

**Can I get a Witness?**

**A Supporting Paper  
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Department of Art  
University of Minnesota**

**By: Lorena Molina**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts Degree in Art  
2015**

**Committee:**

**Primary adviser: Christina Schmid**

**Lynn Lukkas**

**Paula Rabinowitz**

*“My interest here is to fully politicize the existing art-world context, to confront you here with the presence of certain representative individuals who are alien and unfamiliar to that context in its current form, and to confront you with your defense mechanisms against them: mechanisms of fear, hostility, rationalization, and withdrawal. If your interest is to enjoy, then our interests diverge. If it’s to categorize, then our interest conflict. If it is to be diverted or to consider new sources of investment, or to get cultured, then our interests are irreconcilable.”Adrian Piper. Black Arts Movement: Adrian Piper Four Intruders Plus Alarm Systems. Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio, 1980.*

## **Introduction - Collective Traumas**

The video starts and as I look into the camera a hand strikes my face over and over again. Sometimes I stop the unknown aggressor's slap, but many times I just let the hand lie on me. On another screen a new film begins. My body stands still as an iron is thrown over and over at me. At times, my body avoids the iron, sometimes it remains motionless as the iron strikes the space right next to it. The viewer sees me flinch as I struggle to keep looking at the camera. There are marks and dents left on the wall after the repeated impacts of the iron. A third screen starts. I try to speak as wave of water repeatedly drowns my words. I try again, and again, water silences me. A fourth video starts. I am throwing myself against a wall to the point of exhaustion.

My series *Collective Traumas* explores the experience of pain and the perception of the pain of others. What started as reenactments of personal traumas now represents bigger problems of oppression, racial segregation in the museum, questions of power and privilege, the oppositional power of the gaze with the aim to make the voices of the oppressed heard. The videos invite the viewer to bear witness to acts that may be difficult to encounter or confront, yet are part of our everyday landscape and shared history. Pain is political, and the work questions our awareness and complicity as active members of a society that inflicts pain on people's everyday lives.

Relationships and intimacy have been central to my artistic practice. My work aims to delve into the complexity of raw human emotions that simultaneously connect and alienate us. The work is both nurturing and conflictual; violent and loving; honest and vulnerable. It records my genuine longing to establish some kind of long lasting connection that extends beyond the walls of the gallery and the museum. The possibility of creating meaningful relationships with the subjects and viewers of my projects drives my work. The 1970s feminist motto, “the personal is political” explains in part the work I make. I see relationships and the way we form them as political. They are affected by politics and the personal affects how we act politically. When I say political, I do not only refer to electoral politics, but I am also talking about power relations in personal relationships and how these relationships are guided by negotiations of power and privilege.

### **Biography- An Early Encounter**

The fact that pain is political was made clear to me at an early age. I grew up during the Civil War in El Salvador. Most of my family fled to the United States during the war in the 1980s and 1990s. My mother refused to leave because she was in love with my father and pregnant with me. Although I was only six years old when the peace treaty was signed, I remember hiding with my mother under our bed and hearing the rifles fire outside our house. As children we shared stories about the Mozote Massacre in which the Salvadoran army killed 900 men, women and children, often raping the women before killing them. I grew up in a country attempting to rebuild itself after twelve years of my people dying while seeking liberation. The

images of bloody bodies are buried in my brain.

In the meantime, I grew up with an abusive, single, young mother whose behavior, although I do not seek to offer excuses, was the result of the injustices and difficulties that she had to face during this time of war. Her actions were the result of a larger ideology which considers it acceptable to beat your own child or wife, and part of a community that would turn a blind eye towards such offenses because people had problems of their own. Sexism, patriarchy and capitalism all play parts in the oppression of women and children, and these problems are magnified in a country where the majority goes hungry.

### **Biography - Graduate School**

As I pursue my MFA, I am aware of the statistics: one out of four women experiences domestic violence in the U.S. (Tjaden and Thoennes, 2000). I'm aware that the incarceration rate of black men is a form of modern-day slavery. I'm aware that women are seen as sex objects. Popular media teach us that we gain power through our sexuality defined through the gaze of men. Women are striving for equality. Women are striving to be seen. The Michael Brown case enraged me. Black men are trying to be seen less to avoid confrontations with racist policing. I became dissatisfied with discussing another Michel de Certeau article while there is a war going on outside. I became dissatisfied spending hours talking about yet another type of work that felt self-absorbed and self-indulgent and matters only within the art context. Nobody cares outside. I became dissatisfied with the fact that for most of my graduate career there were only two people

of color out of the thirty students in the graduate program. We were the exception. My classmates don't look like me. Professors don't look like me. I can't see myself in them. We once had a meeting about the things that we would change about the art program. The graduate students wrote a list of their demands on the wall. There was only one post about more diversity. It was my request. The others requested more studio time or more time with their advisors. It seems that if something doesn't directly affect you, you cannot demand it or even see it.

And there I was attempting to make genuine connections within the gallery setting.

In graduate school, we talked extensively about “The Other” and oppression in my theory classes. As progressive as it may seem in Minnesota in a room full of academic critical thinkers, talking about my experience as “The Other” made me feel as the other in the room. When I got to finally read bell hooks for the first time, I felt that we lived a parallel academic life when she described her graduate experience.

“They greeted me as colonizers. No need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still the colonizer, the speaking subject. And you are now at the center of my talk.' Stop. We greet you as liberators” (hooks, 208).

I too, have shared this inescapable problem. In academia, I see experts treating the pain of others as something that can be understood simply because they have read about it; simply because they comprehend the structures and systems that cause pain. However, learning how something works and explicating the many structures of oppression, does not mean that you know how something feels or understand the experience of suffering.

To be victimized, to be silenced, to be marginalized, to have fewer opportunities than the white male counterpart, to work extra hard to get the same opportunities as the privileged, it's not something that can be learned. To not be seen and be an invisible member of society is not something that you can become an expert on. We all experience pain and suffering. I am not trying to make a hierarchy of pain or to say my pain is greater than your pain. But this is the pain that I am qualified to write about and I'm an expert on. This is the pain I know and the pain that is part of my everyday existence.

Being the other in the art department changed my work and myself. I became more defiant. My work could not afford the luxury of being about process or art for art's sake. My presence at this university became political and the gallery a site for warfare.

### **The you and I- Defining Relations**

It feels important and even necessary to distinguish who is the intended audience for my work. I am very cautious and aware that my work may trigger emotions in people who may have had violent and painful experiences like mine. I take this into consideration by the way I choose

to display the work. The videos are exhibited on small screens, so that the viewer has to make a conscious decision to want to interact with the work. And although I hurt with the women who have had to endure what I went through; this work is about them, but not for them. *Collective traumas* is not a work that is cathartic or aims to bring any kind of resolution personally. The performances are neither therapeutic nor self-indulgent. I am here to fully politicize pain and the act of witnessing. The work is my gift to the oppressor. It's for those who turn a blind eye to those who hurt. It is my gift to a university that does not reflect its diverse surroundings and makes people of color feel isolated. It is my gift to the history of many art shows which the oppressed have not been invited to join. So when I say "you" in this paper. This is the you. You who have chosen to look the other way.

### **Pain as a Metaphor**

Pain as a subject separates and isolates, because pain escapes and eludes language. To describe pain is to turn to metaphors. As Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through resistance to language...physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" ( 4). Therefore, we understand pain as "my pain" but the ability to understand other people's pain is limited. My videos live within this intersection of resistance to language and the need to share personal pain. The confrontations with the violence documented within and emanating from the videos remind the viewers of their own bodily experience of pain. My pain connects with your pain; there's nothing more intimate than watching someone hurt.

The “non-representational qualities of pain” (Green, 381) provide justification and motivation for my work. Through video and performance, I attempt to create an encounter with pain that gives viewers a chance to bear witness to the experience. Because pain is an inwardly oriented experience the encounter with another’s pain is a particularly intimate and particularly difficult one. The work is not about sharing the invocation of beauty and joy that directs one’s gaze outwards to the splendor of the world. The videos invite the viewer to allow oneself to be drawn inwards to the experience of another, encountering another being at her most vulnerable and open, and perhaps even letting oneself connect to that pain and be drawn further inwards as a result.

### **Viewer as Witness**

As the viewers see my face being slapped over and over again, I hear the question, “What do you want from me?” The mouths uttering this question look offended and disappointed. Do I want visibility? Do I want sympathy? The performance doesn’t disguise itself as anything other than a performance. The viewer knows that I’ve done this to myself. I know that the next question must be why?

First, let us talk about sympathy. If I were asking the viewer to feel sympathy, I’m still asking for validation. I’m still allowing you to tell me that it’s ok to feel this way. Sympathy allows people to feel like they have done their part and that there is nothing else they can do. This defeatist attitude seems purely for personal benefit. The one in pain doesn’t gain anything from self-serving validation and pity. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag writes, “So

far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims of innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all good intentions) an impertinent- if not an inappropriate response” (102). I’m also not asking for recognition. Kelly Oliver in *Witnessing Beyond Recognition* states that “understanding recognition as something the oppressed deserve is a stance that derives from the pathology and psychic damage oppression engenders” (9). The pathology of oppression creates a need for the oppressed to be recognized by their oppressors. Yet the paradigm of recognition fails because it remains within a hierarchical structure.

I am asking for Witnesses.

“*Witnessing*” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the action of being present or observing something, to bear witness, to see with your own eyes, to be a spectator. However, witnessing does not only imply the juridical sense of an eye-witness account but also suggests, in a religious sense, bearing witness to what we cannot see, what can never be seen, what is impossible to see. Oliver writes that subjectivity is constructed in the ability to respond to and address others (73). If oppression works on restricting agency by denying individuals the ability to respond and be responded to, through witnessing those positioned as Other can begin to repair their damaged subjectivity from oppression, by taking the position of speaking subjects.

Therefore, to witness is to open oneself up to difference. To witness is to understand that although it might be difficult to understand pain that hasn’t been experienced personally, these

stories of oppression are still part of the collective narrative that creates our understanding of ourselves and our world. Once we become conscious of witnessing those experiences and stories that have contributed to the marginalization of subjects we see as “the other” we understand ourselves more completely.

Furthermore, in the process of testifying we get to hear our own story. Thus, by telling our story, we tell it to ourselves. My videos about pain ask for witnesses to the horrors of injustices caused to women. They also ask the viewers to come to terms with their own privilege by witnessing acts that their advantages might have protected them from a situation they perhaps take for granted. By the viewer serving as witness, the work can function as a platform for dialogue and raise questions not only about which systematic oppressions can cause this pain but how but to become aware and ask about our own overlooked complicities in them. Because opening up oneself to another’s pain is an encounter with the other at his or her most vulnerable, the act calls for an intimacy and willingness for shared subjectivity rarely demanded in the gallery.

### **The Gallery as a Place for Witnessing**

Oliver’s reworking of our understanding our subjectivity and the significance of witnessing encourages a reconsideration of the relationship between the artist and viewer. In particular, I ask whether it is possible to call the audience to witness through encountering my work in the space of the gallery. I am in dialogue with the writings of Claire Bishop who writes

in “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” that change is created by relationships that are born from antagonism and debate. She explains that “without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order--a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy” (Bishop 66). Bishop is critical of relational aesthetics praised by Nicholas Bourriaud, such as the work of Rirkit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free) 1992*, in which the artist moved everything out of the gallery's office into the main exhibition space, and proceeded to make curry for the gallery visitors. Bishop argues that it is not enough for artists to bring people together as this does not question the political implications of the relationships being formed. Instead, people from different backgrounds and opinions must be brought into the conversation so there can be a substantial discussion that can destabilize and put into question who and what we might think we are in these gathering spaces. While Oliver’s writing on witnessing does not prioritize conflict or antagonistic relationships, I believe that Bishop’s idea of antagonism resonates with Oliver’s emphasis on bearing witness as an act that opens space for further dialogue.

I too am critical of Bourriaud’s optimism that the gallery can provide a home to these meaningful encounters, because the gallery is the symbolic materialization of hegemonic culture itself. Rather than calling for observers to bear witness and open themselves up, the halls of the gallery allow the viewer to judge the art as a safely contained and well-packaged aesthetic object. The museum and gallery context always implies a particular public and restricts the type of interactions that can happen and the type of people who can take part in the conversation.

The artist should demand more from the viewer than to simply participate in an activity

that just by virtue of being in the gallery becomes art. I agree with Bishop that the quality of the relationship should be questioned, since it is not enough to simply build relationships. Instead it is important to understand how we build these relationships and what their function is. We must also examine with whom these relationships are being formed. If they're exclusive, then the artist is not creating an intervention that I find personally effective. Like Adrian Piper, I too aim to have my work completely politicize the gallery and represent individuals that are often excluded from the art gallery conversation. Through my videos I aim to question how pre-conceived ideas of the other affect our understanding of their pain. My work is not interested in entertaining, amusing nor being a form of art for art's sake. Rather, through de-centering the subjectivity of the viewer, I hope to open a space for dialogue and conversation; a place for witnessing.

My work differs from the works that Bishop describes as successful such as as the work of Santiago Sierra. The recurrent theme of Sierra's work considers the exploitation of labor by capitalism and how the end product of the labor as a commodity is valued more than the time of the laborer. He does this by implementing the same type of exploitation techniques in the gallery. Although my work is challenging to watch and demands a lot from the viewer, my work does not aim to prove a point by further exploiting, marginalizing and making a spectacle of the oppressed or the viewer. Yes, capitalism exploits and the gallery and the museum are not as democratic as these spaces would like to be believe. However, creating spaces where people feel attacked and demeaned doesn't allow a space for reflection, opening up and witnessing. My

work gives viewers the opportunity to choose if and how they interact with the work by the aesthetics decisions I choose to display the work, such as the use of small screens and headphones. The work is confrontational without being overbearing. It allows for an intimate interaction where people could choose to have a space for reflection if they allow themselves to do that.

My work lives two separate lives depending on where it is shown. In the gallery, it becomes a confrontation, a form of resistance against invisibility, against the silencing, against making work that is purely for aesthetic consumption. This confrontation needs to happen because of the political implications that the work represents within the gallery. Either way, the gallery eats it up and makes it part of an art movement such as institutional critique practiced by Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Andrea Fraser. The biggest flaw with activist art in the museum setting, although I do not question the good intentions of the artists, is that the people that are most affected by the topics of conversation are not invited to enter the conversation. I have gone to far too many art shows about inequality, oppression, capitalist critique and poverty, where the majority of people are white, middle class and art educated. I feel different in those openings, my stomach knots. I know that I'm the exception in the crowd.

### **Places of Resistance**

In my ideal life as an artist, my work would either live in the public sphere, or I would exhibit in community galleries. The artificiality of the graduate school life will soon be over. My work doesn't need to tell the oppressed they're oppressed. They know their own reality. They're

living outside the gallery everyday. The work, when it lives in the public space, gets to fight the battle where it is happening. This allows the work to come to its full life. The conversation is extended. Communities of care would be built on the commonality that we understand each other's pain.

As humans we seek social spaces that make us feel like we belong as well as a place that can serve as a dwelling for the healing of the wounds created by the injustices of the world (hooks, *Belonging*, 43). Without these spaces, we experience a sense of crisis; we are lost, powerless and those that dominate us continue to have control over us. Yet, this healing can't be done alone. We need relationships that provide us with a sense of community where we can regain our strength and be whole again. bell hooks quotes Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn who writes,

“Resistance means opposition to being invaded, occupied, assaulted and destroyed by the system. The purpose of resistance, here, is to seek the healing of yourself in order to be able to see clearly. I think that communities of resistance should be places where people can return to themselves more easily, where the conditions are such that they can heal themselves and recover their wholeness” (43).

We can't fight if we're weak and wounded and we feel alone. We can't fight the injustices of the world if we don't have a safe space to recover. Communities of care, as hooks states in her book *Belonging*, are necessary to create relationships with one another where we feel we can become ourselves; a place where we can experience respect and open up to the experiences of others.

The University of Minnesota does not offer these safe spaces where the oppressed can build communities of care. On February 9, 2015, thirteen students got arrested at the Office of the President of the University because they asked for their safe spaces. In the recording of the sit-in protest you can hear one of the students requesting through tears,

"People in this campus don't look like us. The police that arrests us don't look like us. We do not need this harassment anymore. Every day we feel uncomfortable walking in this campus. You sit in your office and you talk about how that's your space, but yet again and again the university hasn't allowed spaces that students of color can call their own, this is without considerations to the experiences that students are experiencing in this university, and yes you may say this is your office and it's your sacred space, but we don't have these spaces in the university" – (*Whose Diversity* video documentation Feb 2015)

How can an institution that it is embedded in racism and oppression serve as a community of care? It's impossible under these circumstances. I can spend all the time trying to make relational work in the gallery that is supposed to be healing but as long as the vast majority of faculty, the students and the people who attend the gallery don't look like me. This is battlefield.

### **The Power of the Oppositional Gaze**

In “The Oppositional Gaze”, hooks writes that the invention of cinema allowed black people to look at white people without repercussion. hooks writes how she learned at an early

age that looking is political:

“When thinking about black female spectators, I remember being punished as a child for staring, for those hard intense direct looks children would give grown-ups, looks that were seen as confrontational, as gestures of resistance, challenges to authority. The ‘gaze’ has always been political in my life. Imagine the terror felt by the child who has come to understand through repeated punishments that one's gaze can be dangerous. The child who has learned so well to look the other way when necessary-. Yet, when punished, the child is told by parents, "Look at me when I talk to you." Only, the child is afraid to look. Afraid to look, but fascinated by the gaze. There is power in looking” (95).

There’s also bravery in looking. The freedom to look is taken for granted by the privileged. The possibility to look back when oppressed seems unthinkable, dangerous and even deadly.

There’s history clinging to the limbs of our trees of our people losing their life after looking.

Violence is embedded in everyday experiences for the oppressed. I live in a society where I am to be looked at; advertising tells me so, movies, music, and when I walk down the street. I am aware of my presence by the gaze of others. Yet, I know that I am not supposed to look back. When I first moved to the United States, I was bullied intensely because of my inability to speak English. As I sat on my school table with people who I knew were not my friends, I heard them say, inches from my face, “Bitch...bitch...bitch...” Repeatedly over and

over again. My earlier experiences in life had taught me not to look. I knew that looking would only continue to feed the persecution. I never looked back as they called me names. My eyes closed as I felt hands land on my body time and time again. My denial to look as a child has given me an unlimited desire to look now as an adult. My gaze in my videos challenges the viewers' gaze as they look at me. My gaze acts as resistance in my work. I see you looking at me, and we for once become aware of each other's presence.

Jane Blocker writes in *Where is Ana Mendieta?* "While many male artists experimented with the unfamiliar experience of making themselves the object of the viewer's gaze, female artists worked to expose the violence and control that can lie behind the gaze, which for them (us) is never novel nor escapable" (15). Mass shootings such as Elliot Rodger's stabbing and shooting spree in Isla Vista, California, in 2014, where he targeted women that he felt had dismissed, ignored and deprived him of the sex and recognition he rightfully deserved, provide a particularly disturbing example of how dangerous and deadly the male gaze can be. Examples like this demonstrate that it is not simply the privilege to look that is at stake. The gaze is inextricably tied to an entitlement or perceived right to touch, judge, and the expectation of both submission and recognition.



49-55. *Rape Scene*, apartamento de Ana Mendieta, Iowa, 1973. [cat. 7]

Figure 1, Ana Mendieta, *Rape Scene*, Ana Mendieta's apartment, Iowa, 1973

In Ana's Mendieta, *Rape Scene*, Mendieta's friends found her in her apartment lying half naked on a table with her pants down, broken plates on the floor and blood all over her legs. The performance was done in response to the rape and killing of nursing student Sara Ann Otten in 1973. The performance was designed to replicate the description of how Otten's body was found as described on the press. Mendieta positions the viewer as the assaulter or witness. In the photographs and the performance, the viewer becomes either the perpetrator or onlooker of a crime. Either way, she/he becomes bystander to a violent event. In my video, *Iron*, you see an iron being thrown at me over and over again. The iron seems to come from the same angle as the viewer because you see me staring straight to the camera. In this way, my work creates the same binary relationship of assaulter and witness for the viewer.

The difference between Mendieta's *Rape Scene* and my *Iron* video lies between *action* and *outcome*. In *Iron*, the violence is a never-ending cycle with no resolution. The action doesn't show the viewer the result. In Mendieta's work, you don't see the action but you see the outcome of the violence. In *Hit* where an unknown aggressor hits me over and over again, you see the action and you see the end result of my body bruised with the imprints of the beating. My body reddens after contact with the force of the hand.

I wonder what the act of looking at the action or the aftermath result instigates in the viewer. In one, perhaps the viewer gets the urgency to want to stop it or do something about it, but feels helpless in his/her inability to do so. Does this constant incapacity make the viewer apathetic to the situation? Does the act of not being able to stop a violent act create a feeling of self-protective indifference? Perhaps if you are the witness to a violent act, you rationalize about whether to either get involved or avoid the situation, but when something violent has already happened only the imprint of the outcome is left to dictate your feelings about the situation. The work of Ana Mendieta is very important in showing the result of the violence towards women. I sense that showing the action is crucial for work that talks about violence against women because it creates a complicated experience for the viewer. The need and desire to want to do something is important if you want your work to lead to some kind of change in perception "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers" (Sontag,100).

## The Videos

In *Collective Traumas*, I get slapped, my eyes get covered no matter how many times I try to remove the hands that obscure my vision, water drowns my words as I try to speak, a hand caresses my hair as I avoid the gaze of the viewer. Oppositional gaze, resistance, the act of speaking without being heard, visibility and invisibility, anticipation and dread, as well as the affecting power of the white walls of the gallery are critical elements of the work in *Collective Traumas*.

Most of the performances are shot against a simple white background. The aesthetics are intentionally as minimalist as possible—only a white background and the subject in front of the camera. The performances don't disguise themselves as anything other than performances. The viewer is given the perspective of a witness, perpetrator or accomplice to the events on the screens. The white wall might portray a neutral space, instead it carries with it the loaded history of the white wall of the gallery and the museum. By the framing the performances with this aesthetic, I am imposing the history of pain and oppression upon a space that historically has been guilty of ignoring and excluding the stories of women, specifically women of color that suffer. The videos also invoke confessional videos that have become popular on television. This creates an immediate intimacy and makes it appear to be an event that it is happening between two people; the performer and viewer. In this intimate relationship, the performer remains constant, but the histories and personal stories that the viewers bring to the encounter change with each viewer, thus changing the connection created between the viewer and performance.



Figure 2, Still from *Poema de Guerra*. Digital video, 2014

In *Poema de Guerra*, waves of water flood my words as I try to speak. I look past the camera. The implied existence of the camera feels present and crucial. The water strikes time and time again as I try to recite something. The destination of my words is to someone off to the side, out of the frame. I'm struggling and begging—not only to be heard, but also for my life. What is it like to speak if you are not going to be heard anyway? What is like to talk about your pain, if your pain is ignored? Despite the violent act of the water silencing my words, I still try to speak. I still plead for my words to somehow make it through. But they do not. This it is what is like to talk about your pain when the people around are indifferent to your words. Khinn Oo, one of those arrested at the Whose Diversity sit-in protest, talked about the decision as a group to engage in the sit-in instead of choosing to have more dialogue with President Eric Kaler.

"Engaging in university sanctioned conversations has taught us that simply talking about what's on our mind does nothing to create institutional change. If anything sharing our stories with the university only lead to more feelings of distress after the realization that you can tell them all about your pain all day long, but no amount of pain can move them to act"- (*Whose Diversity* video documentation)

I agree with *Whose Diversity* having a conversation about pain is not an appropriate way to bring consciousness to the stories of the oppressed. Action and demonstrations sometimes must occur if we want to see something to be done about our pain. *Collective Traumas* are my actions. *Poema de Guerra* is my doing something about it. It implements change.

Additionally, water has been seen as healing, cleansing—a common symbol of refreshing purity. It has also been used as torture. In ancient Greece, springs were believed to have supernatural powers because they were the dwelling places of Gods. In Catholicism, water is softly splashed onto the baby's head to wash away the sins that it is already believed to be born with. But water has also been used for many methods of water torture, such as the waterboarding, used during the Bush administration after 9/11. It is this dichotomy between the nurturing and cleansing and the violence that it is important in the *Poema de Guerra* performance. I see the same tension in intimate relationships. Just as water can be precious, like the water used by a caring mother to wash her child, water can also be used to force out the words of people you deem guilty or to drown the words of those that you do not want to listen to. The choice is made by the one in power. In *Poema de Guerra*, water is used as a silencing tool. A metaphorical device to portray the silencing and domination of the ones in pain.

The gaze in *Poema de Guerra* is directed past the camera. The viewer witnesses the recitation of words directed to someone off the frame. The shift between looking at the viewer and away from the camera is important because it alternates the role that the viewer serves as an

audience to the performance. When I look at the viewer and the hands come off the frame of the camera, the viewer immediately has the point of view of accomplice or perpetrator. Perhaps this forces defensiveness, maybe a reaction of resentment at the encounter, or maybe this perspective causes the viewer to shut down or feel guilt. When the hands come out of the camera and the gaze is somewhere else, a third person is added to the event. Viewers can blame somebody else and they are simply passersby who witness an event. But what does the viewer do when he/she witnesses the event? I would like to open the possibility for a dialogue about accountability for the pain of the other. I would like a moment of reflection for viewers to become aware of the internal dialogue in their head as they see the work. What kinds of feelings do the videos bring up? And could these feelings alter the way they understand themselves in relation to the pain of others. Could this act of witnessing lead to action? Any action, even if this means that their realities are altered and shifted if only temporarily during the viewing of the videos.



Figure 3, Still from *Blinded*, digital video, 2014

*In Blinded*, two hands cover my eyes as I try to see and be seen. I remove the hands, but the hands return. The repositioning of the hands is not overtly violent; the movement

and grip is soft yet firm. The calm, effective, persistence seems to say, “*this is the way it is going to be.*” But I resist and I keep removing them, because my urge to see and be seen is pressing. The viewer sees the straining of my hands and body as I attempt to pull the hands away. I get tired, and by the end the hands remain in position—obscuring my view and the view of me. I often think back to past violent experiences, and although the pain of strikes are something that I carry within me every day, to not be seen by the person you love and to not be allowed to see that person seems more wounding. There are risks both with visibility and invisibility when you're not the one in power. The covering of the eyes acts as a way to diminish the influence of the gaze and the ability to see and be seen. It diminishes my ability to make a connection with the viewer. I've had plenty of situations at the university where my presence either becomes overwhelmingly clear like such as openings, in classrooms, or critiques. But in other situations, such as when I walk around campus or when I ask for more diversity in the art department, I feel invisible. I receive no awareness of my existence. It is as if I am not here.



Figure 4, Still from *Hit*, digital video, 2014

In *Hit*, I try to stop the hand from hitting me only for it to hit me back again. In this struggle of resistance, regardless of how much I try to stop the hand from touching my face or covering my eyes, I am not the one in control. I am not the one in power. This is the case for countless women who walk this earth. No matter how much they work, how much they educate themselves, they are still seen as inferior members in society. Especially when the woman in question is also a person of color.

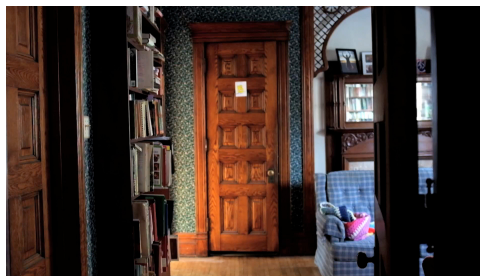


Figure 5, Still from *Still*, digital video, 2015

One of the most chilling and intimidating aspects of domestic violence is the anticipation and dread of wondering when the next attack is going to happen. The illusive quiet and calm of a home space no longer is a sign of safety and security. As in horror film, sometimes the scariest part of the movie is not so much when the monster or killer attacks, but the moments of suspense in anticipation of the attack. Unlike the horror movie, this sense of dread is never ending. It creeps into everyday familiar settings. In *Still*, a compilation of images and sounds of home spaces portrays this deceptive tranquility. However, when placed in relation to the violence of the other videos, the viewer can tell that there's something off. The sound of kids playing or the scene of a shower is no longer so innocent. There are trenches around the kitchen and fires in the bedroom. It is a constant battle not knowing when you're going to be safe, when you can

sleep, and when you can eat. The body is trapped in a state of constant alertness and becomes easily startled. The ground is not safe to walk on. This anticipatory dread is heightened when things seem to be going well because of the fact that it could change at any second and with any wrong move. The scenes in *Still* seem to drag. The home spaces look almost unchanged and not bothered by the events that happen there and the world outside continues as normal.



Figure 6, Still from *Iron*, digital video, 2015

The slowing or dragging of time is also shown in *Iron*. I stand still as an iron slowly hurls towards me. The iron hits and leaves marks on the wall, but there is no sound. The iron strikes the wall over and over. Time slows as this occurs. In this state of slowed motion, the video catches every detail of my body and face as I flinch after the impact of the iron. The viewer is able to see my body tensing up. The sound is removed from the impact of the iron on a wall, and the viewer is asked to fill the silence and replace the sound, internalizing the impact of the iron. The silence in both *Still* and *Iron* is threatening. Much as *Poema de Guerra* reveals the silencing power of that which is read as pure and cleaning, the menacing and debilitating qualities of what is commonly read as peaceful and tranquil is revealed.



Figure 7, Still from *Touch*, digital video, 2015

In *Touch*, you see two hands touch and caress my hair. The touching does not seem comforting; at least judging by the expression of my face. As the fingers slowly wrap around my strings of hair, you can see my face wince. Those hands are not as innocent as they seem. Those hands are not only loving. The expression on my face looks passive. I'm taking it for the time being.

There are different levels of agency that occur throughout the performances. In some of them I try to stop the violence; in others I do the violence to myself; and in still others I simply accept what is happening. The performances started as a way to reclaim the violence done to my body and to gain power over situations in which I was powerless. But as the work continued, all I wanted was to create opportunities for witnessing. Too many experts were doing the talking. This offered yet another form of silencing. I yearned to share my story and the story of many others. I desired to put these stories specifically in a space that has excluded stories of oppression and pain. In a space that has historically caused oppression and pain. The white wall as a background represents so much more than the holder for my work. In moments of insecurity, doubts flood my body and I question my competence to do what I want to do and ask whether

my work is accomplishing my goal. In moments of anger, I know where these feelings come from. The chaos, and sometimes instability, of the work and myself as an artist and person contrast deeply with the tidiness of the gallery. The videos disrupt the space. I like this, I like that the work doesn't make the gallery visit comfortable for the viewer. I want my presence to be noticeable this time. I want the brownness of my skin to be an open sore that the gallery is incapable of healing.

### **Violence, Near and Far.**

Relations of control, agency and privilege affect how people react to the violent images that saturate the American landscape. We have a complicated interactions with violence. We reject and fear it, yet we also crave it. The rise of the twenty-four hour news media, and the availability of social media on our computers and on our phones, has brought wars, murders, and crimes into our private, and not so private, everyday living. There is a satisfaction of looking at gruesome images without flinching and there is also a gratification in flinching. Sontag writes, "As objects of contemplation, images of the atrocious can answer to several different needs. To steel oneself about witness. To make oneself more numb. To acknowledge the existence of the incorrigible" (98).

Mark Seltzer names the obsession and fascination with violence in current American culture in his book, *Serial Killers, Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*. He coins the term, "wound culture" which he defines as the public captivation with torn and open bodies, a joint gathering around shock, trauma and the wound (2). Our fascination with violent

scenes is often confined to fictional and fantastic realms. Roller coasters are exciting because we know that no matter how many twists, turns, heights and speeds we will most likely end up being safe, while still living through the excitement of the thrill. Americans love danger only when it's controlled and contained and you have a choice in the matter. The same can be said about pain. We can watch movies about the lowest depths of human misery and we can watch photographs about the gruesome aspects of wars because war is not happening in our own land. Whenever people feel safe, people become indifferent. The photos of blown-up bodies are far away from us—we are safe and there is nothing we can do. The photos become like a car crash. We dare to look, but we just keep on driving.

The recent videos of the beheading of James Foley made the rounds of different social media news outlets. Images were shared and there was outrage. I wonder about the people who watch the videos. Are they bearing witness to something they need to understand better? Is it voyeuristic? Is it going to lead them to become more desensitized to these images? Does it just make people feel good for being able to watch it without flinching? Would watching the videos drive people to revolt and struggle for change? In truth, we as a nation are not as entirely innocent in the situation as we would like to believe. The U.S. has a history of arming extremist groups to overthrow governments that disagree with American politics or to prevent them from obtaining valued resources. The Middle East is covered with the blood of people killed by the U.S Army, yet somehow their pain is separate from our pain. We see them as THEM and ourselves as US. This hierarchal relationship with pain makes it impossible to completely bear witness and see pain as something that is human and not something that people deserve because

they are them and not us. To see oneself as a subject and to see other people as others or objects, not only alienates us from those around us, but also enables the dehumanization inherent in oppression and domination.

The difference with violence against women is that it is not something that only happens in faraway lands, but here in our cities, on our blocks. People hear screams and the sound of fighting and they turn the blind eye. The knowledge that it is too real and too near makes the experience of the pain near us unexciting. Women carry their pain at the grocery store, the park and they drive it next to our cars. Our pain has marked our bodies and we carry it and hold it everywhere we go. Our pain is not something that we can put away and lay to rest.

The reason why I make and show this work is not because I believe that I need to bring awareness or I'm showing something about which people are ignorant. The viewers of my work know this happens all around them. I don't believe that I'm showing them something new and this is in fact the point. Images of violence against women are known all too well. As a child, my mother would beat me and scream at me in public. People did nothing.

Nonetheless, as I'm making this work, I am trying to understand why people are shocked when they look at my videos since I don't believe I am showing them something new. I have seen people become uncomfortable with my videos, furious that I have made them watch this. Sometimes there are no words. They ask me for a break—a little breather here and there. They require me to make the videos more bearable to digest. I fill with anger when I hear this and it

almost makes me want to make the videos more unbearable, more real, and more excruciating to watch. People are uncomfortable with their privilege. They become defensive when I bring this up, because it means benefiting from a racist, sexist, classist and oppressive environment. I believe this to be one of the main reasons people are uncomfortable with my work. It is not that these are shockingly new images, but that by watching these videos they realize that their privilege has protected them from these experiences and that they are not as inherently innocent from the pain caused to others as they would like to believe.

The reality is that the viewer has a choice to watch this video. Women who have to face violence everyday don't have the choice to make it less bearable and to take a break. This request comes from such a place of privilege and it demonstrates the complicated relationship that the US and the privileged have with pain. We want to witness violence only when we're in control of it, only when it's entertaining and when we are not absolutely affected by it. And if this is what makes my work uncomfortable; so be it, this confirms its importance.

### Figure List:

Figure 1, Ana Mendieta, *Rape Scene*, 1973

Figure 2, Still from *Poema de Guerra*. Digital video, 2014

Figure 3, Still from *Blinded*, digital video, 2014

Figure 4, Still from *Hit*, digital video, 2014

Figure 5, Still from *Still*, digital video, 2015

Figure 6, Still from *Iron*, digital video, 2015

Figure 7, Still from *Touch*, digital video, 2015

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## Artist Statement

*Collective Traumas* explores the experience of pain and our perception of the pain of others. The work delves into issues of oppression, racial segregation in the museum, and the power and privilege of the gaze. The videos invite the viewer to bear witness to difficult to encounter acts that are part of our everyday landscape and shared history; calling into question our role as accomplices in the suffering of others. Furthermore, the work demands an understanding that pain is political, as it questions our awareness of being active members in a society that inflicts pain on people's everyday lives.

Lorena Molina  
[molin195@umn.edu](mailto:molin195@umn.edu)  
3324 18th Ave S apt. 1  
Minneapolis, MN 55407  
562-303-2316

**Education:**

**University of Minnesota**  
Master of Fine Art, 2015

**California State University of Fullerton**  
Bachelor of Fine Art, 2012

**Golden West College**  
Associate of Art, 2007

**Performances:**

[2013]

**Untitled-** Florence, Italy

**Untitled-** Beijing- China

[2012]

**Dance with me-** Walker Art Center

**Revelations –** Walker Art Center

**Solo Exhibitions:**

[2010]

**Portraits of Long Beach-** Long Beach Main Library, CA

**Group Exhibitions:**

[2015]

**Underlined Action-** Katherine Nash Gallery

[2014]

**Northern Sparks Festival-** Outdoor Cinema

**Image/Transition-** Weisman Art Museum

**Blinking Fresh-**Regis Center for Art- Quarter Gallery

[2013]

**Mirror/Window-** Minneapolis photo center for Art.

**Mirror/Window-** Beijing Film Academy

[2012]

**Appreciation-** Regis Center for Art - Quarter Gallery

**Fresh Works-** Regis Center for Art - Quarter Gallery

**Evoke Unity-** 8th Annual Social Justice Summit

**Evoke Unity-** CSUF Grad Central Art Center,

**Untitled-** California State University of Fullerton, CA

**This is Your Grandmother's Art Show-** California State University of Fullerton, CA

[2011]

**Evoke Unity-** California State University of Fullerton, CA

**Evoke Unity-** Main Gallery, California State University of Fullerton, CA

**Open Call L.A 2011-** Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, CA

**Happy2 -** Gallery Godo, Glendale, CA

**Printmaking Annual Show -** West Gallery, California State University of Fullerton, CA

**Student Juried Show-** West Gallery, California State University of Fullerton, CA

**Balance-** Exit Gallery, California State university of Fullerton, CA

**Awards, Merits, Grants:**

[2015]

**Christopher Cardozo Fellowship**

**Gustafson Graduate Student photography Fellowship**

[2014]

**Christopher Cardozo Fellowship**

**Gustafson Graduate Student photography Fellowship**

[2013]

**Diversity of views and Experience Summer Research Fellowship-** University of Minnesota.

**Gustafson Graduate Student Photography Fellowship-**

[2012]

**Gustafson Graduate Student Photography Fellowship-** Gustafson Organization

**Diversity of Views and Experiences Fellowship-** University of Minnesota

[2011]

**Dean's Honor List-** California State University of Fullerton

**Art Center college of Design Scholarship-** Pasadena, CA

**Artistic residencies:**

[2013]  
**Beijing Film Academy**

**Academic Service:**

[2015]

**Instructor-** Summer- Intro to analog/digital photography

**Teaching assistant-** Spring Semester- Intro to analog/digital photography

**Teaching assistant-** Spring Semester-Intro to analog/digital photography

[2014]

**Instructor-** Intro to analog Photography Spring- University of Minnesota

**Instructor-**Intro to Digital Photography Summer- University of Minnesota

**Instructor-** Intro to Photography Digital/darkroom

[2013]

**Teaching Assistant-** University of Minnesota

[2012]

**Teaching assistant-** University of Minnesota

[2011]

**CSUF Photo Lab Technician-** Fullerton, CA

[2010]

**CSUF Photo Lab Technician-** Fullerton CA

[2008]

**The Western Sun Newspaper-** Photographer, Staff writer, Opinion Editor, Huntington Beach, CA