

My Electric Genealogy

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For nearly forty years my grandfather designed, planned, and supervised the spider-vein network of lines connecting Los Angeles to its distant sources of electric power. From the 1930s to the 1970s, he made a second family of the grid and its substations, converter stations, and interties, photographing these monuments of the modern everyday with one foot in the aesthetic and another in the techno-scientific sublime. When he died, he left behind boxes of snapshots that mixed birthday parties and family Christmases with portraits of power plants and transmission towers. Years later, I learned my grandfather's legacy also included some of the most polluting fossil fuel infrastructure in the country—much of it located out of state, on Navajo land. Those pictures inspired me to reimagine electric turbines, boilers, and substations as problematic 'uncles' and 'cousins' whose names I should know, whose actions I must try to understand, and whose climate legacies will pass to my child. "My Electric Genealogy" is a 90-minute solo performance that proceeds from this imaginative re-reading of my family tree. It combines live narration with moving images, choreographed movement, and an original score to make intimate the crumbling, carbon-heavy infrastructures that imperil the planet and to probe the aesthetic, ethical, and practical responses they demand. These infrastructures include not just power plants and transmission lines, but also "infrastructures of feeling:" closely held beliefs about nature, gender, race, and progress. Wearing a midcentury men's suit, I alternately embody my grandfather, my grandmother, my teenage self, my professional self, and my parent self to probe the socio-cultural roots of the climate crisis and to ask what intergenerational environmental responsibility might look like. What does it mean to become a parent in a world underwritten by systemic and ecological violence? How can bringing a child into a precarious future serve a project of social and political transformation?

Bookended by the 99 years that separate my grandfather's birth and my daughter's, "My Electric Genealogy" is set in Los Angeles, a city so emblematic of the values, aesthetics, and conditions of late modernity that geographer Ed Soja called it the "capital of the late twentieth century." The performance inhabits and re-imagines key moments in the city's—and my family's—history, from a 1936 ceremony welcoming the Hoover Dam's first electricity, to a nuclear-powered future envisioned in 1968, to the 1992 LA Uprising, to the 2016 decision to go coal-free. My goal is to challenge a largely non-Native audience to examine and take responsibility for their material and affective entanglements with climate change. Global warming emerges as a product of extractive capitalism, racial domination, and settler colonialism: a phenomenon for which reparations may be a more appropriate response than mere divestment. Reframing the power grid as a dynamic entity that connects diverse and unequally vulnerable communities, I ask how an ethics of care and obligation might animate responses to the ecological crises that "we"—settler-descended people—have *already* created, as well as those still to come.