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Study Guide for scenery

José Felipe Alvergue

scenery

study guide: discussion topics, questions, and an outline for classroom use

glossary

This is an incomplete list of terms, artifacts, and concepts that are useful for the discussion scenarios that follow. It is a useful exercise to have readers compile their own working glossary as they read, or after.

archive: a collection of texts, documents, artifacts, etc., quite often of historical significance and/or specifically important to an event, location/region, institution, or culture. Many academic libraries contain a "special collection" of archival material, usually housing rare books, or first editions, prints, and other donated or acquired artifacts. Across the Humanities there has been a lot of debate about what constitutes an archive, who has access to the archive, and on the role of the archive. For instance, in 2003 the performance scholar Diana Taylor argued that many other understudied forms of "knowledge transfer" must be included in the "repertoires" of what we know as the archive. Her argument has broadened how we think about performance, orality, and non-lingual information, among other modes of knowledge expression, in relation to the development of knowledge. This turn towards repertoire has also worked to decolonize the archive as a collection of knowledge.

casta: system of racial categorization instituted during Colonialism throughout the Americas, predominantly in Latin America. *Casta* was articulated in *casta* paintings, which are baroque-styled scenes sometimes painted by anonymous artists, and sometimes renowned artists. The paintings trace race between indigenous, African, and European parentage and were meant to introduce new terms and names for the children of mixed-race unions. The scenes of parentage portrayed in *casta* paintings are understood to be largely fictitious, in the sense that artists invented the subjects of study and placed them in dramatized scenarios that were also meant to be disciplinary. The fictional character of these paintings can be observed in how racialized subjects are depicted in acts of labor that are meant to correspond to their economic, political, and social position, and the degree of racially decreed disenfranchisement. We also understand various terms introduced in these paintings to be largely problematic, and they exhibit the extent to which European Whiteness was protected through the positioning Empire in a global context, and lowering the status of persons outside Colonial citizenship.

docupoetics: documentary poetry, or "docupoetics," is a subgenre that engages with the concept of witness. While a great deal of poetry is always negotiating who witnesses the social events and social emotions poetry expresses, and thus the voracity of their fact (whether an individual speaker speaking from a personal perspective, or a public voice speaking collectively about a historical or political event) docupoetics looks to artifacts, documents, and other "silent" media to comment on the state of the social. Docupoetics looks empower poets and readers regarding truth, and creating a wider access to history as narratives which cultural actors compose.

ekphrasis: the practice of composing poetry in conversation with images, usually visual art of lasting cultural value and significance.

exceptionalism: a belief in the extraordinary nature of a given entity. In the case of American exceptionalism, it is the unquestioned belief in the extraordinary nature of the American identity from settler-colonialism forward. The problem of exceptionalism is the unexamined nature of complicit violence and White supremacy that undergirds the absorption of property, how slavery created the rise of prosperity, and how the American judicial complex has worked to keep non-White male property owners politically disenfranchised during key eras of national development. A critical turn in the study of American identity involves investigating how exceptionalism and White supremacy work coevally, and in the present context how it functions across borders through neoliberalism.

Freedman's Memorial: The Freedman's Memorial, which is a monument to Emancipation, was designed by Thomas Ball and paid for by former slaves via the Freedman's Bureau, in 1876. The model for the monument was selected in a competition, and an image of the competition model is included between the sections "riot" and "lyric."

John L. Spivak's "Hogtied": Spivak was an American reporter who often wrote on issues of class, labor, and race in the early-to-mid 20th century. "Hogtied" was taken during his research on Southern chain gains in Georgia. His documentary style was a mixture of both reportage and fiction, and much of his investigative work during the early 30s on Convict Leasing became the material for his book, *Georgia N*****, published in 1932.

lyric: a genre of poetry that focuses on recognizably personal expressions of a poetic speaker.

postlyric: an innovation on lyric practices that seeks to question the recognizability of 'the personal' by introducing elements of public or political origin. Postlyric practices as engaged in by poets of color, transnational poets, queer and LGBTQ poets, and disability poets, seek to represent the situation of emotional expression in a sincere manner that takes into account uncontrollable factors that diversify "who" it is we imagine speaking in poetry, or "who" it is we are culturally trained to listen for in poetic voice.

memoir: a factual account sourced from a collection of memories. Memoir can be either personal or public in nature.

model minoritism: the socio-political pressure put on certain groups during moments of racial tension in order to manage group behavior. Model minoritism has shaped the emotional disposition of immigrant groups by profiling any emotions that do not exhibit gratitude or meritocratic outlooks towards America, American politics, and American capitalism in particular. During the 1992 Los Angeles Riots, for example, media images of South Korean Americans shooting looters from atop strip malls was used to promote narratives of minority behavior as either "good" or "bad," with South Korean Americans being regaled as upholding law and order, and Black and Latinx Los Angelinos as "bad" looters, or criminals. During the rise of American globalization in the late 20th century, other model minority narratives have been used to manage naturalization, and "model" good immigrant behavior in areas such as labor, sexuality, education, and lifestyle.

naturalization: the process through which certain immigrant persons are able to apply for and obtain American citizenship.

discussion scenarios

scenario: genre and sentiment

The author mixes many genres, but predominantly relies on memoir and the postlyric strategy referred to as "docupoetics," where documents, texts, images, and other material forms of knowledge or cultural record are pressed upon to demonstrate voice/s, which are otherwise silenced. The relationship between genre and sentiment rests on the demonstrated lyric appeal of poetic voice, which often relies on commonly experienced emotions. Postlyric practices like docupoetics, as well as other strategies that seek to distance poetic voice from a monolithic or idealized performance of the individual speaker, unsettle the exceptionalism implicitly upheld in that which we expect to read as "commonly experienced" emotional content in poetry. Postlyric unsettles the universal subject by drawing-in competing emotional conclusions, and alternative memories and historical experiences that often directly challenge exceptionalist interpretations of the past and present.

Commented [EF1]: do you need this? it's very much a specialist's term.

- How do these two particular genres, (lyric, memoir, and the documentary) postlyric/lyric and memoir, help bridge the intimacy of parenting, which the author associates to personal feelings, with teaching, which the author associates to the civic responsibility of unpacking the negative feelings associated with America's racial history?

Commented [EF2]: I'd suggest: lyric/memoir and the documentary

Commented [EF3]: not sure what this means

Other postlyric practices are demonstrated in the author's use of text and image. For example, *scenery* opens with a digitally altered image of a 17th Century *casta* painting from Colonial era Mexico, and is shortly followed by a 20th Century photograph of Black children working in a field as part of America's Convict Leasing System. Both images are emotionally charged when reflected upon, in the sense that both these images "speak" from the silence of their archive when they are reanimated in a new poetic context.

Commented [EF4]: You could have a question about the genre, which I think many students might not know about at all.

- When investigating power and confronting structural racism, why might it be important to think about the different ways of considering "voice"?

- In what ways can you identify formatting, or how the author arranges text, and/or plays with margin and page space, as part of the author's delving into the spaces between personal and public memory? Maybe especially where text and image meet, or text and text-as-image (where text is formed into shapes)?

- As a reader what are some challenges to thinking and reading between these different demonstrations of "voice"? Are these challenges purely of "perception" (or reading), or can you identify an emotional tone to the book's form and formatting?

scenario: subjectivity

History presents a unique challenge to a unified national identity. The stories we generally accept to be true, and which are taught in schools or through other media compose part of what we believe. This history is interpreted in a largely objective manner across a largely unquestioning population, and this is how exceptionalism spreads. However, throughout the 20th- and 21st-centuries there have been more and more public attempts to challenge the exceptionalisms that uphold the sociopolitical relationships that maintain power and White supremacy (the Civil Rights Movement, for example). Many of these alternative histories often originate from what are deemed "personal" memories of American history. These are also often critical of exceptionalism, and they include stories of racial violence, discrimination, disenfranchisement, profiling, and structural inequality. It is not a coincidence, moreover, that the speakers of these truths are persons of color, LGBTQ voices, persons with disability, immigrants, and other identities of difference. Poetry's use of pronouns, "I," "we," and "you," in particular, are undergoing a parallel disruption. The poetic subject who is bound to collective emotions and memories can longer be so easily relied upon to represent a universal, or exceptional political subject.

- In analyzing poetry, we conventionally distinguish the "author" from the "speaker" of the text. To what extent does *scenery* seem to undo that distinction? Would you argue that the "I" in *scenery* is the author's "I"?

- How does the author [speaker?] frame their own parenting and teaching as anti-racist practices?

- One passage begins: "Leading up to his birth I felt, at least, that my son would avoid being made the subject of America's fetishistic violence, which it reserves almost exclusively for Black children." What does this statement reveal about the writer's conflicting feelings in raising a son in a context of institutionalized racism?

scenario: trauma

In one of most significance scholarly works in contemporary Black Studies, *Scenes of Subjection*, Sadiya Hartman both introduces and refuses to "reiterate" a scene of torture in Frederick Douglass's introduction to the horrors of slavery: the beating of his Aunt Hester. Underscoring her decision to omit this scene in her analysis she writes:

> **I have chosen not to reproduce Douglass's account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave's ravaged body.** (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* 1997, 3)

Hartman cuts to the reproducibility of the violence, even if simply reiterated in text. In the context of image, others like Hanif Abdurraqib have written about the complexly invested nature of White emotional responses to Black suffering via media and group emotion.

> **I don't know what to make of this: the white man who posts on the internet, vigorously, about his disgust with our country's racism. When I approach him**

> **about an inappropriate, boundary-crossing behavior, he pretends not to hear me. This is all, it seems, deeper than simply an idea of liberal performance for point scoring. It is the inability to see a body as worthwhile if it doesn't have a value you can trade in on, some sentimental cash out.** (Abdurraqib, *They Can't Kill Us, Until They Kill Us* 2017, 241)

Abdurraqib laments the White need for Black death in order to provoke White activism. The implication is that White anger only begins to feel critical of our structural inequalities well after persons of color have been talking about them for centuries. In fact, it isn't until Black people die, when, usually, children and adolescents lose the capacity of voice and breath entirely, that White Americans feel inspired toward activism. This essentially mutes the power of voice in persons of color, and disavows their identity as speaking subjects with a sentient understanding of history, politics, and social power. Their "value" to progressive politics seems to only be in dying, publicly. The problematic association of this public death to the scene of lynching is a chilling reminder of what we refer to as anti-Blackness, as it covers both optimistic and pessimistic emotional realities.

- Some might argue that the reiteration of John L. Spivak's "Hogtied" [the young Black adolescent literally hog-tied to a pick] should not be reproduced, given its extreme violence and the trauma it could potentially replicate. What was your reaction to this photograph? What argument would you make for its inclusion (or exclusion) from this book?

- Considered in a different light, how do you think the inclusion of images in *scenery* might be challenging the division of labor in collective suffering, where it becomes solely the work of persons of color?

- Are persons of color allowed to be angry in the same ways as White people responding to images of trauma? In other words, do you think persons of color are "allowed" to express public anger without being reduced to being interpreted as simply irrational?

- How does docupoetics in *scenery* perhaps expand upon our shared understanding of "ekphrasis"? What might the author be trying to challenge in terms of the ways we both passively and actively consume images of Black suffering, or artifacts of that suffering?

Commented [EF5]: Love this question!

In the book the author notes how birth scenes are not depicted in the majority of *casta* paintings. Yet, it could be argued that the author also does not delve into the birth scene of his own child, whose birth asphyxia is used as a metaphor of racial and national ambiguity.

- What do you think the author is investigating as his own privilege at the scene of birth, being a bearer of language, and not the physical birthing?

- What parallels can you draw between his investigation of privilege at birth, and his privilege at the scene of collective suffering, given his status as a person of color? As a teacher of color?

scenario: national belonging
Many immigrant writers have written about the experiences of arrival and acculturation, of what is left behind, and about the hope of what lies ahead as "Americans." Similarly, narratives of "hope" often undergird narratives that address politics as a site of possibility. The author seems to want to present alternative emotional conclusions, however. These alternative emotional conclusions capture a broader spectrum of feelings about what it is to live from behind the status of "immigrant" in America. What it means to be recognized, or naturalized, by a system that simultaneously denies Black humanity, that has been built on that denial. In regards to a "politics of hope," these emotions unsettle the imagined community living out the very philosophical ideas of *being*: as a cohort organized around Life, Liberty, and pursuit of Happiness. In refusing to anticipate "something good" yet to come, the author's emotional content seems to conclude that something radical must inevitable occur, or be destroyed, changed, or unlearned in order of the first of those optimistic expectations, "Life," to be fully animated.

- What are some of the feelings the author engages with in relation to nation, migration, their child, etc.? And how are these feelings different from the expected "optimism"?

- Considering the specific images, what is the author implying about "naturalization" and "Black citizenship," specifically? And what might the author be suggesting about the anti-Racist work immigrants must engage in towards re-evaluating naturalization, and transnational citizenship?

- What do you think is the author asking us to consider about "emotion," specifically negative or pessimistic emotions, and National identity? Are the contemporary examples from the media of some of the collective or group emotions the author considers? Are some emotions policed more than others? How? Why?

- Where would we locate the riot amidst "emotion"?

Commented [EF6]: Wonderful question!

scenario: the monument/al
In June of 2020, a representative for the District of Columbia announced the introduction of a bill to remove the Freedman's Memorial from Lincoln Park in the District of Columbia. This came after a surge in anti-Confederate sentiment, and the toppling of various Confederate monuments throughout the nation. The formal removal of the Freedman's Memorial is a more complex issue, as the monument is modeled after Emancipation.

- Find an image of the monument. What do "see"? What do the postures demonstrate?
- Is this kind of writing, which is at times deconstructivist (in that it undoes certain traditions while relying on them to correspond with audience), toppling monuments? Or is it doing something else, like rebuilding the environment within which monuments stand, forcing us to see them in a different light?

prepared by José Felipe Alvergue and Elisabeth Frost

resources

anti-racism
See *How To Be an Anti-Racist*, by Ibram X. Kendi (2019)

As well as https://medium.com/wake-up-call/a-detailed-list-of-anti-racism-resources-a34b259a3eea

casta
Native Heritage Project https://nativeheritageproject.com/2013/06/15/las-castas-spanish-racial-classifications/

Also see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Paintings,* Yale University Press, 2004.

convict leasing
See the Equal Justice Initiative https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-convict-leasing/

docupoetics
Interview with Craig Santos Perez http://craigsantosperez.com/decolonial-pacific-documentary-poetics-interview-2015/

As well as "Poetry in Light of Documentary," by Jill Maggi, in the *Chicago Review* https://www.chicagoreview.org/poetry-in-light-of-documentary/

Freedman's Memorial
More on the history of the Memorial, and the competition that selected Thomas Ball's model over others, including Harriet Hosmer's model for the monument can be examined in Kirk Savages, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), in June of 2020, promises a bill to see the monument removed from Lincoln Park in Washington DC (see Norton's homepage).

"hogtied"
Original source can be found in the John L. Spivak archive at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
https://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00126

Also see "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror" (3rd Ed.) https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/

And, "A Desire to End These Things: An Analytical History of John L. Spivak's Photographic Portrayal of 1930's Chain Gangs," by Berkley Hudson, in *Visual Communication Quarterly*, 2009.

lyric*, *voice*, *visual form

See interview with the poet and critic Fred Moten: https://openhousepoetry.com/2015/07/20/poetry-begins-with-the-willingness-to-subordinate-whatever-the-hell-it-is-that-you-have-to-say-an-interview-w-fred-moten/

postlyric
See Elizabeth Willis, "Lyric Dissent," in *Boundary 2* (2009) 36 (3): 229–234.

As well as Julia Bloch, "Lyric Descent: A Soft Polemic" *P-Queue 7* (2010) 33-40. 39.

riot, affect, image
See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/04/28/burn-baby-burn-what-i-saw-as-a-black-journalist-covering-the-l-a-riots-25-years-ago/

As well as https://www.wired.com/story/black-photographers-george-floyd-protests/

And https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/arts/elizabeth-alexander-george-floyd-video-protests.html

other useful readings

Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, NYU Press 2012.

Ellie D. Hernández, *Postnationalism in Chicana/o Literature and Culture*, University of Texas Press 2009.

Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Compositions 2013.

Peter J. Spiro, *Beyond Citizenship: American Identity After Globalization*, Oxford University Press 2008.

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BLACKLIVESMATTER to Black Liberation*, Haymarket Books 2016.