A Slav for You
Weronika Rogula

My project is a process, a working through, a wound, a performance, a struggle, a protest, a life, a failure, a possibility as well as a desire. This work/ing through includes a short video which documents one body—marked by twenty years in the west; fifty words spoken in English; six years sober; and one life desperate to find home. This video piece is interwoven with a written narrative that speaks to misalignment and tension; seams and raw edges. It is about resistance as written on the body—the body of a migrant, a seamstress, and a mother—my mother. This project is concerned with unravelling resistances within their individual moments and collective affects/manifestations by exploring the struggles and failures of a woman who has taught/forced me to resist assimilation and Western modes of being. This project deploys a politics of resistance and speaks to the juxtaposition of pride and (transformational) shame, stubbornness, and vulnerability as well as force and fear entangled within making sense of struggles. It is about the messiness of resistances.
ARTIST STATEMENT, A Slav For You (2012)

A Slav For You is process and performance; humiliation and (transformational) shame; struggle and failure; wound and protest; tension and anxiety; possibility and desire; it is a working through and a politics of the everyday; it is also a life (FAG-gy Inspiration). It is the life of a woman for whom, to use Nanibush’s words, “assimilation was never an option” (“Rethinking Resistances Plenary”). This life is marked by: twenty-two years in the West; fifty words spoken in English which, for her, is a “borrowed tongue” or a “language on loan” (Karpinski 2); one (cheated) failed citizenship test; six years sober; hundreds of homes scrubbed of shit (the literal not the figurative kind); and one heart buried elsewhere (Chopin Inspiration).

This is life and resistance as written on the body—the body of a migrant, a seamstress or “szwaczka,” and a mother. This woman, known for her inability to be anything but loud and disruptive, is, as I’ve grown to understand, a site of contestation and resistance. A Slav For You—she is loud, blunt, and rough. Her resistance is a daily struggle that is manifested in her inability and refusal to speak the English language or adhere to Western modes of politeness; her desire and/or need to travel hundreds of kilometers to see a Polish doctor and buy (maybe not Polish) tomatoes (but ones) sold by a Slav; and by her hatred for all things Canadian.

A Slav For You is a short video (3:06) that uses text and technology to (un)make sense of the everydayness of resistance. It puts into practice a politics of the everyday and pays homage to the home video confessional. The video employs a split screen with my mother on the left—close to the heart and left(over)—and, on the right, short scenes that speak to her life in Canada. The split (screen) signifies detachment and speaks to a split within my mother whose sense of self is based upon the distance she keeps from her life here. My mother is portrayed speaking in her mother tongue, but her speech is muted and slowed down to reference her (self-) imposed silence within Western worlds and to ridicule the inclination many have to speak more slowly to and more loudly at those who do not speak their language. The short scenes depict the sweat(y) shop basement where my mother exchanged her (life)time and labour for Tendonitis and bifocals as well as my mother (usually in her underwear and quite often drunk) sharpening knives on/against our front stoop—a regular Rogula-house occurrence which mortified me as a child. Pride and (transformational) shame. The video registers my mother, who speaks in her own way and in her own language about life (emotional survival) in the West. She speaks about her uneducated and working poor existence here and what babcia (i.e., grandma) said she “wasted twenty of the most beautiful years of her life on” (Zabielska n.p.) work (not to mention alcohol and gambling). In particular moments, my mother’s speech is interjected with the voice of my ciocia (aunt) Benka who is not so much translating as she is interpreting and narrating her own life story. The audio is assaultive and anxious as my mother and aunt interrupt and speak over one another signalling their—misaligned and agitating—resistance to Western ways of relating. The video, and its making, reference resistance as well as the ways in which it is individuated and far too often (mis)recognized.
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This video project is about resistance and the fissures that resistance creates within the body (politic). It is a video is about anxious performances bent on rebuking while reifying. It is about coming to terms with the tensions within my mother who is “[w]alking an ambiguous line between identification and counter-identification and between the desire to be accepted and the desire to resist hegemonic culture” (Pelle 23). The video speaks to what Muñoz refers to as “disidentification” (3) which is “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Muñoz writes about the concept of “disidentification” (3) in relation to “a queer person, a person of color, or a queer person of color” (Pelle 23) who “negotiates her/his subjectivity in a culture that often defines such a person as abject, ultimately denying her/his existence” (Muñoz 161). This is “an often violent, shaming, and traumatic collision” (Muñoz 161). I deploy his usage(s) of the concept in relation to my mother who is neither a queer person nor a (queer) person of colour but who performs as the minority subject. She is a sometimes-unshaven, cabbage-eating Slav woman and a “white but not quite” (Agathangelou 4) migrant whose ways of being in the world make this (dominant) culture (re)define her as unintelligible and/or abject. My mother does “not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz 4): she speaks (little to) no English but has no problem speaking her mind; she holds no citizenship here, whether in a legal or socio-cultural sense; and she scoffs at the Martha-Stewart, consumer-capitalist way of life by terrifying the neighbours and sharpening our knives (with pride and shame) on/against the front stoop. My mother performs the melancholic and unnerving bitchy Slav stereotype (archetype) which, for her, acts as a protective skin that is permeable yet shielding. “Disidentification” (Muñoz 3), after all, is about “cultural, material, and psychic survival” (161).

A Slav For You exposes the intimate and erotic entanglement(s) which bind resistance(s) with vulnerability and failure (Agathangelou; Lorde 53). It is about my mother and her (un)wavering pride in being Slav and her (straightjacket) shame in being different—a Canadian (im)migrant failure (Brown). The video speaks to this juxtaposition of pride and (transformational) shame as performed by my mother whose sharp tongue is cut only by her profound discomfort. Eve Sedgwick argues that “shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance” (38). These shame/ful performances speak to the pride my mother has for her (hard-)working class body which is intermingled with the shame she has for her uneducated mind. They also speak to her pride in refusing to accept mispronunciations of her name (0:07), which, again, is inseparable from her shame surrounding her inability to speak for herself when credit card companies and collection agencies call. The performative aspect(s) of shame which some consider the “swampland of the soul” (Brown) speak to what Muñoz defines as the performative aspect of disidentification:
A mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been “spoiled” in the majoritarian public sphere. This management is a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the making that such speech produces. (qtd. in Pelle 23)

*A Slav For You*—my mother performs (transformational) shame and “disidentification” (Muñoz 3), and is always unapologetic about her resistances. For Muñoz, “[i]t is about taking hold of, reenacting, and negotiating the effect of ‘toxic,’ ‘shamed,’ and ‘spoiled’ identity categories in an attempt to illustrate the absurdity of such characterizations” (qtd. in Pelle 23). The video speaks to the ways in which my mother embraces her “‘toxic,’ ‘shamed,’ and ‘spoiled’ identity” (Muñoz qtd. in Pelle, 23) as a Slav and a “white but not quite” (Agathangelou 4) migrant whose contempt for Western ways of being is palpable. She performs her “spoiled identity” (Muñoz qtd. in Pelle, 23) with pride and shame because it is a matter of life and death. My mother negotiates (and sometimes embraces) stereotypes—dirty, loud, and stupid—because such identities can act as “a site of possibility and transformation” (Muñoz 193). She is a Slav for you—no question, tact or bullshit.

My video project is a working through bent on exposing the anxieties and vulnerabilities bonded to resistance(s). The video is about resistance(s) as written on the body—disjointed and incomplete. It is about (and for) my mother in recognition (and need) of her struggles which (un)make sense of failures and misrecognized ways of being in the world. The video project is also about the relationship (and love) I have with my mother whose struggles relate to, or, as Ahmed would say, “stick” (10) to my own resistance(s). It is about making sense of “the double movement that shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality” (Sedgwick 37)—a movement I would argue resistance(s) also make. My mother’s resistance(s) make her set herself apart from Westerners and “stick” (Ahmed 10) to me and other Slavs. Sara Ahmed writes about the ways in which emotions circulate between bodies and register the proximity of others by examining the ways in which they “stick” and “move” (10). She maintains that emotions are not only about movement but are also about attachments or about what connects us to this or that. The video speaks to these attachments and considers what connects my mother to other(ed) Slavs and her homeland. Ahmed states:

The relationship between movement and attachment is instructive. What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place. Hence movement does not cut the body off from the ‘where’ of its inhabitance, but connects bodies to other bodies: attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others. (17)

This video gives recognition to my mother as a site of resistance(s) and makes sense of the ways in which her (weird) ways of being in the world “stick” (Ahmed 10) to
my own ways of being and struggling. Her resistance(s) inform my own resistance(s) to Western ways of being; academia; professionalism; and all interpretations/translations of this particular project. This video and my subsequent working through have underscored my academic ambivalence and reluctance in speaking about its theoretical underpinnings. These resistance(s) speak to what Nanibush said: “I want to do theory without sounding like it” (“Rethinking Resistances Plenary”). I, too, would like to do theory but I desire more access to Slavic intellectual worldviews. My Western grounding fractures my relationship with my mother and my ability to translate my worldview; it makes me unknowable to myself as a Slav; it makes my academic work and this piece unintelligible and inaccessible to my mother; and Westernizes a project bent on rebuking Western ways of being.

_A Slav For You_ is about resistance(s) and the desires, possibilities, and failures associated with registering different worlds. It is dedicated to my mother.

**Works Cited**


**Notes**

1. I employ the term “erotic” to speak about resistances with reference to Anna M. Agathangelou’s presentation at the “Dynamic Resistances” Conference as well as to Audre Lorde’s work, “The Uses of the Erotic.” Agathangelou spoke about the body as a major
site of contestation of global power and argued that struggle is first and foremost erotic. Lorde wrote about the erotic as a source of power for women that is too often misnamed and/or devalued as superficial and inferior. My usages of the term “erotic” build upon their understandings, and speak about the ways in which resistance(s) register not just the sexual but the erotic that, understood as a threat to global powers, is reduced to the superficial and thus disregarded. I argue that the relationship between resistance(s) and vulnerability and failure is also erotic insofar as these experiences are gendered and because eroticism (within women in particular) is understood as a failure (e.g., in morality; in class; in sexuality; in proper upbringing, etc.).

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