

“Guarda l@s Niñ@s”
Installation Statement

One week in June of 2018, I was riding shotgun in my friend Natalie’s SUV on the way to Denver. I’d tagged along to meet Natalie’s friend, though I was really just going for the company and food. It had been a long summer by mid-June, and I needed to escape from the semi-lunatic state that poetry studies, politics, and commiseration had landed me in.

I swiped through my phone. News of idiotic Twitter phrasing and White House seniorization was old hat; the story of hundreds, if not thousands, of child detainees at the US-Mexico border was not. In a fury, trembling, I read articles to Natalie, who reciprocated my rage. It was too much to imagine. We had known for the duration of 45’s presidency (so far) that we adults would be plagued by his irrational, racist, sexist, egomaniacal behavior, but to imagine that children were being equally plagued to their physical detriment was too much. That children were being held captive, caged, in the country we lived in [no longer our country] was too much to imagine. And yet we had to imagine it; as the hail began to fall on the roof of the SUV, as I read article after article, as I heard the Washington Post audio footage of children crying for their mamas, subjected to shame and pain that they had not yet developed words for, I imagined it. As Natalie spoke with her own daughter, who was currently hundreds of miles away in California on a visit to hell where her grandparents lived, as Natalie comforted her daughter and reminded her of how soon she’d be back home, she was forced to imagine it. We both imagined children in cages, and knew that things had gotten so far.

I wrote a furious poem, quickly and in the car. The poem paralleled American ambivalence with atrocity, putting the reader within arm’s reach of the captive children, but denying the reader the comfort of becoming a savior. The poem was not enough.

I performed this furious poem with an equally furious friend, Faye, at Naropa University. We methodically placed paper children in a miniature cage, examining them as we did so, and a slideshow of photos from I.C.E. cages played behind us, and my recorded poem with audio from the border played to the shocked audience. It was not enough.

Nothing can be enough, not so long as children are held in cages in our midst. Not so long as prisons unreasonably hold children. Not so long as racism runs prisons. Cages come in different shapes.

Installation, “Guarda l@s Niñ@s”:
six poster-sized letterpress broadsides, wood type with red ink, with one floodlight,
installed on plate glass windows separating print studio from letterpress studio, University of
Louisville,
playing background audio of “We Shall Overcome” in Spanish on loop, through a speaker near
the door,
playing audio performance of title poem on loop, through MacBook displaying I.C.E. Detention
Facilities locator, with one lamp.