



Reading Viaduct. Photo by Steve Weinik.

“Haunting the space”: Nadia Botello, Nadia Hironaka, and Matthew Suib give an insider’s look at *Unsung*

by: Carly Rapaport-Stein

October 3, 2016

Sound artist and composer Nadia Botello and video artists Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib are retelling the untold stories of the Callowhill neighborhood, using *Unsung*, a one-night-only installation of image and sound, to illuminate these forgotten histories. The artists sat down with me to chat about the project, its conception, and what they think the audience might experience this Friday night.

Carly: What is the origin of this project, *Unsung*?

Nadia B.: The starting point of this project is a focus on the silenced and forgotten voices of the neighborhood, because this history is so steeped in industry and politicians rewriting the stories of the neighborhood, even to the present day.

Nadia H.: When Nadia Botello was first invited to work on this project, she noticed there was a lack of historical research addressing women in the Callowhill neighborhood. A researcher was brought in to help give context regarding the roles of women within this neighborhood and other points of interest. We knew about the future, the plans for the rail park, but little about the history. He then came back with several articles, but one in particular was of interest: “There are Plenty of Women on the Street: The Landscape of Commercial Sex in Progressive-Era Philadelphia, 1910-1918.”

Originally we had two different ideas we were debating, most were rooted in or beginning with the late 1700s and early 1800s. A lot of that had to do with industrialization, which is where we saw the start of

of our timeline. From there, once our project idea was decided, we focused on the history of prostitution within the area, we came up with the idea to have a choir and singers explore this history.

Matthew: We were interested in figures—either populations or individuals—who were on the margins of the historical record, but were playing a role in that neighborhood—just not in the historical record. Women in particular didn't play any role in the historical narrative we were seeing, and their absence jumped out at us immediately.

For Nadia H. and I and our work, that's a thread that runs through various projects we've done: looking at alternate histories. There not alternate, they're just histories, but an alternative to the capital "H" historical record. That's been, for us, influenced a lot by Howard Zinn's writings and our interest in using art as a way of creating or recreating, reinterpreting historical narratives.

Nadia H.: For *Unsung*, we're telling four stories with four vocalists, three of which are first person narratives, and one of which contains quotations from a book. The first narrative focuses on a prostitute seeking pregnancy prevention methods, and it explores Philadelphia's "Sin City" period around the late 1700s, which was a very sexually free time. The second story deals with Duffy's Cut, an area about 30 miles outside Philadelphia. In 1832, when the Philadelphia's Main Line railroad was put in, a bunch of Irish workers were brought in to work on the railroad. The Irish were treated very poorly and there's this area where a lot of Irish died, and the mass grave was rediscovered in the last few years. The second character, I imagine that her husband is one of the people who was killed and her sister, or friend, has been killed as well, but she doesn't know, so she's left talking about the conditions and how the Irish are treated. The third one in some ways might be the most interesting, and is based on a book written in 1849 called "A Guide to the Stranger, or: Pocket Companion for the Fancy, Containing A List of the Gay Houses and Ladies of Pleasure In the City of Brotherly Love and Sisterly Affection" (1849) which was basically a list to all the brothels in Philadelphia. The author, whose name is torn off of the book's cover, gives descriptions of the areas where the houses are, and what the house is known for. Some of these are just for straight up prostitutes and some are just empty hotels, for the "upper classes" to bring their lovers, and included married women of that day and age, a safe place where they could conduct their love affairs in privacy.

The final story is more disconcerting because it deals with human trafficking. There's a lot of human trafficking that's happening for people just to come and work in the States, and there's also trafficking specifically centered around the sex trade. I combined these themes in the last story where the character is doing both, she's with this group of people and is an illegal immigrant. She's brought in as a laborer and any money she gets goes right back to the owner because there's housing and food to account for, so it's an ongoing cycle, and the women are stuck. It's happening a lot and one thing, too, is that it's in the Callowhill area where we're doing the project. There's been a lot of this in the neighborhood and I think with the changing demographics of the neighborhood, those places while still existing are just getting pushed further away, but it's still happening. When the neighborhood changes it just means it's a little bit more out of sight, a mile down the road, a little further back, but it's still going on.

Nadia B.: Nadia H. pulled a lot of interesting research and texts for each character. I've been interpreting them into a nontraditional score, very much inspired by Robert Ashley and his operas, especially *Dust*, which is about people who are on the margins of society and utilizes a colloquial interpretation of American vernacular speech. His operas work with text and narrative as one of the foundations of the composition. He also facilitated collaborative efforts with his ensemble to get to the sounding of the text. And so, a part of our recording process will be to collectively come to the realization of the composition. I'm interested in collaborative efforts and the empowerment of women – I don't really want to dictate to somebody what's happening.

Carly: It's interesting that you're starting from this place of silent stories and then you're letting the women in this piece give their voice. It's a nice historical counterpoint.

Nadia B.: Exactly. And the vocalists will have this as a background in addition to the score, just so they fully know what it is they're getting into. They'll be singing, and we're recording them against a backdrop. Those images and the sound will be projected in the tunnel, pretty much to scale. On one side of the wall, there



will be the four vocalists dispersed at length throughout the tunnel, projectors on one side, and we're also working right now with plans to have fog. There's a variable option on the fog machine, so sometimes it will dissipate and other times it'll come on. So what happens of course is when the fog comes on, you can't see very well but also the image gets caught within the fog, so you get at times this three dimensional element, which becomes obscure. It's a little bit of a trick of walking through the tunnel at night, how much can you see, hearing these voices, seeing these figures, are they singing their unsung stories or are they calling out to you? It's this combination of who you are, in terms of being both a voyeur and participant in the space. There will be speakers for each of the singers, and there will also be sound from the metal pieces that will be set up, providing a low droning that's going to be happening throughout the duration of the performance. When we start recording and when I'm in post-production with it, it's going to be less about the text itself, and more about evoking these silenced responses, listening to women alone and women together. The site is also super specific, and it's why I wanted sopranos and altos, to activate the actual sonic structure of the tunnel.

Carly: Can you talk a little more about how you'll utilize the structure of the tunnel?

Nadia B.: Because the red light district was a response to the industries that were present throughout all these eras, I wanted to give a voice, a metaphorical voice, to some of the materials that were present. I asked for local steel that was found in North Philadelphia, and I'm sonifying it. It's a process of finding the tone of the material itself driven by the women's voices. So throughout the night the steel will be a part of this chorus.

Carly: When people are walking through the tunnel, is there something you want or are hoping that people will take away?

Matthew: We're starting with some real history but then projecting it onto this current moment, asking the vocalists to interpret it in an abstract way. It's something that's supposed to get to evocation, interpretation, and then something that's more visceral.

We wanted to avoid getting into the specific politics of sex trafficking and the morality of prostitution, but to think about it certainly in relation to the title of the piece, *Unsung*. Not just the act of not being celebrated—the most common understanding of the word *unsung*—but the actual stripping of a voice, the opposite of singing: being silenced. In historical writings, for centuries, that's the way that women have been given historical shape. We're trying to create an experience that looks at women as women, and women giving their own voice in their own space that is their expression and their creation, not defined strictly along the terms of those in power.

In terms of audience response, one of the possibilities of using a medium like moving image and sound, which change in the moment you experience them—the opposite of a bronze statue or carved stone, which are fixed forever. If you pull the plug, the installation is done, it doesn't exist anymore. But, the media that we're working with also connects with people in ways that a bronze statue can't, because there's this constant unfolding of experience in which viewers, second by second, create a relationship with the piece. That's something that I think we're interested in in a more formal way: how this piece can function and affect the audience experiencing it.

Nadia H.: Also, we're haunting the space. It will be very immersive, filled with sound and fog and image. When you're in there, that kind of experience is very different than looking at something flat. I love that this is one night, because it mimics a lot of the ideas that we're talking about. With the theme *unsung*, these voices and stories are not typically told or discussed. All of this is being prepped for a celebratory moment, the transition of the neighborhood, but at the same time I think what we're interested in is not forgetting the people who've inhabited this place in less prosperous times. We'll still be celebrating the change and expansion and the rail park, but at the same time servicing or acknowledging some of the less pleasant histories present within the neighborhood.

Carly: I think it's going to be a great night. I can't wait to see, hear, and experience it in its entirety.