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No Estoy Sola (I Am Not Alone)

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Abstract: In this article, I analyze how women at the border city of El Paso address the #MeToo movement and gender-based violence through community-based theatre. By using testimonios and performance ethnography, I analyze the power of storytelling to create awareness of gender-based violence on the border and ability to create solidarity. The theater has become an effective way of addressing such a stigmatized topic. The performance of the theater has inspired a workshop that is now used to help survivors heal their wounds by understanding that they are not alone.

In 2006, Tarana Burke started the 'Me Too' movement as a forum to advocate for African American women and girls that had survived any sexual violence (Chicago Tribune, 2020). The movement was meant to help survivors heal and create a community that was willing to create change. In October 2017, actress Ashley Judd admitted that Harvey Weinstein had sexually harassed her (Chicago Tribune, 2020). Shortly after, actress Alyssa Milano decided to bring this movement to life by encouraging people to state whether they were sexually assaulted using the words "Me Too" (Chicago Tribune, 2020).¹ From there, this movement became a worldwide phenomenon inspiring women and girls from all backgrounds to speak against sexual harassment. People such as Harvey Weinstein, Lawrence Nassar, R. Kelly, Bill Cosby, and many others were exposed for their horrific crimes against women and young girls (Chicago Tribune, 2020). Each place around the world made the "Me Too" movement their own by creating new and innovative ways of spreading the message. In this essay, I narrate the impact that the "Me Too" movement has had in the border city of El Paso, which divides Mexico and the United States. It inspired former Chicana Hollywood producer Elizabeth (Liz) Chavez to transcend the 'Me Too' Movement using the controversial method of community-based theater. Gender-based violence is a stigmatized topic which many people feel uncomfortable listening to, especially, in a theater forum. Despite this stigma, Liz created the "Yo Soy Teatro" community-based theater as a platform for Chicana women to speak against gender-based violence, and to create solidarity amongst gender-based violence survivors. In order to measure the success of this controversial method, it is important to analyze the history of the theater

¹ See, for example, the #MeToo timeline in *The Chicago Tribune*.

group, the impact it has had in its community, and the things the theater has done since the journey began.

The city of El Paso is a unique place since it combines the American culture and Mexican culture, making its own border culture. These two cultures blend the gender-based violence that shadows over both the cities of El Paso and Juarez. The city of Juarez has been known for its feminicides, expert Gonzalez Rodriguez calls it the feminicide machine (2012). This feminicide machine, which has been proven to not only be based on sex but also on race, has made Mexican women seem inferior (Orozco, 2019). This type of gender-based violence dates back to the time of colonization of Mexico (Orozco, 2019). In the past, Juarez was involved in the spread of “male tourism” and industrialization which allowed for the formal institution of sexist beliefs that made women appear to be disposable (Gonzalez Rodriguez, 2012; Orozco, 2019). These institutions are what allowed women and girls to be murdered with no certain repercussion (Gonzalez Rodriguez, 2012; Orozco, 2019). Though this issue has spread nationwide and since the protests began, this issue has reached a point where Mexico is tired of the injustice. There is a certain persistence in degrading women, which allows them to be targeted for these horrific crimes. In February 2020, there was an uproar in Mexico; the people called on politicians to address the situation at hand after a ten-year-old girl was kidnapped and four days later found dead inside of a plastic bag (Orsi, 2020). This conflict has risen from the number of women that are attacked weekly, making women and girls targets of this kind of violence (Orsi, 2020). The city of El Paso, on the other hand, has a problem with the prevalence of domestic violence. In Texas, El Paso has the second-highest number of domestic violence cases, consequently leading to 43 homicides over five years (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2016).² The border between El Paso and Juarez is covered by a smog of stigma that does not allow the facts of gender-based violence to be revealed despite an academic valiant effort to confront the issue. Despite the constant fight against this violence, it seems like the voices of victims continue to be muted. Therefore, with the rise of the “Me Too” movement, there was hope that finally, someone would be able to hear the pain of the border women. The “Me Too” movement was meant to bring voice to gender-based violence of all types including domestic violence, feminicides, sex trafficking, and incest. So, on October 6, 2018, Liz Chavez used the “Me Too” movement as a platform to create the first “Ya Basta” (Enough is Enough) summit. This summit was meant to bring light to the issues that women at the border experienced and to expose the resources available to ending gender-based violence. The summit had a successful attendance rate, and it was overflowing with people from non-profit organizations, law officials, and several other organizations that could offer support to the survivors of violence in the El Paso region. There were many powerful keynote speakers that either had experience within the justice system or had experienced violence. Even with all of this, Liz Chavez still wanted to add something unique to the conference that reflected the sole purpose of her non-profit organization. She reunited the “Yo Soy Teatro” theater group to perform at the “Ya Basta” (Enough is Enough) conference.

Liz Chavez decided to bring together a group of 12 women, including me, to be part of this theater performance, which dealt with traumatic experiences. She planned to bring the theater participants into the shelters so they could hear the women’s stories and then write their

² Look at the Domestic Violence in Texas report from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence for more statistics about the Texas area.

monologues. However, after the first meeting, Liz realized that many of the participants had experienced gender-based violence at some point in their lives. Thus, the 12 women decided to base their monologues on their own experiences except for a few women who were inspired by stories they had heard. However, the monologues were still primarily based on their personal thoughts, feelings, and personal reactions to these other stories through their own experiences.

Background

Although Liz Chavez's idea was unique to El Paso and Juarez's region, it was not the first time that theater has been used to destigmatize violence around the world. In the 1960s, in Delano, California, playwright Luis Valdez, used theater to shed light on the oppression that farmworkers experience in the United States (Bagby & Valdez, 1967). What made Luiz Valdez's community theater unique was its simplicity (Bagby & Valdez, 1967). Instead of preparing and performing an elaborate show with extravagant costumes and set designs, Valdez's theater focused on the story (Bagby & Valdez, 1967). Whether they were comical or dramatic, the stories portrayed a strong message of injustices in the fields, which called for attention from the media (Bolt, 2011). Liz Chavez utilizes the simplicity of Luiz Valdez by focusing on the storytelling rather than the background. Although simplicity was one characteristic "Ya Basta!" embodied, Liz Chavez had several objectives for her community theater to educate and heal. The usage of theater as a form of healing trauma is very common and dates back to the Ancient Greeks (Interlandi, 2014). The Greeks, the soldiers that returned from battle, were required to be part of the theater to help them overcome war trauma; they would call it the "Theater of War" (Interlandi, 2014). Some current United States veterans participate in theater groups in order to express the experiences they had during the war (Interlandi, 2014). In Bogotá, Colombia, female activist Patricia Ariza has created a theater group that is used to call out the government on all the people who have disappeared throughout the years because of the civil war (Greene, 2014). Though, she has a unique type of style, which she named "collective creation" which creates a transformation of "pain into strength," she uses personal experiences as the basis of her theater (Greene, 2014). This makes this theater group a type of healing process for the victims of war. The theater has become a form of protest against injustice, but it has also become a tool of education and healing. In October 2018, the theater focused on creating awareness about the violence that women of the El Paso and Juarez region had encountered. The women of "Ya Basta" broke free from the stigma associated with oppression, oppressing, and victimization, with that platform to voice their truths, no longer being silenced, enough was finally enough.

According to Goffman, the problem with stigma is not the creation of these social expectations, but the presumption that community members must meet them (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, the stigma that surrounds gender-based violence is based on the expectation that it does not exist when, in fact, it does. However, scholars have created certain hypotheses about communities that have altered the expectations of gender-based violence; especially for minority groups such as Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. For example, Oscar Lewis wrote the book "The Children of Sanchez" which discusses the idea that machismo violence is only associated with the lower class (González Lopez, 2015). Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez fights for recognition that violence against women does not only happen amongst lower-class Mexicans but instead, it proves that machismo violence is prominent among any social class (González Lopez, 2015).³ Oscar Lewis's concept has proven extremely problematic because it has created oblivious thinking

³ Gloria Gonzales-Lopez is not the only one to address this issue but her argument against Oscar Lewis work is relevant to her research with incest in Mexico.

within victims that are not part of the lower class, so people that are not of the lower class feel uncomfortable coming forward. Additionally, his comments perpetuate the idea that lower-class Mexican women, like men, are violent, which contributes to the practice of blaming the victims (González Lopez, 2015). Therefore, these critiques enforce the importance of recognizing the prominence of gender-based violence regardless of race, sex, social class, ethnic group, sexual orientation, etc.

In addition, research has indicated that gender-based violence is rooted in the sexualization of women based on the society's cultural perspective, embedded in the minds of women from a young age (Held, 2014). Several social outlets such as hard-core pornography and social media have added to the normalization of the dehumanization of women, increasing their risk of being sexually assaulted (Held, 2014). These social outlets have also created the idea of silence that goes beyond women not speaking about violence, emphasizing male's interpretation of the way women communicate, as women have voices unrecognized by society (Held, 2014). For instance, women are believed to have "coded messages" behind their "refusals" such as "no meaning yes" (Held, 2014). Furthermore, research suggests a correlation between sexual violence and "sexual excitement" which ties with the "objectification of women" (Hartsock, 1999). Consequently, the culture's deconstruction of women, viewing them as less than human, allows them to be disrespected and has silenced women which results in an increase in their vulnerability to getting violently attacked. Taking this information into consideration, the normalization of violence against women inspired Liz Chavez to use the theater as a platform for destigmatizing and unraveling this standard idea that women are objects that can be vandalized.

The statistics of sexual violence in the United States have demonstrated an increase of victims in violent crime from 2015 to 2018 which is related to an increase in victims of sexual assault (Morgan & Oudekerk, 2019). Results suggest that one out of five women and one out of seventy-one men run the risk of becoming victims of sexual assault at any given moment of their adult lives (NSVRC, 2012-2015). Therefore, 91 percent of the rape victims will be women and only nine percent will be male; additionally, eight out of ten victims who have been sexually attacked were most likely attacked by someone they knew (NSVRC, 2012-2015). In 2017, the Honoring Texas Victims report stated that 136 women in Texas were killed by their intimate partner, two of these victims were from El Paso. Conclusively, the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault states that 2 out of 5 women in Texas will be sexually assaulted. With violence being so prominent in Texas and the El Paso communities, it is important to find ways to communicate these issues with the community, such as through theater.

Methods

The methodologies used for this manuscript include testimonios and performance ethnography. Testimonios are a set of personal stories that are used to create new knowledge and social change (Delgado Bernal, 2012). They have been used by Latinx and Chicax communities to document the historical, social, political, and cultural issues that bring oppression into their community (Delgado Bernal, 2012). Sharing one's story is expected to create this effect that will promote social change. Actually, testimonios have become a vital part of feminist Chicana theory because it "merges the brown bodies in our community with academia" (Delgado Bernal, 2012, p.364). That is because testimonios are a powerful tool that brings power to storytelling to break the silence about the injustices being done to the community (Delgado Bernal, 2012).

They have been used as a constant tool to break the 'normal' way of thinking that the dominant culture has created to maintain the oppression of certain people oppressed (Delgado Bernal, 2012). However, by exposing these issues there is a call for social change by the community to change the conditions in which they live (Delgado Bernal, 2012). Testimonios are the methods that consist of two formats where a testimonialista either records, transcribes or writes about testimonios or where they participate in writing and presenting their own testimonio (Delgado Bernal, 2012).⁴ After the manufacturing of the testimonios, there is the presentation of the testimonios that can be portrayed in "text, video performance or audio" which is the "product" (Delgado Bernal, 2012). Following the presentation, there is the learning or in other words the pedagogy, where the audience or the readers learn this new knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2012). However, for there to be a lesson from the testimonio, the listeners have to be willing to listen and the people have to be willing to tell their story (Delgado Bernal, 2012). Then, there is no social change that can be done until there has been a certain communication between the speaker and the listener (Delgado Bernal, 2012).

In addition to testimonios, I drew from ethnography. Performance ethnography derives from "red pedagogy" articulated by indigenous authors challenging academic models of publications by incorporating performance into academic scholarship (Denzin, 2003). For Native Americans, performance can be central to upholding communal traditions; adding performances to the repertoire of legitimate ways of sharing knowledge reinstates their cultural practices within academic registers (Denzin, 2003). Performance ethnography is unique since it takes knowledge from an academic setting to a personal context (Denzin, 2003). This personal context of performance has many lenses that involve the person presenting and people listening. To begin with the performer, performance is based on personal experiences that the researcher has experienced or the experiences of the people he or she has studied (Denzin, 2003). Many times, these personal experiences are based on cultural patterns, therefore, making performance ethnography vital to the social sciences such as sociology and anthropology (Denzin, 2003). Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that even though performance ethnography is unconventional it still involves conducting fieldwork to collect these stories and experiences to then be able to perform (Denzin, 2003). Though there are scholars that base their performance on autoethnographies that relate to their research of interest (Denzin, 2003) such as I did while conducting my research. The unique situation of this research is that the ethnography was done through personal experience. There were no interviews collected but rather this reflected what I experienced being part of the theater. I used both methods by writing down and presenting my own testimonio of how I experienced violence. This whole analysis is strictly done through personal experience and observations.

Ya Basta Community-Based Theater

For the Wise Latina conference in 2018, the theater group began by meeting at an authentic Mexican restaurant called Café Mayapan to write and practice their monologues. The first rehearsal took place two months prior to the performance. Liz Chavez made clear the intentions of the theater group and the expected outcome of the performance. The following week the group met with the first draft of the intended monologues. The first draft of the testimonios was pages long, reflecting the pain of their experiences. During the meeting, each woman had the opportunity to read their monologue which involved an immense amount of emotion. Some of

⁴ For this research, I was an active participant of the theater by writing and telling my monologue.

the women were not able to get through the monologue without sobbing. Many of the participants had not told their story to anyone and therefore, reading their first draft that day was the first time that they had spoken about their experience. The testimonios ranged from domestic violence, to femenicidios (femicides), to rape, sexual harassment, teen dating violence, stalking, and child abuse. Each story was powerful and emotional helping the theater bond as each participant became aware that they were not alone in their pain.

The twelve participants had two months of preparation for the monologues, however, not enough time to prepare for the emotional drainage. As the weeks followed, many women that wrote their monologue were unable to continue with the group since they were apprehensive about sharing their presentations considering that there was a chance that they would receive social backlash. So, throughout the weeks the group went from being twelve to being ten. This experience was empowering to the women that presented; after all, they were able to expose their story to the public knowing the potential consequences that would follow. The theater went beyond performance but instead was a form of healing for many women and helped free them from silence. A woman who participated said, "my monologue helped me organize my ideas and to process pain in a way that I could box it and file it in a place that affected me a lot less than before I wrote the monologue." The monologue brought the theater group together as a group of survivors that understood the pain of being silent. Therefore, the group decided to create a statement that would create solidarity between the participants and the audience members. The group decided on "no estás sola" (you are not alone), it would be our way to say "Me Too."⁵

Wise Latina International Summit

On October 6th, 2018 the "Ya Basta" (Enough is Enough) Wise Latina Summit took place at the El Paso Community College. That morning participants felt anxious and nervous, many of them kept reviewing their monologue afraid that they would forget the words when they were presenting. Even moments before the presentation everyone met behind the curtains and began speaking about the fears that they felt due to the idea of telling their story. Every single participant wears a costume that reflects their monologue so for example, I wore my private high school uniform and another participant wore a hospital gown. However, all the participants decided to wear a reboso (Mexican culture mantle) around their arms to add the factor of our culture into their performance and it was a certain item that unified the group. Liz Chavez took the stage to present the theater group and then announced the first presentation "Tengo algo que contarte y no se como" (I Have Something to Tell You and I Don't Know How). The first member of the theater entered from the right side of the stage. From there on, each member took turns entering from each side of the stage and once they were done telling their monologue they would move upstage and lock arms with the other members. Finally, the last monologue is announced, "I Am That Girl" which portrays the life of a girl in Juarez who experienced the fear of femenicidios. She finishes her monologue and joins the group; the whole group moves to center downstage and together we say "No estoy sola! (I am not alone!) No estas sola! (You are not alone!) No estamos solas! (We are not alone)". Finally, we invite the audience to join us in our chant, and the whole room trembles with the audience's voices.

⁵ The "no estás sola" was the Chicana way of saying "Me Too"; by changing the wording and language it became unique to the group.

Ultimately, the theater group exited through the curtains, however, several of the performers were approached by audience members after the performance. Apparently, many of the audience members were emotionally touched by one or more monologues and there were even some that had experienced the same things as some of the performers. There were even performers that had to walk audience members to the counseling services because the performance triggered traumas that had been repressed. Therefore, it was concluded that the performance was not only a form of healing for the performers but also the audience. The performance allowed the audience to realize they are not the only ones who experienced that type of violence it creates a certain relief for the victims in the audience.

Outcome of the Theater

After the performance at Wise Latina Summit, the theater group was invited to participate in other conferences for victims, academics, and health professionals. The performance also inspired the formation of a workshop that encouraged the power of storytelling. There were also new members that joined the theater group and wrote their testimonio on how they have experienced sexual violence. After the El Paso shooting that occurred August 3rd, 2019 in a Walmart, a member of the theater was inspired to write her monologue on that trauma; which added the essence of racial violence to our performance⁶. The performance on October 6th was a catalyst for change that even inspired a professor from the University of Wyoming to use theater to address the violence that Native Americans experience.

As the theater group continued to perform, telling their stories became easier. Essentially, several of the members embraced their stories and one of them even published her story in the *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social (MALCS)* journal. The theater became a forum to destigmatize the topic of sexual violence and making it possible for the community to speak about and address the issue. Consequently, creating a workshop that empowered the audience to tell their stories and break the silence that is derived from stigma surrounding the topic of gender-based violence. The workshop is about sixty to ninety minutes and asks participants to first listen to the monologues for fifteen to twenty minutes. Then the audience members are given a handout. The first part of the handout asks questions that are meant to make them reflect on the performance. They are asked to write about their favorite monologue and how that monologue impacted them emotionally and mentally; after a few minutes, the room reflects upon the monologues as a whole. Subsequently, we ask the audience members to write on the second part of the handout a story or an experience that reminds them about the monologues, thus, the audience is given about fifteen minutes to write. Then the audience is given the opportunity to tell their story; however, we ensure the room understands that it is a safe space. There is a mutual understanding that anything said in the room is kept in the room which motivates some of the audience members to tell their story.

This workshop has been conducted at three different conferences and two out of the three were for academics and health professionals. The first workshop was training for mental health care professionals which involved a considerable amount of emotions since the theater reminded several of these professionals about their passion. When we asked the room to participate,

⁶ On August 3, there was a shooting in a Walmart in El Paso, what made this shooting unique was that it was driven by racism.

there were several stories about how they or their family members were sexually abused or had experienced domestic violence. After the seminar, several of the audience members took the time to speak to us about how their personal experiences had affected and encouraged them to become mental health care professionals. There was a positive outcome from that presentation but the second conference evoked split feelings about the workshop. The second presentation was for a group of sociology professors that came from several other parts of the United States. After the workshop the theater group had a significant amount of positive feedback, however, there were several audience members that felt uncomfortable with the topic. Nonetheless, the theater was created to address uncomfortable topics, but it is important to recognize that not all audience members will respond to the performance and workshop the same way.

The theater group has accomplished success throughout a diverse number of audience members. Actually, the theater group has become transnational as its performance and workshop has reached places in Mexico and the United States. In August of 2019, Guillermina Nunez-Mchiri conducted the workshop in Durango, Mexico at the local university. However, since not all the performers could travel, the audience was asked to read the monologues which made the performance much more personal to them. Then the audience was asked to present their stories. The essential need for help when it comes to sexual violence was obvious. The audience members spoke about being sexually harassed in the workplace, at school, and at home which brought a considerable amount of emotion. Consequently, this workshop has inspired the university to invite the theater group to give the workshop again. Beyond Durango, the theater group has been invited to participate in a transnational artwork event in November which will connect colored lights between Juarez and El Paso. These lights also transmit sound from one side to the other so the performance will be heard not only on the El Paso, Texas side but also on the Juarez, Chihuahua side. As the theater group continues to work there will be a drive to create an enduring relationship with Mexico.

For the future, the theater plans to continue expanding its members and continue performing. As performers join, the theater wants to incorporate other types of sexually violent experiences such as sex trafficking and child incest. Also, the theater plans to develop a stronger relationship with Mexico so the theater can offer the opportunity to express their stories and perhaps help them destigmatize the subject. The theater will continue to perform in the city of El Paso and even expand to cities that are north and east of the city of El Paso. The theater will continue to improve the performance and the workshop to put more emphasis on community healing. The theater group highlights the importance of creating awareness about the topic, but it is important that with the workshop the theater group focuses on creating a form of healing for the audience.

In conclusion, the powerful performance on October 6, 2018, by the “Ya Basta” theater group has allowed for the group to transcend into this transnational phenomenon. The theater group has become a form of art that helps relieve the pain of gender-based violence for the survivors that are part of the group. This theater group has become a voice to the Me Too movement in the border city of El Paso. The word “no estoy sola” has become a statement of solidarity that has allowed survivors to realize that they are not alone. Since the “Ya Basta” theater group has become successful, the theater group has participated in several conferences around El Paso. The success of the theater group has inspired the submission of a grant proposal and the creation of a workshop that will encourage the audience to participate. As the theater group

continues to expand it is expected to help destigmatize the topic of gender-based violence and help the audience find healing through the act of performance. As this project continues to grow, many other women have joined and they have brought their unique stories to the table.

About the Author

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