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## Lara into the Invisible: A conversation-performance rasanblaj

JOSEFINA BAEZ | AY OMBE THEATRE ANA-MAURINE LARA | UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

### SCENE ONE: THE PREAMBLE

**Setting:** The space between voices, bodies, minds (Space that is a voice, a body, a mind).

ANA *[to herself, to an imagined audience]* Pensé to myself, qué preguntas le puedo hacer a Josefina porque ella está en otra onda. Tenemos que tener esta conversación de otra forma, en otro "ser", en otro mundo. Between us, it is not sustainable to maintain a conversation about blackness for the sake of blackness itself—we must nourish the roots and the horizon, the healing and the possibilities that come with all we have inherited.

JOSEFINA: Yo soy el ayer. El futuro. Mi ayer. Mi presente. Mi futuro. Yo soy todos mis tiempos. I am all my lived-living and coming times. I am all those times and all possible tenses.

*Ana has sent Josefina a message. It reads as follows:*

ANA: Gracias, Josefina, por estar dispuesta to try this out. What an honor and a joy to be able to interview you. Below, I am putting the first two questions for you. And below that I have included all of the questions (there are 13 in total, like the phases of the moon) in case you feel like going somewhere other than where I have started. As you can see, this is not a regular interview, because I am hoping we can both speak from our places of truth, our hearts, our deep ways. And our voice(s). So, that is how I have framed the preguntas. It's a call and response.... Feel free to call back, as well. I am open, though my priority is to focus on you and what you create.

ANA: Compartir compas compatrio sa sans songs I want to hear to know to feel and breathe your song-o**Go**

JOSEFINA: My song, MY song, does not rhyme. Its theme does not make the current wave. No Postcard. It is really little. But not contained. Content. Yes. I like to sing prayers in a merengue tempo. No por joder. But it really takes the prayer into a quotidian sacredness where heaven is painted with loud colors. I always have a song in my head. Sometimes the entire song is just a word. I will always sing my song. Songs sang in made-up languages. Sometimes my song is silent. And I enjoy it immensely, too. Tell me about the languages in your song. Tell me about the song in your languages. **Please braid more ARs in abrazos.**

### SCENE TWO: BREAKING BREAD

**Setting:** A New York apartment, bookshelves against the wall, the kitchen expansive against the courtyard wall and window.

**//** Enter Ana. There are mantras and merengue playing. Merengue and mantras. Merengmantras. Between the oms and the trumpets, between the radio and the computer, there are moments of unexpected harmony.

JOSEFINA: How are you today?

*Ana understands that the question being asked is of a prior world, spiritual nature. Someone unseen—has spread the chisme that her stomach has been hurting. The notebook flies out. Recipes are written. Josefina demonstrates a jar of fermented cabbage, explains how to add the salt to the water to make the brine. The question is reciprocated. ANA: And how are you today? Josefina returns to the wash she had started before Ana entered. A beautiful, white dress rests in water. She picks it up with both hands, wrings it—swirling the fabric into a tight coil against her chest. Water drips into the tub, adding to the sounds of mantras and merengues. Merengues and mantras. Josefina shakes out the dress. Hangs it. The dress is witness, is guest. A conversation takes place about herbs. ANA: I love el Palo de Indio. The same one that's used for Mama Juana. But, I make a mabi out of it. I boil it, with ginger and malagueta. Then I let it ferment. And it's delicious. And stimulates the blood. Josefina brings out a bejuco, a cutting from a vine, that someone has brought her. It is the palo of which Ana speaks. Ana takes a small sliver of the bark and chews it. The bark dissolves into bitter slivers. Then there is calendula. The herb of the month. The discussion of tinctures, salves and oils. The beauty of the flower. Josefina places a bowl of beets and fermented cabbage on the table. Takes a bowl of tabbouleh out of the refrigerator. JOSEFINA: I put spirulina on it. Josefina turns on the stove to heat the lentil soup. The conversation in between morsels of food draws up ancestors and magic.*

ANA: What has been said what must we leave sans decir **Go**

JOSEFINA: Possibility. Wanted. Not desired. Life As Is.

ANA

JOSEFINA

ANA

*It is only after the bowls of lentil soup stand empty that Ana and Josefina turn to questions. And wanderings. The light from the courtyard is brass. It enters the apartment and reflects off the flame of a burning candle.*

SCENE THREE: A CONVERSATION

*The conversation begins somewhere in between where it left off, months before.*

ANA: Let's not start with the hurt because this is the before and after let us now break Bread **Go**

JOSEFINA: Great, since my hurt is worked privately. Ingredients. Bread ingredients. Ingredients, know themselves as themselves just in the before phase. Bread will be their present. Vital. Their future will always be a common universe. **Where are you?**

ANA: in the I in the we, in the present, the gift, the performance, my offer in the air, not in the sky above the fog and the desert and the city

JOSEFINA: Querida?

ANA: What is your marvelous? Qué es tu maravilla?

JOSEFINA: Mi maravilla. What ángulo de la maravilla? When grounded on Gaia or triggered from the inside..., siempre la encuentro when I bend my knees and I'm still. Rooting myself more and more. There's something that happens, it makes me wonder. And I become that wonder. Hay una maravilla...in that connection. And it is real. No separation—the thinker—the thought—what is being thought. Es la dance...cuando no importa el resultado. El flow. The zone. Divine chercha. It's who I am at all times. And I get connected with my heart's decision. It is what doesn't change. That essence—that ángulo doesn't change. That's why I ask qué ángulo de la maravilla because es como un fractal. You enter. You multiply. Existence, coño that's marvelous...All There IS...

ANA: Y eso pasa there, in bending your knees?

JOSEFINA: Yeah. And I dance like that at all times, bending my knees. It's very humbling, and physically it gives you this level of alertness. This is a pillar in my Performance Autology. La vena principal en el performance.

ANA: ¿Cuál es el secreto de la rodilla?

JOSEFINA: La...el...To bow. To thank. To bow. To Thank. A sublime state and in full alertness. How about that?

ANA: What will we hold not hold abrazar cargar portar **Go**

JOSEFINA: Hold not hold but ourselves. Ourselves. All selves. All selffffffs. Not selfies. Self. Portando alma. Cargo AIIIIIIIIIIma. Clipper. Cargo. Otra remesa. I said alma. Con ele. A la letal la pronuncio igual anyway. Cargando Corazón. Corazón cargándome. Canteándome. Cantándome. Holding all in my nada. Asiswaswillbe. Bewillwasisis. Gracias ain't grace. But both dance in-to-from the heart. **Please braid more ARs in abrazos...**

ANA: What is your crossroads like?

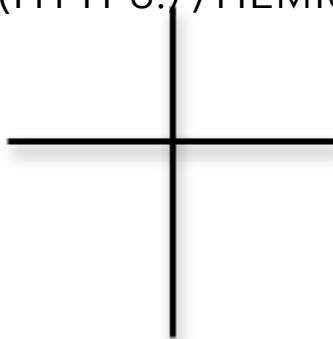
JOSEFINA: I see it from here [*sitting at a table's edge, points down to the surface of the table, puts the edge of one hand over the edge of the other, then points to the corners between the lines*]. From there [*moves hands like butterfly wings, emphasizing movement, dislocation, repositioning*]. Because the crossroads creates triángulos de los 90 degrees, and you can move that axis and play with it. My crossroads is on top of crossroads [*edge of hand against edge of hand, marking the crossroads in the air, moving from the table up to her crown*]. They fluctuate. I'm not fixed, not even to the crossroads.

ANA: ¿Lo desechas? ¿Lo entierras?

JOSEFINA: I walk it. I walk through them. On them. Over it. Under it. Una de las lecturas con las que hago diálogo es la de la cruz que conocemos desde la fuente judeocristiana. Your Higher Self and the communal living.

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This vertical line is the connection with the highest.



This horizontal line is very important—the line that represents the collective body, community.

JOSEFINA: I like to play. Si estoy encima de mi crossroads that gives me a way of seeing lots of details and other characters and props involved. If I'm here [*points to the table surface*] I'm not able to see much. But there is una cercanía. Ahí se ven las pecas, las arrugas, el color miel de los ojos... Then I can see myself in the choreography of it. At every angle...other info informs. Angles are always moving, so it's a bird's eye view. Y de abajo también es una vaina bien. Cada ángulo bestowing specific grace. Specific potentiality.

ANA: Your ancestors my ancestors whose feet are yours whose mouth whose lips whose memorias y memorials **Go**

JOSEFINA: He nacido muchas veces. He muerto la misma cantidad. Siendo mi mai y mi pai. Mi vecino. Y mi comadre. Y todas y todos los posibles personajes.Soy mi propia chopa. Soy mi reina. Dios-diosa-bodeguera.No urgency. No emergency. I walk slow. I walk. In the As Is.I. My ancestors—que soy yo misma—are greatly satisfied. With their shadows and their lights. And so am I with mine. The only suggestion I hear them sing at all times is that I must continue to walk/dance with joy. Sometimes I hear it as one of the deep down regrets in their personal histories. Thus the altar of joy is lighted up at all times no matter what.Memorias or memorials.

ANA: So old so long ago old there is only blood and muscle tissue creak cric el desdoble de nuestro doble antes siempre ahora entonces después **Go**

JOSEFINA: Cric Creak.Ahora. Hoy. Going.Went.Back to the first go.Fist. Go. Open. Palm. And La six fingers—La Cinqueña dancer se desdobra ó veces. Just before the 7<sup>th</sup> time so the cat will not take it as any competencia. La Cinqueña no es la ciguapa. No.La Cinqueña se desdobra. La Ciguapa es el desdoble. Cric crac. Crac. Cric.Cric creak. Bloody Creek.Before. Today and tomorrow. Resilient. Galore. Co creating As was As Is. Is. Si. **Where have you taken/take Ciguapa a dar una vuelta? Share some of your quotidian resilient-magic-daily-everyday-cada día-todos los días-energía vital.**

ANA: el fogón mi tía mi tía used to use fogón cuando the gas se acababa there was no money como that smell of cuaba y carbón of leña where's the eye on my keyboardlenyaand soonthe smell of yucca boiling

i'm not being nostalgicthere's wisdom here

almacigacuavatabonucotabacoguaguancoguayacanguavaberiguayigaguaraguaguaoguguaguaguagua

JOSEFINA: Ana, Nostalgia has wisdom too. In its waste of time. Recreating time. Playing with time. "killing time."Creating a time that rarely was as it was. Fiction wisdom. OM.

Cric Creak.Ahora. Hoy. Going. Went.Back to the first go.

ANA: ¿Cuáles son tus memorias peligrosas? What are your dangerous memories?

JOSEFINA: I have a poignant one.Coming to the States, I'm thinking—ok, it's family here, family there. [*Shrugs shoulder, pushes lower lip out, moves hands in a palm facing up circular gesture, head slightly bent...the intended meaning is to say, "It's not a big deal." Or so it seems*]. My brother asked me to come out to the building door. It was November. Back in the days, Fall felt like winter. He said Look. He was effortlessly

"smoking" with no cigarette. [*breathes out like when one breathes out and breath is cold air and a sound is formed before one's nose.*] I tried. Oh My God—I was smoking at twelve! That's the time I knew I had changed places. I am in New York. No less. It was powerful. As powerful as when I walked from church home and the moon walked with me. I stopped. She stopped, too. After I created that smoke...next day we had a snowstorm and, of course, I created it.

ANA: Quién sabe, quizás?

JOSEFINA: Right? Como la mariposa aquella que causa una tormenta. [*laughter*]

ANA: Qué son tus dangerous memories?

JOSEFINA: Mis memorias son chiquitas. No sé si son peligrosas. Los chiquitos somos peligrosos...cuando crecemos y somos comunidad. En eso estamos todavía, creciendo. Estas memorias chiquitas...Grand is existence. I enjoy the tiny little great things. Me dan mucha risa. Me río como río. Cascadas. Carcajadas. De todo. Con todo. Especialmente conmigo y de mí. Gozo mucho. Gozar sí es mi misión. Quizás, I don't even have memories. Oh shit. Could dangerous be something sweet? Why dangerous?

ANA: Why dangerous? Por ejemplo, la memoria más chiquita puede revelar las verdades más grandes. For example, yo subirme a la mata de cereza con mis primos. Quizás al principio parece insignificante, pero era un espacio donde estábamos totalmente libre en ese árbol de cereza, y ese árbol de cereza también tiene su historia—quién lo sembro, por qué...

JOSEFINA: Y los colores y las florecitas de la cereza que son bien lindas, muy delicadas. Y fuertes...que de ellas viene el fruto. Y cada cereza puede ser dulce o agria. El dangerous podría usar el dulce igual. That memory is sweet. Ahora sí. The dangerous sweet memory.

JOSEFINA: Podría ser, pero no sé si es algo que es real. As many memories. Es mirar por una hendija [*she pinches her fingers together, imitating a small peephole or keyhole, and tilts her head, closing one eye as if looking through*] y ver pasar un tanque de Guerra en la avenida Santa Rosa en La Romana. Y por esa misma hendija yo veía entrar el sol y todas esas pajitas [*hands dancing*] que viajan como en slow motion. Antes había visto ese sol, pero ese día vi esto (el tanque) y no sé si es real. Digo esto no para hacer un diario de guerra y dolor. La postalita. No. It's just memory.

JOSEFINA: Una memoria. Un día vi el cielo de un color que nunca más lo he visto. Eso paso el día cuando mataron a un joven en La Romana—por supuesto La Romana es el mundo, no? El joven se llamaba Limonal Vargas y era un guerrero de esos anti-Balagueristas. Lo mataron. La policía lo mato. Recuerdo que mis hermanos estaban muy consternados por esto. Ellos lo conocían. Yo tendría siete u ocho años. Lo que recuerdo, vividly, es un sol, un cielo naranja. Esa muerte tomo todo el dolor del pueblo y dibujo un cielo naranja.

JOSEFINA: Y sí—es dangerous. Sí. Porque me lleva a un espacio que tengo que reconstruir. Que reconstruyo siempre. En ese movimiento viven esos muertos. En esa vida que reconstruimos. Es un espacio donde la base es muy personal. Porque todo el mundo va a recordarse desde su ángulo, obvio. Tengo una responsabilidad con mi pasado, con este presente que se convierte en futuro. Y así entender y atender mi 'realidad'. Por eso soy todos los tiempos. Mis tiempos. Y en esos tiempos, viajan las historias, desde mi ángulo. Este ángulo es complementario a los otros ángulos. Ahora sí...estoy totalmente de acuerdo con tu propuesta que es dangerous. Mira lo que recuerdo. Oh My. No sé si pasó así. Le he preguntado a otras personas y ellos no lo recuerdan así.

ANA: There is knowledge here of what is seen what is unseen our ancestors have questions **Go**

ANA: That scar right there the one that marks your left from right there is no arriba arriba ni abajo **Go**

JOSEFINA: I have not made the mark a reality. I did not co-create it. I do not entertain it. My spine cuts both sides as mine. Contradicting everything I said. But I live in the tangent. Dig it Querida? Estoy en la tangente? It will hurt my ancestors if I take advantage of their pain. It hurts me if I entertain their questions. I trust their

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ANA: Té y sed hazme un t pa la c que me ayude there are always teas for colds for fevers for el pecho apretado y el pasmo y ésto **Go**

*The water boils in a kettle. Josefina shows Ana peppermint leaves then pours them in a teapot. The water steams up. The teapot travels first to the altar, then to the table. Into two small porcelain cups. Ana and Josefina drink peppermint tea.*

ANA: Aquí estamos anyways Sovereignty Blood Land Rio Rue **Go**

JOSEFINA: Inner Sovereignty. Another synonym for Light.

ANA: Pale 18 01 19 37 18 22 19 96 19 24 14 92 15 21 20 13 17 96 **Go**

JOSEFINA: Pal e. Pa le P ale. Pa lee. Tripleta 12 13 16 Combinao. Anyway..

La lotería ganada de por vidas... es la soberanía interna. Inner Sovereignty. Light by other name, indeed. Formed and informed by... Go. Always go. Go including stillness. Go. In the go with my Constantes. Hay una comunidad visible, una comunidad invisible. I talk with them both Hay una comunidad elegida, hay otra comunidad impuesta. Hay otra comunidad heredada, imaginada. Hay un montón de comunidades. Algunos se entrecruzan. Hay segmentos de la comunidad que es para reirte hasta orinar-te-reirte que te duelen las costillas, para tomar té, para comer, para hacer familia y donde te sientes como en familia. Siempre estoy. Siempre soy.. Yo soy mi propia comunidad, también. My best community to tell you the truth. Me río mucho conmigo misma. Bailo sola, canto, improviso muchas locuras. Lo que no veo quizás está más presente de lo que veo.

ANA: Somewhere in there trapped under the weight of lágrimas wanting searching for the delta there is no ship tonight no pintas or maries or cross lets unearth the bones of the unspoken mourn the hurt that will no longer live inside of us rest the femur the rib the skull down among the generations flesh greeting flesh a newly turned stone **Go**

JOSEFINA: The unspoken mourning has infused me with this amazing resilience; a strength that weaves minor and major issues; utmost respect; joy and gratitude for my-theirs-all existence.

ANA: How do you know you are in the presence of community? Y cómo sabes que estás en la presencia de ellos?

JOSEFINA: El resultado es la alegría. La alegría no precisamente carcajada. Una alegría más contentment. Es una alegría as in plenitud. Como el 'gozo en el alma'. Y eso no pasa siempre así. Hay momentos. Y cada momento tiene su expresión específica. You just know. Como alguien que tu respetas y te quiere te pone la mano en la pierna [*both Ana and Josefina put hands on their own thighs*]. Ese gesto lo dice to'. No hay nada que decir. Un I'm here for and with you. Entonces hay momentos que ves. Hay momentos que sientes. Que te inspiran y más que inspirar they lead, they lead you to comer algo, decidir esto, lo otro. Vas caminando y una voz, a very distinctive voice, will tell you "no, no, no—not this way. This." And that—that is presence taking care-doing their thang. In this unending dialogue of seen and unseen. It's presence that I bow to.

JOSEFINA: Yo creo que con los familiares míos que no están físicamente, nos comunicamos con la alegría. No hay forma de recordar a mis hermanos—ver una foto o escuchar una salsa que les gustaba—que no me de alegría. Que no baile. Que no haga un gesto que tiene que ver con ellos [*she imitates her brothers, shoulders broadened, a smile on her face, chin tucked*] es con alegría, con una assurance that everything is this. As IS.

ANA: What have been the expressive practices that gave birth to you?

JOSEFINA: Survival and quotidian ones. Cooking, doing. Todo lo que vive en mi casa en el pueblo. Those expressions made me. Every thing from my social class. Every thing from my working class strata. Our strata guides our entire life. No matter what.

ANA: Who did what in your house?

JOSEFINA: Mis hermanos y mis hermanas. Somos 10—mucha gente. Algunos de los varones saben cocinar bien. Hay música. Hay muchos amigos. Hay muchos cuentos, todo esto se filtró en mi storytelling. La música, el baile—la cherca—el swing. La forma de decir o escuchar todo lo que pasaba y no pasaba. Las marchantas y los otros buhoneros con sus jazzyblues sweet selling pitch. Sí, todo lo de la postalita también. Si todo lo que se vive. El cotidiano...Es el sedimento mío. Mi escuela también.

Enter Pablo Neruda's poems, from *The Book of Questions*. Translated by William O'Daly. Josefina pulls the book from the shelf. Ana opens to a random page. ANA [quoting Neruda] A quién le puedo preguntar qué vine a hacer en este mundo? Por qué me muevo sin querer, por qué no puedo estar inmóvil? Por qué voy rodando sin ruedas, volando sin alas ni plumas, y qué me dio por transmigrar si viven en Chile mis huesos?

JOSEFINA: Arriba del crossroads.

ANA: Yes, it's beautiful. It's where you are.

[sound of peppermint tea pouring][clapping]

JOSEFINA: Play. That's my prayer.

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Josefina Baez (La Romana, Dominican Republic/New York) Storyteller, ArteSana, performer, writer, theater director, educator, devotee. Founder and director of Ay Ombe Theatre (April 1986). Alchemist of artistic/creative life process, Performance Autology© (creative process based on the autobiography of the doer). Books published: *As Is É*, *Dominicanish*, *Comrade*, *Bliss ain't playing*, *Dramaturgia I & II*, *Como la Una/Como Uma*, *Levente no*. *Yolayorkdominicanyork*, *De Levente*. *4 textos para teatro performance*, *Canto de Plenitud*, *Latin In*, and *Why is my name Marysol?* (a children's book).

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## Land Acknowledgement

The Hemispheric Institute at New York University acknowledges with respect the Lenape nation, whose traditional homelands NYU now occupies. We recognize the longstanding significance of these territories for Lenape nations past and present. We acknowledge that we work in a city with the largest urban Native population in the United States. Even as we work to increase the historical awareness of Indigenous exclusion and erasure, we acknowledge the effect of that legacy in educational institutions, at NYU, and across the hemisphere. We are committed to work revealing Indigenous history and life-worlds and to the inclusion of Indigenous voices and participation, in allyship with Indigenous makers and communities across the Americas.

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