to do. We were constantly thinking about what would be the best way to get votes from disenfranchised communities that we were working with. Not all of the collaborators were just artists either. I worked with an immigration lawyer, activists, and partners from the Hull-House Museum. One of these collaborators was formerly incarcerated and currently does activism working in and out of prisons with those formerly incarcerated. So he took ballots into a prison in Illinois. Every voting station was very different, based on what type of community we were trying to get involved in voting.

**Elena:** Why did you decide to have a live art element?

**Roberto:** Really the nature of the project is to be open and inclusive. It provides voting stations open to everyone, at this very crucial political moment. This model is a kind of kit for different invited artists to use within their communities. What is that disenfranchised community? Are they undocumented or prisoners or merely discontented voters. And what is the best way to access that community? So in a sense, the concept itself is a performance art piece.

It’s a conceptual performative piece that calls for innovation and site specificity. It allows the

piece to take on multiple formats; an audio piece; a simple desk piece; an elaborate participatory installation. Or it can happen in a discotheque or in a border zone in Mexico. In Mexico this piece also served as a pedagogical tool where our collaborators, Cecilia and Erik, brought in students from their university and created a semester long experience for them.

Aram visited my Border-Crossing class at SAIC, and some undocumented students found this project a particularly pertinent tool to address the current moment. They are under attack in the US. I mean that is just what is happening right now. These people are under direct attack and live in a constant state of fear and increasing trauma in their own homes. So we used it, the voting station, as a pedagogical tool. Aram came, talked about the piece, and offered ballots for the students to do whatever they want[ed] with them. The piece was really a response to the frontal assault on immigrants, displaced people, women, queers.

**Aram:** That’s why the next iteration of the project will be during the Mexico election. The initial collaboration that happened in Mexico was so interesting, and I learned so much from it. Really they were the most successful in terms of how they just geared up people to wait in line for their turn to vote. In the USA people were excited, but it didn’t seem as urgent. The voting station in Acapulco had a huge line the entire day. This made me think about the gesture of voting across borders. And how important that is.

**Elena:** It is very poignant how the main messages from the project appear on the textiles during the installation in Hull House. Aram you are also a prolific banner maker. You say on your web site that: ‘Banners are a way for me to resist what is happening in the United States and in the world. It is a way to put my voice out there and not stay silent’. This spring you opened the The Protest Banner Lending Library as a space for people to gain skills to learn to make their own banners and a place where people can check out handmade banners to use in protests.

**Aram:** The Protest Banner Lending Library project is such a logical continuation, because it moves from the act of casting your vote to the act of protesting the results. The act of making

a statement and being there, being forward. Because our ability to protest is minimised, cornered… Boxed in by the government, the police, laws around protests… Especially for those who are not citizens. People even get deported for getting arrested during protest. That’s such a scary space to be.

**Roberto:** The act of voting, the act of the banner making workshops, getting people

together and providing those kinds of tools is a pedagogical space as well. With audiences, with scholars, with activists, who all come to this space, and teach each other. What are the strategies of the advocate and of the activist versus that of the dancer, performance artist? Where do the concerns intersect between the radical queer community in Mexico City versus the political left or the political right? Where are the intersections, and where are the conflicts? Those are really some of the spaces that these projects want to open up. We’re really interested in providing new models of collaboration.

A**ram:** Definitely it is also about the ethics of making this kind of work; that’s something I’m

always concerned with in terms of this type of project. That’s why I create this kind of open

space where anyone can participate on any level. So, you can make a banner, and you can

also check one out… I try to create spaces where power is equal as much as possible amongst all participants… how do we create these spaces together… in the various communities that we are all in and from.

**Roberto:** So the issues we’re talking about here are precisely those that are happening in Europe and other places in the world. This was why we wanted to continue these projects. We don’t see it as something exclusively about Trump and this moment in the US, but rather a project that can translate to the political realities in many countries across the globe.

**Aram:** Voting especially across borders is such a gesture of care. Because we care about what happens in the world.

**Roberto:** The votes that the audience casts are poetic messages, are gestures, are drawings, are like expressions into the wind. Their voices are in the air. We need to fill the air with dissent and discord and these strong voices, so that we feel that energy.

1. It’s worth noting that despite this official reveral children were still being separated from their familes well into 2019 (see, eg. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-child-migrant-separate-us-border-mexico-immigration-family-a9028366.html>) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Hostile Environment Policy announced in 2012 by Theresa May, is aimed at producing voluntary leave. According to Diana Martin, this policy is closely tied to processes of subjectivisation that construct illegality and ‘waste’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As one of the most traumatic injustices isTheWindrush scandal, a 2018 British political scandal concerning people who were wrongly detained, denied legal rights, threatened with deportation, and, in at least 83 cases, wrongly deported from the UK by the Home Office. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hirsch, Afua. 2018. *Brit(ish). On race, identity and belonging*. London: Random House. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)