

## CONFERENCE REVIEW

### *Women Who Rock: Making Scenes, Building Communities*

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*Women Who Rock: Making Scenes, Building Communities. February 17–18, 2011. University of Washington and Seattle University. Co-Conference Organizers: Mako Fitts, Quetzal Flores, Michelle Habell-Pallán, Angelica Macklin, Sonnet Retman, and the Women Who Rock Graduate Collective (Nicole Robert, Kim Carter Muñoz, Monica de la Torre, Martha Gonzalez, Kate Mottola, Noralis Rodriguez, Georgia Roberts, and Schuxuan Zhou).*

**Building from** the Pacific Northwest tradition of women using music and activism to anchor social justice movements, this groundbreaking conference brought together musicians, activists, writers, advocates, educators, and scholars from across the United States to talk about questions of female representation and access for women within music scenes. Central to the conference vision was a focus on feminist of color epistemologies. As the organizers explain, “We have been particularly inspired by the ways that Chicana and Black feminist thought has expanded who counts as ‘women’ and what counts as ‘rock.’” The conference title, *Women Who Rock*, thus spoke not only to the work of female musicians, but also to those who intellectually, politically, critically, and collaboratively, make scenes toward social justice–oriented community building.

The conference staged conversations so as to inspire and foster future engagement and collaboration beyond the events. Program organization proved absolutely vital to the success of the conference and represented an ideal model

for all of us to consider as it yielded one of the most productive, inspiring, and meaningful conference experiences in my twenty years attending such events. We often lose sight of the university as a place of possibility as well as privilege. It is the spaces of possibility that the conference organizers consistently embraced and opened up with their adamant positioning of the university as a visionary meeting ground. In their welcoming program comments, the organizers shared, “We intend to create an open structure through which unexpected, transformative, and even healing conversations might emerge. We look forward to engaging in rich dialogues and laying the foundation for new kinds of communities.” To ensure this, they experimented with a conference structure that avowedly emphasized dialogue and made scenes.

Events spanned over two days, beginning with an intensive all-day workshop devoted to works-in-progress. Graduate participants from the University of Washington and Seattle University submitted papers in advance to a small group of scholars (Alice “Bag” Armendariz Velasquez, Maylei Blackwell, Daphne Brooks, Andrea Clay, Marisol Berríos-Miranda, Rebekah Farrugia, Raline Joseph, J. Kehaulani Kanuanui, Sherrie Tucker, Leilani Nishime, and Judy Tsou) who then provided feedback and discussion. Writers and readers, as well as audience, had the opportunity to dialogue about how the papers resonated. This proved an incredibly effective way to begin the conference, for it commenced the circulation and exchange of ideas while also setting the tone for outreach, collaboration, and community building which then permeated the entire conference. The evening program featured a film festival, “Making a Scene On and Off Screen,” hosted and curated by Angelica Macklin. The screened work showcased how women are making social change by breaking rules, building community, and making music from South Africa to Palestine, Mexico, Brazil, Seattle, and the spaces in between.

Day two of the conference began with an open mic spoken word performance. Among the performers, Christa Bell engaged the audience in a call-and-response poem in which she invited us to commit to having an orgasm each day for forty days. She asked that we consider what it would mean to measure the events of our lives by the barometer of our self-pleasure. How would this shift our sense of priorities and obligations? How might we feel called to a higher purpose in our personal relationships and political activities? The performance was followed by an opening address presented by myself. Significantly, in her invitation, Michelle Habel-Pallán had instructed me not to deliver a paper; rather, I was to share my perspective as a critically-engaged listener, building from presentations and performances, to identify the threads suturing together the various works, events, and conversations.

I introduced three terms I have coined that I saw as pivotal to the conference: roquera theory, crisis performance, and critical witnessing. Notably, there were several powerful and established roquera theorists on the program: performance artist María Elena Gaitán aka Chola con Cello, Alice “Bag” Armendariz Velasquez, and Martha Gonzalez of Quetzal. Roquera theory is precisely about making a scene. Roqueras are unabashed, unapologetic, and uncensored. They move us both emotionally and physically, driving us to our feet by fueling us with the force of their *grito*. They inspire us to communicate in fresh ways, for example, dancing (as we did in the conference’s closing *Fandango*) to express the new awareness that has come to us as a result of roquera performance. We, too, become unabashed, unapologetic, and uncensored. Roquera theory is born from engaging in crisis performance, a genre dedicated to bearing witness to the struggles of individuals and communities in states of emergency. The roquera theorist feels compelled to make a scene not merely to speak out, but also to call people into a circle of bearing witness, to have others see what they see and share in their vision toward action. In creating a shared experience about

struggle in the face of impending catastrophe, they illuminate a situation and give vocabulary to what originally seemed unspeakable. In the process, artists carve a path for forging personal and social change. The work ushers us into a scene where we might collectively construct a stage of action. Critical witnessing is motivated by the desire to walk down that path, to be part of the solution not only in a select moment, but also for the duration. It is a desire born from recognizing that to do less is to participate in maintaining the status quo that led to the crisis point.

This second day of the conference also featured concurrent breakout sessions focused on work being done to empower communities through music. Featured topics included: DIY Media, Documenting Community, Resisting and Reconstructing, Seattle Fandango Project, Rock Camp, Home Alive, and Breaking Gender Barriers. I attended the session facilitated by Gretta Hartley and other former members of Home Alive, a Seattle-based organization launched in 1993 as a response to the murder of The Gits' Mia Zapata, who was assaulted and killed after she left a bar while en route to her music studio. Refusing to grieve in silence or live in fear, the feminist music community began Home Alive with a basic goal: forming a campaign to make sure that after late night events, people would consciously advocate for one another's safety, beginning with the key question, "How are you getting home?" Over time, the organization evolved to include personal empowerment and self-defense workshops and a worldwide distributed compact disk featuring music about surviving, confronting, and preventing violence.

The concurrent breakout sessions were followed by a roundtable discussion facilitated by Alice Bag, Andreana Clay, Daphne Brooks, J. Kehualani Kauanui, Sherry Tucker, and myself, and moderated by Mako Fitts. Again, Habell-Pallán refused the traditional format of paper presentation;

furthermore, she put roquera theory into practice by requiring us to take stage as an ensemble prepared to improvise. None of us had been told our roundtable duties in advance. It was not until we were on stage that our highly skilled and deft moderator revealed each of us would provide comment on the breakout session we had chosen to attend. In a bold visionary move Fitts, Habell-Pallán, and Retman had strategically, albeit quietly, orchestrated all of us toward attending different sessions. I found this to be an absolutely brilliant, critical, political, and pedagogical maneuver because it resulted in a roundtable session that genuinely and organically enacted the building of critical mass and thwarted the banking concept of education: Together we worked to synthesize the panels and envision their implications in a larger, shared context. This format allowed all conference goers to experience the entire scope of the conversations staged during the breakout sessions. As roundtable speakers shared about the panels they had attended, audience members would add to and build from our summaries and observations. The result was an incredibly rich and meaningful conversation with a very lasting imprint. It's one of the few conferences I have been to where participants continued the roundtable conversation until the very end of the closing events.

Making a scene depends on taking risks that include not just conversation but also confrontation. There was a moment during the roundtable when a white woman launched what appeared very hostile questions and comments toward one of the panelists. Ten or fifteen years ago, given the specific dynamics of the interactions staged at this particular forum, I believe that our response would have been one of fatigued defensiveness. Earlier, Mako Fitts referenced the work of *This Bridge Called My Back* as a model for the kind of cross-cultural work represented at the *Women Who Rock* conference. Fitts spotlighted *Bridge* as marking a sea change in academe, becoming a validated platform for the employment of personal narrative to produce critical theorizing. Twenty plus

years later, an entire generation has been deeply influenced and shaped by the work. When it was clear the questioner was crossing a line from critical inquiry to personal inquisition, an audience member took the mic and called for a time out, offering, “I want to invite you to think about how you are speaking from a position of privilege by presuming that your very personal and hostile line of inquiry to this panel is appropriate; it does not respect the audience as a whole nor does it respect the road traveled and paved by the women of color on the panel.” Another audience member added, “As a white woman, I am ashamed and embarrassed by the displayed lack of self-reflexivity. I work hard to educate myself about how to thoughtfully and productively speak—and listen—in a multicultural world; I invite you to read *This Bridge Called My Back* and take its pedagogy to heart.” As music scholar Sherry Tucker pointed out, “The bridge is the part of a song that doesn’t resolve and is often unacknowledged as the most complex part of the work, and it can also sometimes be the most beautiful part of the music.” It was heartening to witness such an active cultivation of critical listening. After the session, several roundtable participants and audience members individually reached out to the woman who had asked the hostile question to make sure that the moment of confrontation was ultimately as productive for her as it had clearly been for others. It was a moment that ushered everyone on to higher ground and called each of us to put our discussion into both critical and political context and practice. That scene illustrated the profound impact of *This Bridge Called My Back* and its very real transformative force.

After an afternoon interlude by Lady Jane DJ, performance artist María Elena Gaitán gave the conference’s keynote address. She began by explaining how the playing of the cello requires not being shy; a cellist needs to straddle the instrument and become one with it. As a Chicana and a woman, she spoke of the special imperative to get over the admonition that women must passively sit

with legs closed. Her presentation explored how the history of the instrument and its music has been shaped by elitism and sexism. She shared work from her current performance project, which engages with the violence of representation over who can play the cello, by using her body posed with cello to stage a visual critique and incite dialogue. Gaitán concluded her presentation by playing with the accompaniment of Quetzal, another visual resignification of orchestra structure, with their song illustrating the powerful role music plays in healing personal and historical trauma and (re)building community.

All conferences include dinners, be they organized meals or informal gatherings. The organizers held dinner at Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant, a local establishment with a price point that allowed nearly all conference participants to come should they like. The food was superb, and the gathering over food a most memorable experience because such a wide range of participants came together to continue the conversation staged by the conference. Following dinner, we returned to the Seattle University campus for a closing Fandango and Community Music Gathering. Notably, it wasn't a performance, but rather an *encuentro*. Improvisation ruled the scene and took center stage. Members of the Seattle Fandango Project began the playing and showed various conference participants how to play instruments and master basic footwork so as to join in the *son jarocho*.

In offering a model for change, the Women Who Rock Digital Oral History Project archives the stories of women and women of color who have built community through the making of music in Seattle, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. Kim Carter Muñoz, graduate student intern, developed the pilot oral histories for this project. The archive will be hosted by the University of Washington and made freely accessible to the public. Notably, and thankfully, this was an inaugural event. We look forward to seeing what the second *Women Who Rock* conference proposes.

The event was co-sponsored by the American Music Partnership of Seattle (Experience Music Project, KEXP 90.3 FM, and University of Washington) and by a grant from the Paul G. Allen Family Foundation. At Washington University: American Ethnic Studies, the Borderlands Research Cluster/Center for the Study of the Pacific Northwest, the Center for Global Studies, the Clowes Center, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity Research Institute, the School of Music, the Simpson Center for the Humanities, the UW Libraries Digital Initiative, Women Studies at the University of Washington, and the UW Graduate School. At Seattle University: Departments of Anthropology, Sociology, and Social Work, Women Studies Program, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

### **Links**

**General information:**

<http://womenwhorockresearchproject.wordpress.com>.

**Full program pdf:**

<http://womenwhorockresearchproject.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/updated-women-who-rock-making-scenes-building-communities-film-and-conference-program/>.