

Las Voces de Barelás
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Abstract

This presentation examines a digital photo-journalism project involving the participation of young artists of the Albuquerque, New Mexico collective Working Classroom. This collective has been promoting the creative, academic, and leadership potential of talented young artists from historically ignored communities. The images documented reveal the construction of gendered identities in relation to the neighborhood of Barelas and the strengthening of their connections to their home environments and the memories that they greatly treasure. These visual narratives revealed a growing sense of agency among the community members of this neighborhood as they embrace a private/domestic space as center for their social interactions where they are able to decide the course of their lives. Digital media was instrumental in the conceptual development of this project as it allowed a rich interaction between the student-artists and the community members of this historic neighborhood.

Keywords: Photojournalism, gender studies, digital arts, Hispanic Communities in the Southwest of the United States, education

Las Voces de Barelás: Visual and Literary Discourses

This paper examines a photojournalism project involving the participation of young artist of the Albuquerque area from the art collective Working Classroom. As a community organization, Working Classroom is one of the most proactive organizations in arts and education programs “promoting the creative, academic, and leadership potential of talented young artists from historically ignored communities” (Working Classroom, 2017). This essay places special attention on the photographs that either depict women, or that the narratives were written by women participants of this student collective.

Despite the extant literature that addresses the importance of material culture in New Mexico in traditional Hispanic communities, little has been explored concerning the construction of gendered ideologies related to the discursive practices involving a domestic sphere, and its manifestation in contemporary New Mexican society in Hispanic communities. In reading the narratives created by this collective and the students that participated in the project, we can observe aspects that are telling about the gender interpretations of teenagers and their perception of an older generation in their communities. Gendered community aspects are manifested by the narratives that developed from an effort by the collective to culturally preserve a piece of community history.

This essay observes how gender is performed and reproduced discursively both, by the people interviewed and the students who participated in the documentation. The documentation and the project created by Working Classroom adds narratives that exist typically stem from formal academic research and not much attention has been given to the outlook of young men and women in the Albuquerque Community and it is for this reason that exhibits such as this one should be provided a forum of discussion.

Contexts and rationale

Albuquerque, NM. is located in the Southwest region of the United States. Much has been heard in relation to the city as television series and movies had left an imprint of the community as one of the most violent places in the world. This city has been rendered the nest of meth laboratories, poverty, lowest educational scores in the nation and the setting of ongoing femicides, and the location of more than 300 years of colonial ideologies. In contrast with the dysfunctionality that has been portrayed, this city has been the home community of scientists, artists, activists, and people that are constantly organized in grass-roots efforts to heal the ailments that have been so clearly present.

Henry Lefevre (1991) posits the observation that the construction of modern cities were urbanistic projects orchestrated politically and socially after a code- “a code which allowed space not only to ‘be read’ but also to be constructed.” (Lefebvre, 2009). Lefebvre (1991), observes that space is socially constructed by the triad observed by Soja where space is conceived, perceived, and later experienced (Soja, 1996). Power and resistance fuel tensions that give way to “enunciations,” as identified by Homi Bhabha, that open up the possibility of growth (Bhabha, 1995). Breaking away from structuralists binaries opens dialogic possibilities where, as noted by Florencia Mallon and Anzaldúa, “new voices are acknowledged: the subaltern, the post-colonial, the liberated voice”, the voice of struggle, the voice arising from the cracks, or the voice of the threshold people that Gloria Anzaldúa proclaims as victors of this dialogic fight where Nepantla, or the space in-between is revealed (Keating, 2006).

The work done by the project participants reveals intersectional perspectives on the telling, the listening, the visual, and the written processing of the stories of men and women that were part of this documentation. In looking at the process of production of this project we

acknowledge the important role an observer plays in reproducing gendered discourse-narratives. Photography, as a visual media has a discursive quality that carries its own language. Photography is also subjective, biased, as well as the narratives that were created. In looking at the subjectivity-biases of the narratives, whether visual or written, we can immerse ourselves in a world of ideological constructions which are important for own understanding of what are the driving mechanisms of socio-cultural interpretations.

The Work

This project had the direction of Adria Malcom and was coordinated by Gabrielle Uballes. Participants included the following young men and women: Keily Castro, Elijah Chavez, David De La Cruz, Analy Morales, Ana Palma, Michelle Perez, Izaiah Ramos and Estefania Valencia. My participation has been indirect as I have served as the social studies instructor of several of these students in the Dual Language strand at Atrisco Heritage Academy High School in the area of the South Valley in Albuquerque, NM. The Neighborhood Project is a community art initiative by Working Classroom student artists under the instruction of guest teaching artist Adria Malcolm. Through portraiture, interview and feature writing, the student artists aim to create a body of work that explores the people of the Barelas community. Las Voces de Barelas is the first installment of The Neighborhood Project that bridges the gap between otherness and commonality through story and photography (Working Classroom, 2017).

The process of production involved an initial visit to the Barelas Neighborhood and the young men and women who participated gradually met adults who live in this community and who willingly told their stories. The interviews were later recorded and transcribed by the students and the adults who collaborated with them. As part of this project, the students had the

guidance of journalists from the Albuquerque Journal who teamed up with Adria Malcolm to make this project possible.

The Stories

Image #1: Betty Jo Martin by Analy Morales

The first image to be discussed was taken by Analy Morales. This image depicts Betty Jo Martin seating in her porch as she warmly smiles for the camera from her wheel chair. Like all the other stories told by the men and women interviewed, there exists a nostalgic tone to the descriptions of their life, both, in the present, and in the past. There seems to be an omission of conflict, the past seems to have been mediated by a present that disables much change, nonetheless, we can detect a slight discontent or awareness with how life is playing out for them in relation to the community, their children who “can’t play anymore outside.”

Betty Jo Martin mediates realities from a vast body of lived experiences and at the core of her identity there is a strong attachment to what a community means for her when it is evident that as people come and go many of us are left with a community space that remains somewhat constant. Mary Jo, from her wheelchair, greets people, remembers, recalls, and re-tells. As she sits and narrates her life she positions herself as an important woman of her community, perhaps transcending her role as a woman in relation to men or a gendered subject, she narrated herself in relation to a community. Mary Jo Martin finds soothing that her life has enough stability because she lives in the house she was born and this the story of a family and the familial capital remains manifested through a home.

Image #2: Alice Gurule

The image taken by Keily Castro of Alice Gurule depicts Alice assertively standing by an image painted by herself of the Ten Commandments as she recalls she painted these lines after her

mother passed away “from old age” and after a long time where Alice did not have a stable home, she inherited her late mother’s house. Again, just as Mary Jo, the structural support a house provides translates into stability and a feeling that everything will be better as women like Alice can now stop looking elsewhere. Alice mentions that she keeps her mother’s personal belongings “untouched,” she continues, “I haven’t gone through anything..... right now it’s helping me with grieving... and if it means her stuff staying here, I’ll leave it there for as long as it takes me to grieve.” The narrative by the young woman who documented this piece responds to the sentimental materialism and the nostalgic presence of aspects so abstract as memory and nostalgia on the part of Alice as Keily Castro notes that for Alice, her home meant a place of stability that contrast with other parts of her life that have been filled with “temporality.” As Alice embraces a more stable life she legitimizes her actions

Image #3: Graciela Torres by Isaiah Ramirez and text by Michelle Perez

In an interview with young emerging artist Michelle Perez describes this image as one of her favorite in this series. The religious regalia captured the imagination of Michelle making this photograph and interview one of the most discussed in the exhibit that took place in Casa Barelas on October, 21, 2017.

In this photograph, Graciela Torres stands by a little stand where she sells religious objects. She usually stands outside of a chapel on Second Street outside of El Modelo Restaurant. Graciela is not originally from Albuquerque, she travels from Mexico City every year to sell the crafts her family makes. She describes herself as a devout Mexican Catholic and it was important for her to mention that her Catholicism is rooted in her family from her great-grandparents, and her grandparents. For Graciela, her belief system is the guiding engine of her family and much of her life is dedicated to feeding her faith and her religious image.

In documenting this image of Graciela Torres, the students who wrote the narrative strongly reacted to the perpetuation and reproduction of religious symbolism and the strong elements of faith Graciela embraced in her daily life. It was particularly important for Michelle that Graciela would always come to the Barelas neighborhood to sell her religious objects which indicated that even when Albuquerque or this neighborhood was not the place where she resided, she had embraced Barelas as a safe-heaven for her daily activities as a woman, a merchant, and a Catholic practitioner.

As part of this analysis it was important to add the story of Graciela since there has been a growing discussion regarding the influence women have had and have regarding migration after a strong push from feminist scholars to extend the analysis beyond migration as a category of analysis that has traditionally omitted women (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Cranford, 2006). The authors note that “the vast majority of contemporary research on immigration and migration typically omits women, focuses exclusively on men, and operates as if though men were without gender (Wright, 1995 as mentioned by Hondagneu-Sotelo, & Cranford. 2006. Pg. 106). Furthermore, the authors observe that as we analyze the role of women in migration, we can situate migration and gender as “historically situated and socially constructed” (pg. 106).

Conclusion

Conclusion the exhibit “The Voices of Barelas” questions the traditional main-stream notions related to the relationship between women, the body and the ideological construction of domestic space by dematerializing or de-commodifying the idea of home. This paper analyzed the ways young women of the school community are interpreting developing a trans-generational view and in looking at the visual interpretations of youth we can identify discursive practices that permeate into the reproduction of ideological constructs of identity and the building of the self.

In looking at identity as a category of study, which is considered vital for the analysis of school culture and societies (Gee, 2000), we can attain a wider understanding of the different ways gender is manifested and performed. In addition to the discussion of a “core identity of an individual”, this paper focused the attention on the idea of identity as defined as the social recognition of an individual in a larger group (p.1). Just as the construct of identity can be the result of a self-identification, the author notes that it can also be the result of the perception what other people construct of an individual. The development of “identity” as a concept has been problematized in recent research. This study proposes that the definition of identity encompasses the “identities” that each individual is assigned. One person may be identified and assigned gender, class, race, identities yet work, family, occupations become part of the ways people are defined socially.

Lori Merish in her work *Sentimental Materialism* proposes that while males have power and authority, women have the socially constructed illusion, right or imposed privilege of sentimental ownership and taste of the domestic space. These aspects were observed as we read the narratives and the stories of Betty Jo Martin, Alice Gurule, and Graciela Lopez. The images documented reveal the construction of their gendered identities in relation to the neighborhood of Barelas and the strengthening of their connections to their home environments and the memories that they greatly treasure. Even when there is exists a great omission of their relationship to the men of their community, we can read from the narratives that these women developed a sense of agency as they embrace a private/domestic space as center for their social interactions where they are able to decide the course of their lives.

The documentation developed by the student participants developed in a deep exploration of identity through digital media. This digital process allowed the students to engage in societal explorations that involved interactions within the tools used for documentation and the personal interactions between the students and the community members of the Barela's neighborhood. The original idea behind this project was to develop a visual narrative related to the lives of the oldest members of the Barelas community. As the students engage in the process the biased decisions developed into a window that revealed complex gendered construction. These visual narratives correspond to identities engrained in social spaces that produce intricate connections with the conceived, perceived, and lived environments that attest for the intricacies of geography, gender, and intersectionality.

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