

Tomorrow You Are A Cactus

Simon(e) van Saarloos and Paula Chaves Bonilla

Director, choreographer and performer Paula Chaves Bonilla came over in “butch mood.” Her long hair wrapped under a baseball cap, carrying a duffle bag and wearing an oversized army jacket. It’s early May, and we speak with 1.5 meter in between. Before the recorder is turned on, we talk about what has been canceled and changed, due to Covid-19 measures. Chaves Bonilla should have been on a residency with Dansmakers, together with her collaborator Thais Di Marco. They were going to engage in wrestling techniques, specifically Bolivian Lucha Libre: a fighter practice performed by indigenous women. Their research is postponed —Lucha Libre would be too much touch.

Chaves Bonilla studied dance and circus in Bogota, Berlin, and New York, before landing in Amsterdam, where she obtained a bachelor’s degree in Choreography. In The Netherlands she made Paraart, Against The Wall, and Down is Up, while joining Amanda Piña’s long-term project Endangered Human Movements as a dancer and assistant choreographer. Her collaborative project with Hilda Moucharrafiéh Down is Up is described as a strategy: “we bring the DOWN—the South and that which has been rendered invisible—UP to the geo-surface of our consciousness, thus inverting the logics of orientation as cemented by the dominant westernised world views.” Her last performance, Omni Toxica—in collaboration with Di Marco—narrates the violent circulation and exploitation of the coca plant, told from a feminist queer, womxn perspective.

Coming from a legacy of political dissidence rooted in her family history, Chaves Bonilla also works as an anti-racist and queer activist. Between 2012 and 2016 she was co-organizer of Queeristan—a D.I.Y. Festival in Amsterdam to explore and counter the normative workings of gender, sexuality, and identity. Chaves Bonilla co-founded Queer Latinx, a platform to support feminist Latinx artists and art. She also collaborates with Sehaq, a Middle East and North African queer refugee group, and Maricas Indocumentadas, a group of undocumented translatina asylum seekers.

Chaves Bonilla is currently working with Veem House for Performance and Het HEM to develop a new performance, The reconquest of earthly underworlds—Atemporal Dungeons. The performance explores a post-apocalyptic world. Which is, in some ways, a very familiar place.

Chaves Bonilla affirms: “Speaking about climate change, *marica*, it’s important to say: the end of the world already happened a thousand times for marginalised communities, *habibi*. It’s been more than five hundred years of ongoing fight against the complete erasure of our peoples. More than five hundred years since the white Europeans came and the fight against the extraction and colonisation of our lands started. The end of the world already happened.”

Paula Chaves Bonilla shows anger like an activist, conducts research like a journalist, and moves like a dancer. Her work embodies the violence that springs from the non-consensual colonial use of land and resources. How and why does she use performance and fiction to share her urgency?

The Plant that Kills

Simon(e) van Saarloos: Let’s start with the broken earth.

Paula Chaves Bonilla: I grew up in the boom of narco-paramilitarism and the expansion of free trade markets. My childhood was bombs and narco-terror, para-politics, corruption, narco-politicians. Peasants live in extremely precarious conditions due to the lack of subsidies and abandonment from the government. You can try to farm potatoes or coffee, but nobody will come to pick up the harvest. You have to transport it yourself and that ends up making the cost of the local product higher than those imported under the free trade agreements. So when someone comes and says, “*Papito*, I can pay for your product at a decent price and I will come to pick it up,” surely they are going to accept. It’s very hard for local poor communities to not get involved in such illicit businesses. Neocolonial logics at place: a quality product is produced at low costs in the South and consumed at high costs in the North.

I grew up with a widespread advertisement on TV that warned you against “the plant that kills.” These advertisement campaigns were super problematic because they criminalise the practices of indigenous communities who have been using the coca plant for millenia. One of the most recent initiatives by the Nasa indigenous community in Colombia, has been to reclaim the ancestral value of the plant and challenge its bad reputation through the creation of a sparkling beverage called “Coca-Sek,” which is made out of the leaves. But Coca-Cola has patented the word “Coca” and they started a lawsuit against the Coca Sek initiative, which — with the help of the corrupt Colombian government — criminalised their beverage and initiative. The Colombian government,

just like any other country in the South globe selling and privatising their resources in favour of multi-nationals, don't give a fuck, *marica*. They don't protect the wellness of their people and lands.

In school I didn't learn about our non-western legacies, I didn't learn about our indigenous and afro heritages. I started learning it only later. Colombia is a super pluri-ethnic territory, but we don't learn about that at all. I went to a private school, gringo-oriented so with a lot of praise for Anglo and mainstream culture. Of course, I also got some critical stuff along the way but that was an exception to the rule. For example: I remember when I was about eleven years old, discussing a book about Columbus and the Americas and the teacher asked us: was this a discovery or colonization? I don't know if she even used the word colonization. That was one of the most explicit things you would hear about our actual history.

Later on during my choreography classes we would be talking about Pina Bausch or Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker. Why weren't we writing about our own dance and choreographic history? Is it that Bausch is better? Latinamerica is a land of bastards so of course there is an internalized superiority of whiteness and a naturalized focus on European history, and as latinxs of course we carry this, *marica*. It's internalized.

SvS: What is also internalized: the guilt of the survivor.

PCB: Yes, this is very real. A lot of my friends from the South Globe share a paralysing or dissociative experience when we are confronted with the news and realities of our countries back home. The transnational grassroots movement of first generation South Globe migrants fleeing from war and precarity, looking for a better future in the Northern hemisphere is just starting to articulate itself. I oscillate between the privilege of having survived and escaped and the traumatic experience of growing up in that violence. Of course, *marica*, I am here because I had the class privilege and the possibility to leave. It's not that "I'm so smart and talented and this is why I made it here"—*por favor no man*. There are so many people in Colombia who want to get out and cannot. I am super lucky, because Colombia is a super dangerous country and being a queer lesbian doesn't help. I often hear Colombians living abroad say "I'd never go back to that horrible place." And this is not something I often hear people say when they come from other places in the South globe—we Colombians are particularly traumatised, we've undergone 55 years of ongoing civil war. It's very sad.... Lots of trauma and pain.

SvS: Saying this feels dangerous too? In the North, the West, such feelings and statements can be used to affirm a narrative of progress—expecting that the future is here and only here, expecting everyone wants to have a part of this future, this privilege that is built on exploitation. Is fiction somehow a refusal of this subsuming white superiority?

PCB: This potential for trans-national solidarity is new, *marica*, we meet from all over the world. Different belief systems, different myths, different realities, different habits and behaviours, different temporal and permanent fictions. It's difficult and incredibly interesting and relevant at the same time because there are no common backgrounds. Yet we share a similar experience of colonization. We are not the second generation of migrants. I'm not, for example, Moroccan-Dutch. I'm not a Chicana, I didn't grow up in the States, I'm a Colombian person who grew up there and moved to Europe when I was already an adult. Articulating this, it's quite... where do you speak from, *marica*? Whom do you speak to? My one partner is a Muslim-Atheist from Lebanon who lives in the Netherlands. Islam is a hegemonic political project in her region, but she would have difficulties voicing such positioning in the current Islamophobic Dutch reality. Here, she almost has to say "I love Islam." But it's like "No I don't fucking love Islam"; political Islam and Arab nationalist powers are often very fascist and are complicit in supporting oppression and hateful politics in the Middle East and North Africa. How do we articulate this? There isn't a vocabulary yet for these complexities.

SvS: Are theatre and performance a way to create a vocabulary for such complexities?

PCB: It's about creating space for different ways of existing. A different imagery. Capitalism is a myth, *marica*, it's a permanent fiction, but it's still a myth. It's been around for so long we forget that it's a myth. Neoliberal economy is a myth, it is not The Truth. It's a myth like any other. That is why I work with the idea of fiction because it gives the capacity to de-centralized hegemonic structures, to imagine otherwise. To center other perspectives. One of the concepts I've been researching and reclaiming with my long-term collaborator Natalia Chaves Lopez, who is a historian and sociologist working with local indigenous communities in Mexico and Colombia, is the idea of cosmo-histories: a discipline that isn't busy with whether an event has truth or not, nor is concerned with the difference between reality and myth, but is rather invested in understanding the lives and histories of people: their narratives and relationship with objects, other animate beings and their surroundings.

The performance *Omni Toxica* is inspired by a myth about the message of the coca plant. One of the coca rituals consist of sitting in a circle and talking with ourselves and each other, *marica*. You talk and reflect whether your intentions are in line with your words and your words are in line with your actions. The coca plant's prophecy transmitted through Kjanachuyma, the main fortune-teller of the Inca empire, said: "I will protect you, I will appease your hunger, I will support you in hard times and long journeys. And one day what is a source of strength and a gift to you, will be exploited and turn into a source of addiction, oblivion and idiocy for the white people themselves." And this was before cocaine existed! The coca predicted that cocaine was going to exist and that we motherfuckers were going to become as viciously addicted as we motherfuckers are now to consumerism and instant satisfaction.

When the Spanish colonists first arrived, and the French and the English, they were super afraid of the knowledges of the indigenous people. They wanted to ban the use of coca leaves, and suppress their knowledges and life styles. It's super important to talk about this censorship, because in Europe they always say that there is enlightenment here, love for science and knowledge, and freedom of speech... but for whom? White culture is built on censorship. The coca-cocaine complex illustrates this very well: the consumption of cocaine increases in the northern hemisphere and European banks get to launder the money from narcotraffic with no more than symbolic fines as a consequence of their involvement with such criminal activities. In Latinamerica, the violence and instability of our economies—due to external debt and the devastation of our lands, ecocide due to the pesticides used to control the coca crops—is unknown to the rest of the world. Narco culture has become romanticized in Netflix series like *Narco* or *Pablo Escobar, el patron del mal*.



Omni Toxica. Photo credits by: © Bas Czerwinski

SvS: Your upcoming performance, The reconquest of earthly underworlds, also starts from a myth. In 1541 the indigenous Muisca from the region of Ubaté, Suta, Tausa and Cucunubá, located in the nation state of what is now Colombia, rioted to disobey the conquering power. Instead of surrendering to the Spaniards, the Muisca people killed themselves.

PCB: Fuuuuck! They killed themselves in protest! In our current context, we would never think of this strategy. We see visibility as a form of protest. As queer people, as racialized artists. There is this constant pressure to be visible, to fight for our existence and explain who we are beyond the racist and misogynist gaze that tries to define us out there. Do you know the biggest fear of the white man?

Chaves Bonilla invites me for call-and-response, only answering when I say: "what?"

PCB: Death, *marica*, they want to be immortal. This whole Darwin story of becoming stronger and better, on and on! Relax relax, today you are human, tomorrow you are a cactus.

SvS: The Underworlds performance is also based in BDSM practices. BDSM plays with domination and pain through rituals of consent. It's often said that in the West, the relationship to land and to earth and to peoples is a non-consensual one, marked by an entitled attitude to take

whatever one wants, without asking permission or proposing mutual exchange. The relationship between performer and audience can also ignite questions about consent. Omni Toxica starts with performer Thais, bare breasted, commenting on the futility of a parental advisory. During the performance, the audience is personally addressed, sometimes cursed at, sometimes simply asked to share their discontents or protest slogans. At the end of the performance, anger builds, climaxing until the audience is basically kicked out of the theatre space. How are you thinking about consent in your work?

PCB: Well the purpose of consent is to create a dialogue so that all the perspectives involved are taken into consideration. But similar to many other terms it has become a label that is not necessarily connected to an actual ethical practice. In the theater, we can say that the audience consents to enter and watch a performance piece. But this assumption of consent is often a reproduction of elitist behavior, and comes with the assumption of freedom of speech and progressive ideals, while it's just reproducing colonial oblivion by judging and censoring other approaches to theatre making. For example, challenging the known theatrical codes has been a way to raise questions around consent. It has been an empowering move to develop and find my own language as a South American migrant artist, coming from a background of politicised art and inscribing myself within institutional spaces here in Europe ... yet actively trying to distance myself from the reproduction of Eurocentric elitist aesthetics.

SvS: In popular narration of BDSM, there is the pressure to “know what you want” and to be explicit about it. It demands clear communication—this demand for clarity is cultural too.

PCB: “Consent culture” has been an important project; it emerged from grassroots movements in the US to raise awareness in relation to racial and gender politics. But at this point of globalisation, it's naive to pretend we can foresee what will potentially trigger people we don't even know. At the same time it's problematic because it might propagate paternalistic modes of safety and a specific kind of call-out culture based on specific politics of discomfort which doesn't necessarily speak to how we relate, confront, or speak with each other within our own contexts. What could be triggering for me may not be for you. Who am I to decide “what will be dangerous for you?”

SvS: The battery of the recorder has died. I wonder whether we talked enough about climate, but can “climate” even be talked about in explicit ways, as an isolated subject, or is it always entangled?

PCB: People have been working with the land and non-human kin for centuries. Remember the coca: it predicted its own revenge on the abuse of greed and consumerism it would endure. We don't have to save the world. You can die today, the earth will not care. It's ridiculous to *save* the world. It's also this colonial idea that nature is beautiful and peaceful and we stand in front of it, enjoying it, consuming it as a separate entity. It's not beautiful. It is wild as fuck, *marica*. It's super powerful. It's beautiful and it is powerful and it is dangerous and you should put your head down to her, to earth, to Gaia. We are not defending nature. We are nature defending itself!

Chaves Bonilla's words bring to mind the prologue of N.K. Jemisin's novel The Fifth Season from The Broken Earth Trilogy: "This is what you must remember: the ending of one story is just the beginning of another. This has happened before, after all. People die. Old orders pass. New societies are born. When we say 'the world has ended,' it's usually a lie, because the planet is just fine."

Simon(e) van Saarloos (1990, Summit, New Jersey) is a writer and philosopher from Amsterdam, The Netherlands. They published several books in Dutch including *Ik deug / deug niet*, a collection of columns originally published in the Dutch national newspaper *NRC*; *De vrouw die*, a novel on a molecular biologist running the NYC marathon in a burqa; and *Enz. Het Wildersproces*, a feminist and queer report of the trial of the Dutch right-wing politician Geert Wilders. In her 2015 book *Het monogame drama*, Van Saarloos critiques monogamous living and false notions of safety, proposing a non-monogamous love life and thus a different take on ownership and property. The book was recently translated into English and published by Publication Studio, titled *Playing Monogamy*. His most recent book, titled *Herdenken herdacht*, is a non-fiction work about queer forgetfulness, whiteness, and embodied commemoration. Van Saarloos curates collaborations between artists, activists and scholars and regularly appears on stage as a lecturer, interviewer and performer.

Learn more about Paula Chaves at <www.paulachaves.net>.