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Queering Craft in Santa Clara del Cobre

Coppersmithing as a Practice of Care

ABSTRACT

As an artist-anthropologist who studies “making” through apprenticeship, I have discovered that craft production in the Mexican copper-smithing community of Santa Clara del Cobre is a practice of care, a kind of love. This inversion of careful and caring labor, required to create the well-made copper piece, also encompasses qualities and skills that queer societal stereotypes of binary gender-lines. Artisans generate bodies of knowledge through representative and reproductive performance, i.e. productive labor anchored in the forge through care, perspicacity and attention. Like all nurturing activities given freely, artisanal reproductivity cannot be adequately measured as wage labor. This is not to say that this generous work should be unpaid. But rather to suggest that what is desired of craft is precisely this non-enumerative quotient of care. My research is based upon an apprenticeship to Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas, an independent coppersmith artisan, successful enough to be free to follow his vision and imagination, to create things with care. Maestro Jesús would say: “If I counted all the blows of my hammer, I would go crazy! And besides, no client would be able to afford to buy my work!” It is this boundless giftedness that makes up the imaginary of craft, its tropes and aura: its generosity. Like women’s “reproductive” work of family, the work of the artisan is also “reproductive.” Both demand a “maternal” nurturance, unquantifiable attention and care. This quotient of care is pure gift without reciprocity. This non-enumerative labor... a kind of love.

Keywords:

Craft, care, performance, non-enumerative labor, incommensurability.

INTRODUCTION

As an artist-anthropologist who studies “making,” through my apprenticeship to a master coppersmith in Santa Clara del Cobre, Michoacán, Mexico, I have discovered that craft production in this community is a practice of care and a kind of love. This inversion of careful and caring labor that is required to create the well-made copper piece also encompasses qualities and skills that queer societal stereotypes of

binary gender-lines. Artisans generate bodies of knowledge through representative and reproductive performance: productive labor anchored in the forge through care, perspicacity and attention. Like all nurturing activities given freely, artisanal reproductivity cannot be adequately measured as wage labor. This is not to say that this generous work should be unpaid. But rather to suggest that what is desired of craft is precisely this non-enumerative quotient of care. My research was based upon an apprenticeship to Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas, an independent coppersmith artisan, successful enough to be free to follow his vision and imagination, to create things with care.



VIDEO 1. An audio-visual video with author reading the paper. (To watch the video, click the picture or the link : <https://biccs.dh.gu.se/2023/8-2023/1>)

Maestro Jesús would say: “If I counted all the blows of my hammer, I would go crazy! And besides, no client would be able to afford to buy my work!” It is this boundless giftedness that makes up the imaginary of craft, its tropes and aura: its generosity. Like women’s “reproductive” work of family, the work of the artisan is also “reproductive.” Both demand a “maternal” nurturance, unquantifiable attention and care. This quotient of care is pure gift without reciprocity. This non-enumerative labor, a kind of love.

Nowadays, women in Santa Clara, as well as men, are educated in metalworking in the town’s two government supported artisan schools, where forging vessels, silver engraving, jewelry design and other metalworking techniques are taught (Feder-Nadoff, 2004, 2014, 2017, in-press). Maestro Jesús’ family forge is run by his sons, and almost exclusively dedicated to forging utilitarian and non-utilitarian vessels. Although male dominated, this space is integral to a “way of life” and “world-making” that “incorporates all genders.” But, women, wives and daughters, have always participated in the forge, assisting their husbands and fathers directly or indirectly, often invisibly (Feder-Nadoff, 2004; 2014; 2017; in-press).

This preliminary discussion of the queering of craft is organized into three parts. The first outlines how performance theory applies to making, specifically to my study of coppersmithing in the Mexican

community of Santa Clara del Cobre in the state of Michoacán. My long-term research in Santa Clara was initiated in 1997 and is based upon an apprenticeship to the village master, Jesús Pérez Ornelas (1926-2014). The second section expands upon this application of performance theory, taking a deeper dive into the coppersmiths' performances of social representation and aesthetic reproduction. More specifically, it focuses on the coppersmith's reproductive performance, turning to Annette Weiner's concept of "reproduction" in conversation with Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality." The third section expands further upon these performance concepts, looking at how coppersmithing and making things require extreme "care." This care is a kind of love, a generous incommensurate gift. The section looks at Maestro Pérez's work and concludes with an inceptive outline of the queering of craft based upon my research in Santa Clara.



FIGURE 1. Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas and his son Felix who is holding steady the copper piece he is working on. It is a fish shape for the staff of the bishop of Tacámbaro.

Words like "representation," "reproduction," and "care" begin as small snowballs. But they are also touchstones, magnets of sort. They are recursive and performative. [See Figure 1 and 2]. They lead and guide us like a current and a poem. As they roll along with us through encounter and reflection they take on meaning, growing bigger through their stickiness. In ethnography the deeper we go, these words become terms -metaphors really- that capture elements and aspects we sense and feel but are not yet quite able to grasp why. With this in mind, I will wind my way through the concepts of reproductive and representative performance to bring us back to the notion of "care". Although this might seem a digressive entrance to the concept of "care," on the way of course, I will explain how these are all connected.

PERFORMANCE THEORY AND CRAFT

Despite that performance theory has been taken up by a range of disciplines in the last decades, in many respects it still remains a “loosely defined school of thought” (Gavin Brown 2003:4). Yet, even so, it is rarely, if ever, applied to “making”, skilled practice or visual arts, and remains locked within its application to performance as spectacle or theatrical. Overtime, however, the processual and the performative meet, in my view, through the application of performance theory to an anthropology of making (Feder-Nadoff, in-press; 2022a, 2022 b, 2017).

That said, in my long-term apprenticeship-based research with the coppersmiths of Santa Clara del Cobre, performance theory has become a useful analytical framework for understanding artisan agency. Performance entails the carrying out of a particular task or given activity- to perform a series of actions, such as hammering out a bowl. A performance also means to perform something well or perform for others, as in theatre or in an artisan demonstration. My analysis of performance distinguishes two interstitial strands of performance and artisan agency: the social and the aesthetic. These performances correspond with representation and reproduction, respectively. Reproductive-aesthetic performance takes place predominantly in the forge and social-representative performance takes place publicly in the marketplace, such as during the national copper fair when artisans perform spectacular coppersmithing demonstrations (See Figure 1). Coppersmithing performances are ontological and epistemological techniques; they form identity and bodies of knowledge, skills and skilled bodies. [See Figure 2]

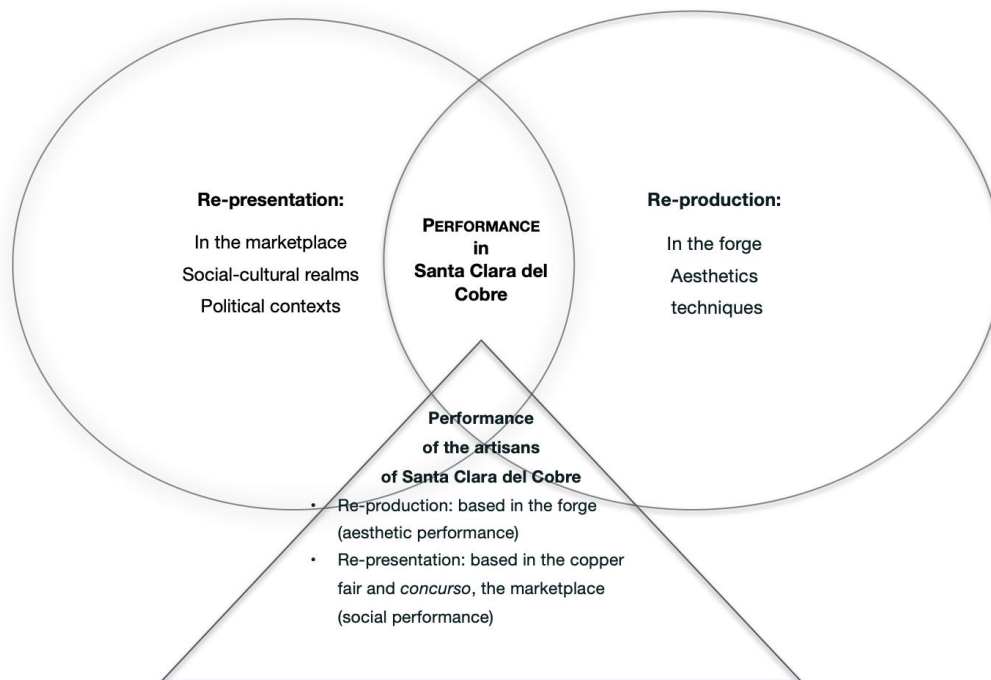


FIGURE 2. Representative and reproductive performance in Santa Clara del Cobre..

Brown (2003:4) explains that often what sets performance apart from other modes of human action is its “reliance on a preexisting script” such as for a “theater performance, a musical score for an opera, a prescribed liturgy for a religious ritual, an order of proceedings for a ceremony” and so on. Likewise, in Santa Clara this script, or repertoire, encompasses its “operational sequences”, the techniques and

steps of the coppersmithing process. But this repertoire is hardly fixed or static. Performances of aesthetic-reproduction always involve contingencies and serendipity. In the forge, regardless of the amply used repertoire of steps, when forging a copper vessel into a deepened and elaborated form, creative contingency is accounted for, as is material variations, flaws and even technical errors, human mistakes. When asked “What are you making?” my artisan teachers would respond: “I will see what comes out.” The piece would direct them, even when they would be repeating the style of a piece they had forged many times before. Similarly, in Brown’s (2003: 5) discussion of performance he explains that:

To understand performance as purely the enactment of a script equates to, in the words of Victor Turner, a form of ‘cognitive reductivism’ [...] because “no script can ever fully encapsulate a performance; rather, a performance represents a creative tension between the ‘what should be’ of the script and the ‘what happens’ of the actual performance. To speak of performance is not merely to be concerned with the intricate form of the event as envisioned by the script, but also, to explore the unscripted dimensions of the activity. (Brown 2003, p.5)

Performance is always emergent, and in action the scripts within the forge and copper fair always undergo “reconstitution” which then alters future performances and their cultural meaning (Hymes, 1975, p.13 cf. Brown 2003, p.6). Turner stressed this emergent nature of performance and explained how “cultural performance” is less a performance of culture and more a formation, or even a re-formation, of culture. This is why entering the world of performance in Santa Clara as an artisan-apprentice has allowed me to witness and participate in not only the forging of things, but also in “the production and reproduction of culture.” (See Figure 1)

REPRODUCTION AND NATALITY

Annette Weiner (1980, p.71) explains that every “society must reproduce and regenerate certain elements of value in order for the society to continue” and that although aspects of both reproduction and regeneration overlap, they are distinct. Weiner explains that reproduction “is concerned with the cultural attention and meaning given to acts of forming, producing, or creating something new”, While as “regeneration refers to the cultural attention and meaning given to renewal, revival, rebirth or re-creation of entities previously reproduced.” From a performance lens we might see how regeneration and reproduction are carried out through repertoires that both build upon and rebuild archives.

Although scripted and choreographed, the copper festival and its activities, as Santa Clara’s artisans coppersmithing repertoire, are not static, rather they are reproductive performances of community rejuvenation. Regeneration and re-dedication are evident in the copper fair’s splendid array of processions dedicated to every trade and member of the community. These are also social dramas, in Victor Turner’s terms. But they are also Boalian-like exercises in which labor and hard exertion becomes art, expressive, and literally and metaphorically striking. The smiths exhibit their grand facilities, grace, and modesty. They are prepared, respected and knowledgeable—indeed, admired. Here in these moments the “as if” becomes converted to an “as is”, at least for a few moments. Through these public performances the artisans of Santa Clara re-perform, re-present and re-assert their identity. Publicly re-enacting their smithing repertoire removes these acts from their familiar context, and by doing so, these performances of smithing become interventions (Taylor 2011, p.19).

Thus, the coppersmiths gain social control through an embodied theater in which they exercise an authority and resistance that is not normally permitted to be expressed through direct discourse (Herzfeld, 2004). These performances are a *mezcla*, a mix, in which social structures and hierarchies shift momentarily, like musical chairs. During the annual copper fair and competition, Santa Clara’s sociocultural structures are produced and reproduced, re-formed and performed. And via these very illusive and temporal “structures of experience”— just as in ritual ceremonies- social meaning is recreated, restored (St John 2008:4) and regenerated (Weiner 1980), but also transformed.

This brings Weiner's concept of social reproduction and regeneration into concert with Hannah Arendt's concept of "natality," the capacity of all human beings to create new beginnings. Arendt (2018 [1958], p.246) explains that the:

... life span of man running towards death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin or destruction if it were not the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something anew, a faculty inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin. (Arendt, 2018 [1958], p.246)

But, Maestro Jesús' life and work cannot be mapped by progressive points between beginnings and endings. His agency must be measured not by progression, but rather by performance. Performances are understood by their effects and the values they contain. Like forms or images they are concealed or revealed, "registered in the actions of those who witness" them in the present. The past becomes a new beginning, not because it has ended, but because it has begun again differently in each encounter. This is why what Maestro Jesús considered most important were his tools. With this in mind, returning to Weiner's analysis of reproductive performance, we can now look more closely at how artisanal production in Santa Clara blurs --or queers-- the lines between gender stereotyped activities of nurturance and care.

CARE: MAKING THINGS; PERSONS AND WORLDS

Weiner's (1979, p.328) theories of reproduction and regeneration grew out of her criticism of traditional kinship studies, which had "analyzed the roles of men and women through a priori ethnocentrically constructed perspectives." By "using biological reproduction as a first principle", Weiner explained, "women have been treated as reproductive agents (and usually nothing more) and men have been treated as non-reproductive agents (and everything else)." Weiner's concept of reproduction is "a model for the organization of a society" in which "both men and women are analyzed as reproductive agents" actively engaged in "the reproduction [...] of human beings, and the regeneration of social relations." Yet the problem remains that these processes of reproduction that involve "the social, the micro, the little currents, the informal oral tradition, the subjective and the spaces of everyday life are made to seem secondary and inconsequential." And all of these reproductive and regenerative processes require incommensurable care.

Bernice Fisher and Joan Tronto defined care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" (Fisher and Tronto 1991, p.40). In Santa Clara the coppersmiths are involved in just such a care.

The amount of care and minute attention that was required to create a copper piece well went beyond the perfunctory. These performances of reproduction entail an incommensurate investment of energy, values and care. The Santa Clara performances are "more-than" performance; these repertoires extend the space and time in which they take place, to include an archive of mythology, history and technologies of metalwork in West Mexico and complex cultural interactions and transactions which go on beyond the exchange of copper things and their commodification, to become incommensurate.

In Maestro Jesús' work natality, reproduction and care come together in the creation of his copper works. His vessels are encircled by human or animal or bird-like heads and faces that emerge, seeming to push out from the solidity of the symmetrical walls of his copper vessels. The repeated human heads, most especially, appear similar to birth images as they emerge from the vessel walls, crowning. Here it becomes evident that men as well as women participate in reproduction: of communities, as we saw above, and themselves and the things they make. The repetition of heads form a continuity of gaze: a representation and "performance" of reproduction. Unlike Janus heads they have no beginnings nor endings. They are not poles, nor dualities; they encompass whole passages, not

just thresholds, but the entire space between. In these vessels, time is represented not as “a line between happenings” but rather evokes the past and future simultaneously.

Maestro Jesús’ vessels of heads and faces usually have no limbs. More often, they have wings and are human and nonhuman beings that transition between heaven and earth. Their bodies rest on tripod “feet” or rounded bases that form the ground. Oft represented is the owl, a bird whose head rotates 270 degrees and whose open wide eyes are so large they can see in almost complete darkness. Acute hunters, territorial and monogamous, owls camouflage themselves into tree boughs and trunk holes via their mottled muted colored feather patterns. They are vigilant in protecting their young and surveying their surroundings and situations. Just as their artisan-maker, they contradict gender-stereotyped binaries of “feminine” and “masculine” roles and activities (as imagined by humans). The care and delicacy given to create these copper vessels queer the “masculine... realm of production and appropriation” and the feminine realm, “characterized by transformation and maintenance.” Reproduction is transgendered by artisans who perform as doulas giving birth to self, communities and things with care.

CARE, GIFT AND LOVE: CONCLUDING TO BEGIN AGAIN

Care is a kind of “gift.” Like the gift, care is also recursive and performative. Its generosity is not necessarily reciprocal but yet, as Weiner suggests, it endows an ongoingness of relations that can exceed death. The production of copper work by my mentor-teacher, Maestro Jesús Pérez Ornelas, performs a kind of gift in the sense that it is also a performance of value, of incommensurate value in the context of his community of Santa Clara del Cobre. Yet, in addition, his copper work is a gift whose incommensurability lies in its inability to function exactly as a commodity. By this I mean that its measure of worth is beyond the measurable and outside of the constituent factors of the global marketplace. In a simplified sense this is evident in his oft repeated saying: “If I counted all my hammer strokes, I would drive myself crazy, and besides no client could afford my work.” And this is also met by how he sold his work, based upon the current market value of copper.

Replacement value is not possible in the sale of Maestro Pérez’s work. These are one of a kind pieces not only because their variance is complex, but because it runs in parallel to a consistent aesthetics, symbolism and iconographic morphology that he created over a lifetime. But beyond this stylistic succession lies his inversion of care that makes his labor incommensurable, non-enumerative. Like the work of the caregiver, mother, or father, this is not commensurable labor. For a mother and father, care cannot be measured. Similarly, the inversion of care in the labor of craft is incommensurable. Only when production is dissected within commercial and more factory-like forges-- where production steps are turned into itineraries, repertoires divided among many artisans and designers, repeated with clearly defined and limited ends and means-- can labor be quantified, valued and measured as commensurable.

The quotient of the incommensurable manifested in Maestro Jesús’s work testifies to creative freedom. This includes the allowances of unpredictability, the serendipity of material engagements and the endless pursuit of perfection. Yet, the incommensurable points also, more generally, to the limitless potential of creativity as a generative form of love and care. It is here, in this nurturing relationship, in the realm of the reproductive potential of making things, where crafting becomes queered.

POSTSCRIPT: LESSONS OF CARE

These lessons of care, as demonstrated by the artisans of Santa Clara del Cobre, can also be applied to the practice of ethnography and research more generally. Just as the coppersmiths of Santa Clara, ethnographers must practice care in correspondence with materials, people and things. As researchers we need “to know people, with care.” As Biehl and Locke (2017, p.33) articulate, we must be open to “the knowledge and mystery of others”, maintain “curiosity towards how human ways of living are intertwined with nonhuman modes of life” and have “humility in relationship to our own thinking.”

Echoing Tronto's call for an ethics of care, this means we must be engaged researchers who might be able to change things by considering how research might be proactive. To become "mobilizing force[s] in this world" as Biehl and Locke (2010: 318) insist, we bear the "responsibility to think of life in terms of both limits and crossroads--where new intersections of technology, interpersonal relations, desire and imagination can sometimes, abasing all odds, propel unexpected futures."

This incommensurate factor of care in research is also asked of you as readers who are asked to become active and "read with love." As Biehl and Locke (2017, p.33) instruct us:

This active form of "reading with love" frees us from critique as combat in favor of critique as care: care of the self and others, of aspirations for less violent and more just ways of inhabiting and sharing the planet, and of the imagination and thought itself. It makes it possible to engage in what texts can unleash, the forms of understanding that they open up, and the larger external machineries of which they are a part. (Biehl and Locke, 2017, p.33)

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