Performing Monstrosity: Queer and Transgender Tactics of Resistance in Twenty-first Century U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Performing Monstrosity:
Queer and Transgender Tactics of Resistance in Twenty-first Century U.S.

This dissertation is a theoretically informed project that blends ethnographic and archival research methods to examine how queer and transgender performance artists deploy monstrosity as a tactic to question the terms by which LGBTQ people are granted or denied humanity in twenty-first century United States. While there is an abundance of research in critical humanities studies that investigates how the figure of the monster is deployed in popular literature, film, and television as a metaphor for LGBTQ people and practices, the response of LGBTQ performance artists to the social and material effects of these cultural productions is largely under-examined. This project fills that gap by tracing how butch lesbians, effeminate gay men, and transwomen of color, many of whom are from Latin America, adapt figures and scenarios from classic monster tropes and tales (Homer’s *Myth of the Sirens*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) to critically reflect not only their lived experiences and desires, but those of the transnational queer communities in which their performances are produced. This is crucial as the voices of these artists and communities remain marginal, if not excluded, in dominant discussions of LGBTQ identities, cultures, and histories in the U.S. Focusing on performance art staged in Chicago and New York City between 2003-2017, I theorize the artists’ different approaches to the monster as embodied, aesthetic, and choreographic tactics that enact feminist resistance against heteronormativity and its neoliberal offshoots – homonormativity, transnormativity – which have spurred what I term the “defanging” of LGBTQ politics, representation, and practices. In the process, I show how the performances of the artists in this study foster monstrous worlds that breach the hegemonic borders of gender, sexuality, race, and the nation.
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The development of this research began prior to my doctoral studies at Northwestern, when I was an M.F.A. student in the Performance Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and was initially inspired by the fear, confusion, anger, and loathing that my masculine-of-center dyke body at times inspires in others. Sputterings of “sir, sorry, ma’am?,” women jumping in horror and/or pulling their children closer to them in public bathrooms then rechecking the sign on the door, TSA officers deliberating in front of me about whether a man or woman should pat me down as I pass through security checkpoints, lewd threats from men who feel compelled to let me know that they have a “cure” for my queerness—the list goes on. I internalized these external abjections—they made me feel like a monster. I could relate to the tragic monsters of fantasy like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature who, upon catching his horrific reflection in the water, plunged his fist into it—sometimes I felt like punching mirrors too. However, I couldn’t help but notice an odd sense of power in my difference—on occasion I enjoyed making the humans squirm, disrupting their narrow visions of what it means to be a gendered and/or sexual person, a proper citizen. I also found a queer pleasure in the campy monsters of classic film and literature who disrupted the entitled lives of heterosexual human characters. I thought their performances reflected something about the gender and sexual realities of living in heteronormative society that was worthy of investigation. It is at this intersection of personal experience and intellectual curiosity that the idea for my M.F.A. thesis, *Brick Lining*, sprang forth. A multi-media blend of personal narrative and appropriations from popular culture, *Brick Lining* explored the terrible, pleasurable, and subversive aspects of being perceived as a
monster. It drew not only from my experiences of discrimination and cultural alienation as a queer adult, but as a queer child coming of age in a white, working-class, Christian fundamentalist cultural environment during Ronald Reagan’s and George H. W. Bush’s presidencies. As I developed the performance, my mentors Lin Hixon, Mary Patten, and Roberto Sifuentes pointed me to the repertoires of queer performance artists and troupes like Charles Ludlum and Split Britches, who deployed the figure of the monster to excavate and interrogate the histories and experiences of gays, lesbians, and other queer subjects. I realized that there was more research to be done and more performances to be made that explored the relationships amongst monstrosity, gender, and sexuality. I continued to search for other queer monsters. The chapters that follow contain just some of the monsters I have encountered over the past several years.

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1 For more details about and photos of the performance, see my artist website: https://sites.google.com/site/ralanges/brick-lining.
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INTRODUCTION

Restaging the Monstrous Encounter:
Sharpening the Fangs of LGBTQ Politics, Representation, and Practices

This dissertation is a theoretically informed project that blends ethnographic and archival research methods to examine how queer and transgender performance artists deploy monstrosity as a tactic to question the terms by which LGBTQ people are granted or denied humanity in twenty-first century United States. While there is an abundance of research in critical humanities studies that investigates how the figure of the monster is deployed in popular literature, film, and television as a metaphor for LGBTQ people and practices, the response of LGBTQ performance artists to the social and material effects of these cultural productions is largely under-examined.¹ This project fills that gap by tracing how butch dykes, effeminate gay men, and transwomen of color, many of whom are from Latin America, adapt figures and scenarios from classic monster tropes and tales (Homer’s Myth of the Sirens, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein) to critically reflect not only their lived experiences and desires, but those of the transnational queer communities in which their performances are staged. This is crucial as such voices and communities remain marginal, if not excluded, in dominant discussions of LGBTQ identities, cultures, and histories in the U.S. Focusing on performance art staged in Chicago and New York City between 2003-2017, I theorize the artists’ different approaches to the monster as embodied, aesthetic, and choreographic tactics that enact feminist resistance against heteronormativity and its neoliberal

¹ For a notable exception, see Susan Stryker’s seminal essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” first published in GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies in 1994, which deploys the figure of the monster as performative tactic for resisting transphobia and affirming transsexual embodiment and experience. Additionally, Bernadette Marie Calafell performatively deploys the figure of the monster to theorize her experiences of discrimination as a queer-identified Latina in the academy in the introduction to her monograph Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture (2015). However, Calafell’s monograph, for the most part, focuses on how U.S. popular media texts represent racial others as monsters, rather than the response of LGBTQ culture makers to these representations.
offshoots – homonormativity, transnormativity – which have spurred what I term the “defanging” of LGBTQ politics, representation, and practices.\(^2\) In the process, I show how the performance practices of the artists in this study foster monstrous worlds that breach the hegemonic borders of gender, sexuality, race, and the nation.

Throughout this project, performance, whether artistic or quotidian, operates as an object of study, method, and optic for unpacking the social, cultural, and political stakes of representing LGBTQ subjects as monsters in the early 2000s. In an era celebrated for its advances in LGBTQ civil rights, why do the artists in this study turn toward the figure of the monster, a figure deployed in mainstream media and politics to dehumanize gender and sexual minorities, to articulate their lived experiences and desires? The findings of my research show how, despite trends of humanizing gender and sexual minorities in mainstream media and politics, evidenced by the successful careers of transwomen in the entertainment industry like Carmen Carrera and the Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage in 2015, the social benefits of this trend are distributed unevenly, and in some cases, incite dangerous backlash against the most vulnerable members of the LGBTQ population. LGBTQ individuals and communities whose lived experiences and desires challenge these positive representations of LGBTQ social and political progress (e.g. un/documented immigrants, sex workers, racial minorities, poor people) are still treated like monsters who can be discriminated against and even killed with impunity. Those

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\(^2\) Queer theorist Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as gay and lesbian acceptance of “heteronormative assumptions and institutions” such as consumerism, privatization, monogamy, and marriage, which largely benefit white upper-class men (50, 63-66). Historian and critical scholar Susan Stryker argues that transgender people used the term “homonormative” long before academic theorists to describe the ways in which some gays and lesbians seem to have more in common with the “straight world” (“Transgender” 146). For example, Stryker notes that homosexuality “as a sexual orientation [is] based on constructions of gender shared with the dominant culture” which elide transgender identity (ibid.). Queer and transgender theorists C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn describe the emergence of a “transnormative subject, whose universalized trajectory of coming out/transition, visibility, recognition, protection, and self-actualization largely remains uninterrogated in its complicities and convergences with biomedical, neoliberal, racist, and imperialist projects” (67).
who embody the cultural ideals they privilege (e.g. citizenship, monogamy, whiteness, economic success) are hailed as productive members of the nation, whether they desire to be so or not. My analyses of the performances in this study thus focus on how the artists sharpen their fangs by deploying the figure of the monster to cut across and penetrate the borders demarcating hegemonic formulations of LGBTQ politics, representation, and practices that center the concerns and cultural productions of white gay (and sometimes lesbian) citizens. In the process, they reflect the social discrimination and violence LGBTQ people continue to face and resist interpellation into the normativizing political agendas of a nation that has historically excluded them.

The performances central to this study embody a feminist politics that addresses how transphobia, sexual respectability, racism, and citizenship status impact the quality of life of LGBTQ people, particularly those who are Latinx and identify with or as women. This project is therefore heavily indebted to intersectional feminist scholarship that is invested in critically interrogating the systemic oppression of women, as well as the category of “woman” itself, particularly as it is constituted by and exceeds normative definitions of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship. My research demonstrates how queer and transgender artists use performance as a platform to engage critical debates around the limits and possibilities of feminist politics and cultural production in the twenty-first century. Altogether, the performances in this study

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3 In this dissertation, I follow the lead of queer artists and activists of Latin American descent and use the term “Latinx,” instead of Latino or Latina, in order to decenter the masculine/feminine binary that structures the Spanish language. I use Latino and Latina when the specific gender of a person or community is salient. My usage of Latinx as a category of identity and culture is also informed by Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, who applies the term Latino/a “to Latin American immigrants, second-generation children, and in the case of “Chicanos/as,” a succession of generations that were in the Southwest before its annexation to the U.S. in 1848” (12).

4 Coined by black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality denotes “the various ways in which race and gender interact” to shape the “structural, political, and representational aspects of violence on women of color” (1244). Crenshaw’s theorization of intersectionality includes tending to how interactions between race and gender are compounded by class, sexuality, and immigration status.
demonstrate how popular monster tropes and tales are productive sites for interrogating dominant constructions of femininity, particularly as it manifests and is policed in and across the bodies of queer and transgender people of color and immigrants. It is important to note that not all of the artists who participate in these performances are Latinx or identify with or as women, per se. Collectively, the artists hail from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds and reflect a spectrum of gender. All of the main artists, however, were born in Latin America and either immigrated to the U.S. or have produced performances in the U.S.

The performances I analyze in this study enact what Chicana lesbian playwright and feminist theorist Cherríe Moraga terms “theory in the flesh,” wherein “the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity” (19). These theories of the flesh emerge from the artists’ embodied experiences of birthing, becoming, and being queer and transgender monsters. In her adaptation of Frankenstein, entitled Dykenstein: Sex, Horror, and the Tragedy of the Straight Brain (2003), New York City based, Argentinian performance artist Susana Cook plays the role of a butch “alien” scientist obsessed with creating “the perfect dyke,” satirizing heteronormative anxieties around the capacity of lesbians, particularly those who are immigrants such as herself, to birth monsters who will take over the U.S. In Inferno Varieté, or Hell’s Variety Show⁵ (2015), Mexican performance artist Felipe Osornio (aka Lechedevirgen Trimegisto) uses live piercing and carnivalesque games involving the audience to draw parallels between the medieval torture and punishment of brujas (female witches) and contemporary instances of homophobic violence during which queer men literally become monsters as they are beaten and burned beyond human recognition. In Divas from the Underground (2014), Sofia Moreno, a Mexican-born, Chicago-
based visual and performance artist deploys the figure of the siren, a chimeric sea creature that seduces and destroys men, to critically reflect and refigure her experience of always already being a monster in the eyes of heteronormative society as a transwoman of color and former sex worker. Overall, the collection of performances presented in this dissertation constitute a queer and transgender bestiary that I mark as part of a longer repertoire of LGBTQ aesthetic practices such as camp horror, drag, BDSM, body-based art, queer burlesque, and cabaret. Throughout my analyses, I argue that the performances collected in this bestiary provide unique lenses through which to re/consider queer and transgender histories.

While the early twenty-first century U.S. has seen a renaissance in LGBTQ historical research and archives, these projects are not immune from the trend of defanging that seeks to render them less threatening and thereby assimilable to dominant society. In her introduction to *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, gender and sexualities studies scholar Heather K. Love writes that the aim of many of these historical projects is to affirm “the legitimacy of gay and lesbian existence” which often translates to a distancing from and a disavowal of histories of “violence and stigmatization” that yoke queerness to negativity (1-2). Love continues, “rather than disavowing the history of marginalization and abjection, I suggest that we embrace it, exploring the ways it continues to structure queer experience in the present” (29). The main artists in this study demonstrate how the figure of the monster—a creature of fantasy that has been used in lieu of actual representations of LGBTQ people for a significant part of U.S. history—is a salient metaphor for LGBTQ histories that have been and continue to be censored from official records because they represent violence, stigmatization, abjection, and marginalization as part and parcel of LGBTQ lived experience and aesthetic practices. The artists mine their embodied experience and histories as people of color and/or immigrants to mark the
censorship of LGBTQ histories as part of the violent legacy of colonization, which mandates conformity with white European heteropatriarchal values. The artists thus utilize performance as a site for fanging—slicing open and seizing—LGBTQ histories that tarry in the negative, spilling out and mining their contents for knowledge and tactics critical for surviving the present and envisioning queer and transgender futures.

Various disciplines in the humanities (e.g. literary studies, film studies, sexualities studies, anthropology) have done important work to recover LGBTQ histories censored from official records by collecting and analyzing unique archives, conducting and (re)interpreting clinical studies on gender and sexual nonconformity, and interviewing LGBTQ people about their lives and communities. While these disciplines largely draw from text-based data, a performance studies analytic enables us to trace the embodied aesthetic practices and relations through which LGBTQ people and communities preserve, disseminate, contest, and revise their histories. In her monograph, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor argues that “performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity” via reiterated behavior (2-3). Taylor’s argument, which hinges on the reproducibility of performance, contravenes Peggy Phelan’s well-cited argument that performance is ephemeral, that it becomes itself through disappearance and is therefore unreproducible (91). Although Phelan’s understanding of performance is useful in that it provides a frame for thinking about how performance resists commodification, Taylor asks us to consider “whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance lacks the staying power to transmit vital knowledge” (5). The histories embedded in the embodied aesthetics, symbols, and scenarios that constitute performance repertoires are transmitted each time they are reproduced before an audience. This staying power
of performance renders it a crucial platform for recovering histories excluded from or misinterpreted within official archives (ibid.). Following Taylor, I show how the monstrous performances examined in this study work to transmit the social knowledge, memories, and identities of queer and transgender immigrants and/or people of color who identify with or as women. In the process, they challenge defanged narratives of LGBTQ history in the U.S. that privilege white, masculine gay citizens and culture by re-centering the roles of feminine and feminized subjects within it.

Taylor’s study builds on previous scholarship that shows how the reproducibility of performance makes it useful for preserving cultural history. For example, Joseph Roach argues that performance is a process of surrogation aimed at reproducing culture when “actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric” (2). In *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, Roach shows how surrogates are groomed, or at the very least expected, to perform cultural roles vacated in death or by other means, which helps to preserve cultural memory and tradition from one generation to the next. However, as Roach shows us, the reproduction of certain cultural roles, memories, and traditions requires that others are forgotten or repressed (2-3). Roach thus outlines what he describes as “performances of waste” aimed at ritually purging subjects whose differences disrupt the cultural continuity promised by surrogation. Roach argues that bodies considered excessive and/or expendable, namely black and brown bodies, were symbolically purged, or wasted, in seventeenth and eighteenth century circum-Atlantic theater to allay white anxieties of cultural mixing and miscegenation. In other words, circum-Atlantic theater plays introduced black and/or brown characters, who symbolized the growing heterogeneity of the U.S. and Great Britain, in order to eliminate them and restore the illusion of racial and cultural purity. While Roach shows us how
performances of waste function as climaxes in theatrical productions aimed at ensuring hegemonic cultural continuity, they also function to maintain social hierarchies when enacted through everyday social violence. The queer and transgender artists in this study restage the socio-cultural scenarios that often lead to performances of waste, particularly those that culminate in the destruction of a person deemed a cultural monster by the majority. However, rather than destroying these monsters to restore the status quo, the artists enliven them as macabre embodiments of LGBTQ histories.

In the U.S., the genre of the horror film has historically functioned as an important outlet for articulating the “unspeakable,” or same-sex sexuality, as the antithesis of heterosexuality, which film historian Vito Russo demonstrates in his study on cinematic representations of gays and lesbians, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (42). Following the implementation of the Hayes Code in the 1930s, which banned filmic representations of “sexual perversion,” the monsters of horror film were increasingly used as metaphoric stand-ins for gays and lesbians, as well as cross dressers, transsexuals, and other deviants assumed under this category. The werewolf, suppressed within the body of a seemingly normal person, emerges under the cover of night to satiate an uncontrollable hunger for human flesh, an apt metaphor for the closet and the predatory licentiousness projected onto queer subjects (Spadoni 56-59). The vampire, with its penchant for imbibing the bodily fluids of both men and women, reflects heteronormative fears of being contaminated by queer desire, and by extension sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS, historically associated with gay men (Benshoff 2; J.J. Cohen 5). While the Hayes Code fell out of practice in the 1960s, using the figure of the monster as a stand-in for gender and sexual minorities remains a prevalent trope in popular horror films, as well as in popular television series, literature, and political discourse. Between the years of
2013 and 2017, several states aired campaign advertisements that positioned transgender people as monstrous sexual predators in order to limit their access to public bathrooms and other facilities.\(^6\) This latter example demonstrates just one of the ways in which monstrous metaphors for gender and sexual nonconformity are mobilized to negatively affect the social and material realities of queer and/or transgender people in the twenty-first century.

It should be noted that while the artists in this study deploy classic monster tropes and tales to launch sharp critiques of the de/humanization of LGBTQ people in the U.S., their references to Latin American history and cultures demand a more layered interpretation of the meaning and function of monsters in their performances. Across U.S. history and culture, monsters are constructed as pure evil and must be destroyed so that good may reign. However, in Latin America and Latinx cultural contexts in the U.S., monsters are not always viewed as evil, and their presence in everyday life is at times normalized. For example, even though Osornio’s embodiment of \textit{la bruja} during \textit{Inferno} emphasizes her association with Satan, evil incarnate himself, in one scene he performs \textit{una limpieza} (a spiritual cleansing), pointing to her simultaneous association with indigenous healing practices in Mexico and Chicanx\(^7\) culture. She is not simply good or evil, but both and something more. Osornio’s ambivalent embodiment of \textit{la bruja} thus not only reflects histories of misogynist and homophobic violence, but offers tactics for surviving and healing from it, as I will demonstrate in Chapter Two. The performances by Cook and Moreno deploy equally complex versions of classic Western monsters to highlight their

\(^6\) For just one example, see Campaign for Houston’s advertisement against Proposition 1, which used horror tropes and transphobic rhetoric to suggest that allowing transgender people to use bathrooms that align with their gender identity would put women and children at risk for sexual assault by men dressed as the opposite sex (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYpko86x6GU, accessed 6 June 2018).

\(^7\) Here, my usage of Chicanx performs a similar move to my usage of Latinx, in that it works to decenters the gender binary that structures the Spanish language (see Note 3).
impact on and uptake within Latinx milieus. Each artist in this study, in their own way, highlights the figure of the monster as not only a rich metaphor for LGBTQ histories, but as a product of European colonization and evidence of the persistence of the cultural traditions it attempted to destroy.

In *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*, cultural theorist Scott W. Poole argues that the figure of the monster embodies the violent histories of human civilization, which continue to haunt the present. Poole writes:

Belief and ideology, the social realities produced and reproduced by the images of the monster, turn into historical actions and events. It is not enough to call these beliefs metaphors when they shape actual historical behavior or act as anxious reminders of inhuman historical acts. (25).

Poole traces monster tales written by the first European explorers to travel to Africa. For example, the diaries of the French naturalist Compte de Buffon described “giant African apes mating with African women,” which he then cited as proof of his theory that white people are superior to black people (46). Such racist fantasies, as Poole demonstrates, spurred beliefs and ideologies that were used to rationalize the enslavement of African descended people in the U.S. (ibid.). Similarly, European explorers represented indigenous people in the Américas as sexually promiscuous, cannibalistic witches to rationalize genocide and other violent practices of colonization, a monstrous history I examine in Chapter Two through my analysis of Osornio’s performance of *la bruja* during *Inferno*. The fact that both of these examples emphasize sexual deviancy as evidence of the monstrous nature of racial others is significant to this study. As many critical scholars point out, sexual and gender deviancy, or difference, has long been associated with racial difference in Western European and U.S. culture, and sexual and gender
normalcy, or heteronormativity, with whiteness. Throughout this dissertation I demonstrate how the artists in this study deploy the figure of the monster to resist and refigure the racial dynamics structuring dominant accounts of what Taylor describes as “the colonial encounter” between white Europeans and those designated as their cultural “others.” In the process, I argue that they generate parallels between these colonial racial dynamics and de/humanizing representations of LGBTQ people, politics, and practices that privilege whiteness in the twenty-first century.

Taylor argues that the “the colonial “encounter” is a theatrical scenario structured in a particular, formulaic, [and] hence repeatable fashion” (The Archive 13). While scenarios include “features well theorized in literary analysis, such as narrative and plot,” they also demand that we pay attention “to milieux and corporeal behaviors such as gestures, attitudes, and tones not reducible to language” (28). In other words, to fully grasp the complexity of a given scenario, one must analyze the (inter)actions of the bodies at play within it. Taylor argues that the setup for scenarios suggest a predictable trajectory and outcome based on the “assumptions, values, goals, power relations, presumed audience, and epistemic grids” it establishes (28-29). This is reflected in the setup of the scenario of colonial encounter, wherein a European explorer “discovers” a “new” world and claims it for his nation of origin, then proceeds to conquer and/or kill its inhabitants, figured as monstrous cultural others in need of the disciplinary forces of civilization.

Taylor argues that accounts of the scenario of colonial encounter by European explorers were performed for official historical archives. These archives were then cited to ratify the so-called facticity of their performances, and to rationalize the violent racial dynamics of future scenarios of colonial encounter as natural and inevitable (57). My analyses of the performances in this study build on Taylor’s discussion of the scenario of colonial encounter by tracing the ways in which it is paralleled in popular scenarios that construct LGBTQ people as monsters. This is
important because it helps us to trace how the violent dynamics the scenario of colonial encounter normalized in the service of establishing a new national territory are reproduced in the twenty-first century to police its borders.

The socio-cultural scenarios structuring the performances analyzed in this dissertation are often enacted to dehumanize gender, sexual, racial, and/or ethnic minorities. However, the artists tactically deploy the figure of the monster to first set them into motion and then disrupt their predictable trajectories and outcomes. Here I draw again from Taylor, who argues that “the irreconcilable friction between the social actors and the roles [they play in a given scenario] allows for degrees of critical detachment and cultural agency” (29). For example, in Chapter Three I show how Moreno’s adaptation of The Myth of the Sirens reflects what I describe as the “trans panic scenario,” wherein transwomen of color are positioned as sexual predators who can be killed with impunity by cisgender men who view their embodied difference as threatening. Moreno’s embodiment of the siren highlights parallels between the trans panic scenario and the scenario of colonial encounter in that a monstrous feminine other is violently subdued and extinguished upon encounter with a normatively masculine subject. Moreno sets the trans panic scenario into play to performatively manifest the day-to-day violence that transwomen in particular must negotiate in order to survive and thrive, which is absented from defanged narratives of transgender lives and histories that highlight social progress and integration into U.S. society. However, in the process Moreno utilizes her body to modify the violent dynamics reinforced in the trans panic scenario to envision a different outcome, one that does not result in her death or the erasure of the deaths of the transwomen who came before her.
A Note on Gender and Sexual Terminology

Before proceeding with a more detailed description of the dissertation, it is important to clarify the ways in which I am defining, distinguishing, and using the terms “queer” and “transgender,” given how they overlap and are conflated with one another in contested and fraught ways. I understand the term “queer” as referring to “gender and sexual identities and practices that operate outside of the logic of normative heterosexuality” (Rivera-Servera 26), disrupting the ways in which normative heterosexuality naturalizes monogamy, patriarchy, and the institution of marriage as essential aspects of human society and presumes “stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (Jagose 3). Therefore, queer encompasses gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals and other gender nonconforming people, practitioners of bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism, or BDSM, and polyamorists, among many others. In the U.S., the term queer has predominantly been historicized and theorized in relation to the identities and practices of white gay men and sometimes white lesbians, particularly those who are citizens of the U.S. This trend works to erase the gender and sexual identities, practices, and histories of queer people of color and immigrants (see C. Cohen; Ferguson; Sandoval-Sánchez). Therefore, this project, following the critical interventions of queer of color scholars and culture makers, challenges assumptions that conflate queer identities and practices with whiteness by foregrounding the art, histories, and knowledge production of queer people of color and/or immigrants, particularly those who identify with or as women, in order to address the complex intersections amongst gender, sexuality, race, and nationality.
Also pertinent to this project is an understanding of the term queer as a verb that works to challenge and transform dominant assumptions about identity and the social hierarchies and norms that organize human society. As performance and Latinx queer studies scholar Ramón Rivera-Servera notes, “queer acts include ways of reading or seeing the world from a queer perspective” (27; see also Somerville 257). They also include ways of queerly being in and navigating the world. As such, queer acts connote “a continuous process of becoming queer” that emphasize how gender and sexuality are performed rather than innate characteristics, a point to which I will return in the next section (ibid.). The concept of queer as a continuous process is reflected in Muñoz’s assertion that “queerness is an ideality” that exists on “the horizon” (Cruising 1). In other words, it is not guaranteed and must be striven toward. I see the monstrous performances in this study as queer acts in that they challenge the static and oppressive social categories and hierarchies that organize U.S. society by introducing alternate modes of seeing and being in the world.

While all of the main artists in this study have described their performances as queer at one point or another, Osornio and Cook are the only ones who regularly use queer as a term that describes their identity. Indeed, Moreno has made it a point throughout her artistic practice to insist that she be referred to as transgender, transfeminine, and/or a transwoman, and lambasts those who refer to her as queer. Other transgender artists discussed in this dissertation take a similar position, pointing to the historic tension between the terms queer and transgender, as well as between those who identify as queer and those who identify as transgender. Transgender studies scholar and historian Susan Stryker draws from the transgender activist, essayist, and novelist Leslie Feinberg to describe transgender as “a “pangender” umbrella term” that encompasses “transsexuals, drag queens, butches, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, masculine
women, effeminate men, sissies, [and] tomboys,” among others (“(De)Subjugated” 4). As such, transgender can and definitely has been enfolded into the category of queer. However, as Stryker argues, theories of queerness tend to “favor sexual identity labels (like gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual) over gender categories (like man and woman) that enable desire to take shape and find its aim” (“Transgender Studies” 212). The term transgender, as many transgender theorists and activists argue, is a gender identity that does not connote anything specific about one’s sexual identity. Furthermore, the fact that transgender embodiments and identities challenge the gender binary, and by extension the naturalization of any sexual orientation category based on it, has generated much animosity in cisgender gay and lesbian milieus (Stryker, “(De)Subjugated” 8). Therefore, I attempt to work through and hold these tensions in view as I describe and analyze the performances in this study in order to provide a more complex accounting of their social and political entwinement than is generally taken into consideration in historical and theoretical projects that engage queer identities and practices. I use LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) to situate the artists and their performances within broader publics and discourses of gender and sexuality that make use of this acronym, as well as to acknowledge that many lesbians, gays, and bisexuals do not identify with or acknowledge the terms queer or transgender due to prejudice, or generational or cultural differences, but are connected to them socially, culturally, politically, and historically nonetheless.

Theorizing the Monster Figure as a Performative Tactic

In this project, I define monsters as figures, both human and nonhuman, whose hybrid, mutant, excessive, or lacking bodies incite “category crisis,” and whose behaviors defy cultural

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8 In queer and transgender parlance, cisgender refers to those whose gender identities align with the gender they were assigned at birth.
norms, as medieval studies scholar Jeffrey Jerome Cohen points out in his essay, “Monster Theory (Seven Theses).” A monster might be a human-animal blend that seduces and cannibalizes men like the siren, or an animated assemblage of dead body parts that blurs the lines between life and death, like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature. A monster might shapeshift its horrific form into one that is seemingly human in order to infiltrate and wreak havoc on society, like the malevolent bruja or extraterrestrial alien. Or, the monster might simply be what French philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault describes as an “abnormal” human (e.g. hermaphrodite, disabled person, sexual criminal) in need of rehabilitation via medical technology or the prison system (55-56). Monsters strike fear, loathing, disgust, and even hatred in those whom they encounter. It should come as no surprise, then, that the Latin root of monster, monstrum, is derived from monere, which means “to warn or threaten” (Hanafi 3). Monsters are portents; they bear upon their bodies messages of doom and destruction (ibid.). As such, they require a witness, or an audience, to heed the messages they embody. By examining the figure of the monster as an artifact of these encounters, or performances, we can trace the social attitudes, relations, beliefs, and values that it reflects and disrupts in the moment of its appearance. The temporality and location of this encounter is crucial to consider, for what is monstrous in one epoch or culture might be normal, even sacred, in another, as I noted earlier. Thus, monsters exist only at the site of encounter in which they are perceived as such (see MacCormack 304-305; Mittman 6). In sum, the monster is a performative phenomenon that both polices and transgresses “the borders of the possible” (J.J. Cohen 12).

The term “performative” was originally defined by linguistic philosopher J.L. Austin to describe a speech act that initiates a particular social reality. As Austin explains, performatives “do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate anything,” they are “part of, the doing of an action” (5).
Speech acts such as betting, making a marriage vow, or naming something are all performatives; they do something rather than describe it. Philosopher and queer theorist Judith Butler expands Austin’s definition of the performative to include gesture and other types of nonverbal communication. This enables Butler to make the claim that gender manifests through “a stylized repetition of acts” that must be repeated in order to “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (“Performative Acts” 519). For example, acts such as plucking one’s eyebrows and putting on makeup, wearing a dress, and/or waiting for a man to open the door may be repeated to constitute the illusion of an abiding feminine gender. However, these stylized acts can be appropriated to expose the performativity of gender, as drag queens show us (see Butler, Gender 174-180). The monster figure is performative because it is instantiated in the moment of encounter that it is perceived as such, which is communicated through speech (“You are a monster!”) and other embodied acts (screams of terror, fainting). Powerful figures and institutions take advantage of the performative status of the monster to dehumanize and therefore rationalize violence against individuals as well as entire populations of people. The artists in this study tactically reappropriate such deployments of the monster figure in order reclaim its potential to disrupt, rather than reinforce, the cultural logics that enable violence against gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic minorities.

Performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison draws from the French philosopher Michel de Certeau to define the term tactic as “creating a means and a space from whatever [...] resources are available [...] to resist or subvert the strategies of more powerful institutions, ideologies, or processes” (Acts 2). In de Certeau’s own words, “a tactic is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power” (38). Tactics are opportunistic; they repurpose and recombine the components of a system in surprising ways to
destabilize it from within. Strategies operate on the premise that the system from which they operate is stable, predictable, and impenetrable. Throughout this study, I trace how the artists tactically deploy the figure of the monster to resist and subvert the strategies used by/in the mainstream media, government institutions such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and religious and political leaders to de/humanize LGBTQ people and reinforce the dominance of white heteropatriarchy in the U.S. In the process, they raise critical questions about the desire to be included within the ranks of humanity, historically defined against those positioned as monsters for their social, cultural, and corporeal differences. As I will demonstrate, the artists draw from the resources available to them, including but not limited to their own bodies and those of their audience, recycled and repurposed materials, online media platforms, grassroots community spaces, and their homes to produce and circulate monstrous performances. They use these resources in unexpected ways to resist defanged LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices, shredding the systems through which they are produced to reveal their complicity with anti-queer ideologies and practices.

Each chapter in this dissertation examines the performative tactics the artists use to restage and refigure scenarios that construct LGBTQ people as monsters, both in everyday life and popular media, across three sections of analysis. I track how the repertoires of each artist respond to and resist the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representation, and practices in twenty-first century U.S. I bring Taylor’s theory of the scenario together with the scholarship of queer performance theorists, namely the late José Esteban Muñoz and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, who attend to the embodied, aesthetic, and social practices of LGBTQ people in order to situate my analyses. The first section of analysis focuses on how the artists and their collaborators embody the monster figures featured in their performances. I show how their use of costuming, queer
vernacular, body modification, and/or digital media conjure these monsters to reflect, resist, and refigure dominant constructions of feminine and feminized subjects in the U.S. I argue that they adapt the figure of the monster into a feminist articulation of the treacherous material and social realities many LGBTQ people must navigate on a day-to-day basis. I pay particular attention to how the artists’ embodiments function as disidentificatory performances that reflect and rehearse modes of birthing, becoming, and being queer and transgender monsters, performative states that I tend to separately in each chapter, but which often overlap with and initiate one another. In this section I draw from Muñoz’s theory of disidentification in his first monograph, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. According to Muñoz, disidentification is a performative tactic used by minoritarian subjects\(^9\) that “works on and against dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism)” to “transform a cultural logic from within” (12). Muñoz argues that disidentification is a “third mode of dealing with dominant ideology,” one that acknowledges the ways in which it both produces and is contradicted by minoritarian subjects (ibid). The artists in this study disidentify with the figure of the monster; they acknowledge how their identities, experiences, and desires are simultaneously shaped by and exceed anti-queer discourses and practices that position them as monsters in the eyes of dominant culture. Their ambivalent embodiments highlight the fraught and complex intersections between the figure of the monster and the human, raising critical questions about the cultural ideologies that produce them as opposite to and antagonistic toward one another.

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\(^9\) Muñoz defines minoritarian subjects as “people of color/queers of color” who often experience “multiple forms of domination within larger systems of governmentality” (*Disidentifications* 7; 160).
The second section of analysis focuses on the queer aesthetics of the performance in question. I draw from Muñoz’s second monograph, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in which he describes queer aesthetic practices as a “reappropriation and reffunctioning of the commonplace” (135) that “call the natural into question” (138). I show how the artists’ use of commonplace materials (found objects, images from pop culture, household items) constitute an environment that performatively disrupts the racist colonial logics underlying scenarios that construct LGBTQ people as monsters. The artists’ queer aesthetics are performative in that they set these scenarios up in ways that compel interactions between and amongst the artists and audience. I show how the artists implicate themselves and members of their audiences in the violence that queer and transgender people of color and/or immigrants are subject to in the U.S. I argue that their queer aesthetics and interactions with the audience highlight how systemic racism and the privileges it affords white citizens often motivate the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices in early twenty-first century U.S.

In the third section of analysis I focus on the anti-virtuosic choreographies that unfold across each performance, which are executed in ways that are comedic, tragic, and/or erotic. I show how the monster’s failure to execute traditional dance and movement choreographies in a virtuosic manner works to articulate and arouse queer desires. While the figure of the monster often incites repulsion, its association with taboo also arouses the desire to transgress social and cultural norms in those whom it encounters, as J.J. Cohen so saliently points out (17). I argue that the artists’ anti-virtuosic choreographies position the audience as queerly desiring and desired subjects in relation to the figure of the monster. As I will demonstrate, their messy, clumsy, and out of rhythm performances of striptease, line dancing, and cultural rituals invite the audience into a more intimate and empathetic engagement with the figure of the monster. Their
performances thus resist the normative gender, sexual, racial, and ethnic scripts that traditional dance and movement choreographies often reinforce. I draw from Rivera-Servera’s theorization of “choreographies of resistance” in order to make my case. According to Rivera-Servera, choreographies of resistance are “embodied practices through which minoritarian subjects claim their space in social and cultural realms” (161). While here Rivera-Servera is referring to how queer Latinxs resist the heteronormative narratives of popular Latin ballads by switching up traditional gender roles while dancing, and/or the dominance of white gay men in queer clubs by taking up space through their virtuosic execution of a particular dance, his argument can be usefully applied to the anti-virtuosic choreographies discussed in this study. Choreographies of resistance, both virtuosic and anti-virtuosic, show the power of bodies in motion to create a space for enacting and fostering queer relations and desires. The anti-virtuosic choreographies analyzed in this study compel alternate orientations to the figure of the monster as a means of resisting the racist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist logics that produce it. In the process, they open up a space for desiring and being desired differently as queer and transgender subjects. Indeed, to resist, to say no to or to refuse conforming with the status quo, is in itself an expression of a desire for change, for something different.

It is important to note that my framing of anti-virtuosity parallels Muñoz’s argument that queer failure is a kind of queer virtuosity that constitutes an important element of queer aesthetic practices. In his analysis of lesbian artist Jibz Cameron’s adaptation of Dante’s Inferno, entitled Hell in a Handbag, Muñoz argues that the main character, Dynasty Handbag, fails “to achieve melodic or choreographic conformity” throughout the performance (Crusing 174). Muñoz argues that Handbag’s “offness,” or performative failure, is a means of refusing participation “in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity” (ibid.). Rejecting such
“normative ideas of value,” Muñoz suggests, is at the core of what it means to perform queer failure (173). However, Muñoz aligns such performances “with a certain mode of virtuosity” in that they help “the spectator exit from the stale and static lifeworld” produced by normative ideas of value (ibid.) One could describe the anti-virtuosic choreographies that culminate each performance in this study as queerly virtuosic in that they utilize the figure of the monster to map out new pathways of desire that fail to conform with normative ideas of value, sexual or otherwise. However, in this dissertation I describe them as anti-virtuosic in order to foreground their function as tactics of resistance. Their articulations of and incitement to queer desires agitate, disrupt, and even work toward the destruction of the norms and values that seek to limit how we move through and experience lifeworlds that reinforce stale and oppressive notions of the human.

Mining Violent Histories and Presents, Making Monstrous Worlds

Some critics might argue that the monstrous embodiments, queer aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic tactics analyzed throughout this study are dangerous in that they not only reproduce toxic stereotypes of LGBTQ people but restage scenarios of violence aimed at confirming them. In *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”*, Diana Taylor questions the ethics of producing and watching theatrical performances that restage scenarios of violence. Theater, an aesthetic tradition that prizes metaphor over literality, is geared toward invoking pleasure in and entertaining an audience. Therefore, restaging scenarios of violence in theatrical performances, even if they are critical, risks reducing them to pleasurable, aesthetic events that entertain, to metaphors that elide or obscure the socio-cultural and political contexts through which they are enabled, as Taylor argues (4-5). How do we explain the “desire
to participate in a painful experience by watching [a] particular play” (10)? Moreover, how is our participation framed and what does it do? It is risky to participate in and restage scenarios of violence. However, the cases in this study demonstrate the potential of performance to transform them into empowering gestures and incisive critique. Delving into and grappling with the violent histories, representations, and social dynamics that shape our daily experiences, interactions, and desires to acknowledge that they are a part, but not the sum, of our person, as I contend that the artists in this study do, is both risky and crucial. Indeed, as Taylor writes, “not representing real political violence and atrocity only contributes to its legitimization and perpetuation” (147).

There are important insights to be gained by examining our cultural monsters and the scenarios of violence through which they are produced, policed, punished, and put out of their misery. However, while I argue for the transformative, empowering, and critical potential of the performances in this study, I also mark where they incite frictions that point to the possible ways in which they perpetuate harm. Rivera-Servera claims that “frictions […] emerge within social spaces that are structured around difference and inequality” (37). Furthermore, frictions have the potential to divide people along lines of gender, sexuality, race, and national belonging (ibid). It can be unsettling, offensive, and even painful to witness literal or metaphoric representations of violence against and alongside people with whom you identify, or whom have identities that are different than yours. Indeed, I myself have experienced all of these feelings while witnessing the performances central to this study. Friction shows us where our experiences converge, diverge, and bump up against one another, raising important questions about our social positions within various spaces, and the power and privilege, or lack thereof, that our social positions afford us. However, it is friction, rather than “naive collectivism,” that has the power to foster the “utopian doing of performance,” as Rivera-Servera argues (40). Therefore, throughout this dissertation I
attend to the frictions that emerge onstage, backstage, and in the audience as moments that offer
glimmers of hope in the present for a different and better future.

Rivera-Servera’s argument about the utopian potential of friction builds on the
scholarship of feminist and theater studies scholar Jill Dolan. In Utopia in Performance: Finding
Hope at the Theater, Dolan argues that “utopian performatives,” or doings, “spring from a
complex alchemy of form and content, context and location […] as process, as never finished
gestures toward a potentially better future” (8). Theater and performance, she writes, offer sites
to embody and enact, even if only in fantasy, the “affective possibilities” of these doings (6). The
desires, pleasures, hopes, and frictions evoked by the utopian doings of theater and performance
have the power to transform our orientation to the world and to one another. Similarly, Muñoz
argues that utopia is a performative phenomenon that is critical of the political present and exists
only on the horizon, or in the future, like queerness; therefore, utopia is queer, and queerness is
utopian. Drawing from German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, Muñoz suggests that we turn
toward queer aesthetic objects from the past in order to mine them for their “anticipatory
illumination” of a queer utopian future that is not yet here (3). Muñoz argues that “it is important
to put the past into play with the present” in order to disrupt its tyrannical and “tautological
nature,” which “is almost exclusively conceived through the parameters of straight time” and
thus forecloses queer futurity and the utopian performatives through which it is imagined (28-29).
Like Dolan, Muñoz argues that the affective charge of utopian performatives has the power
to transport us beyond the present moment to glimpse possibilities for a better future. However,
unlike Dolan, who focuses on how this affective charge manifests in contemporary performance,
Muñoz focuses explicitly on queer aesthetic works, including but not limited to performance and
visual art, from the past. I see the performances in this study, which look to monster tropes and
tales from the past for alternate modes of embodying and envisioning LGBTQ lived experiences and desires, as queerly utopian, which might seem counter-intuitive. Yet, as Dolan asserts, utopian performatives manifest even in “the most dystopian theatrical universe” (8). As I will demonstrate, the dystopian universes produced in and through the performances, populated by monsters and those who dare heed the messages they embody, affirm this assertion. The dystopian doings of these performances, enacted through the monsters and the scenarios in which they emerge, threaten to destroy the world as we know it, and it is in this destructive potential, or potentiality, as Muñoz might call it, that moments of queer utopia are glimpsed, and new worlds are made.

Muñoz argues that “disidentificatory performances and readings” are sites in which new, or queer, worlds are made (Disidentifications 25). In order to clarify what it means to make queer worlds in and through performance, Muñoz writes:

The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—one theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of “truth” that subjugate minoritarian people. (Disidentifications 195).

The performances and performance practices documented and analyzed in this study participate in the making of monstrous worlds, which are akin to queer worlds. As I have suggested throughout this introduction, the artists’ performances resist the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices, which work to subjugate LGBTQ people who either cannot or choose not to conform with the oppressive truth regimes espoused by heteronormative, homonormative, and/or transnormative discourses and practices. They produce alternative views
of the world that that critique the subjugation of those whose nonconformity positions them as
monsters in U.S society. For example, in Chapter One, I argue that Cook’s performance of Dr.
Dykenstein, a butch “alien” doctor hellbent on cloning her femme ex-girlfriend, challenges what
feminist philosopher Monique Wittig describes as “the straight mind,” or the discourses and
practices that position heterosexuality as natural and foundational to human behavior and culture.
I show how Cook, along with her queer cast, attempt to usher forth what I describe as the lesbian
apocalypse, a topsy-turvy world dominated by dykey monsters who threaten to end the
heteronormative social order. In the process, their satirical performances wreak havoc on sex-
negative, gender essentialist constructions of lesbianism popularized by white lesbian feminists
during the 1980s and point to how they are replicated in twenty-first century lesbian spaces to
rationalize the exclusion of transgender people. In Chapter Two, I argue that Felipe Osornio’s
abject performance of la bruja challenges what he describes as the “outsourcing of
homophobia,” or the tendency of so-called developed nations like Mexico and the U.S. to
emphasize trends of homophobic violence in so-called developing nations like Uganda to detract
attention from homophobic violence that takes place within their own borders. I show how
Osornio’s performance conjures what I describe as queer purgatory, a hellish world that reflects
the quotidian nature of homophobic violence in both Mexico and the U.S., then refigures it as a
site of decolonial queer resistance. In Chapter Three, I argue that Moreno’s salacious
performance of the siren challenges the sexual respectability politics of what she calls “the
transwave,” or the increase in humanizing representations of transgender people in mainstream
media, which tends to elide histories of transwomen, especially transwomen of color, who do or
have done sex work. I show how Moreno’s performance constitutes a current of what I describe
as the undertow of the transwave, a horrific and titillating world that critically reflects the lived
experiences and desires of transwomen of color who are marginalized in or left out of the transwave. The monstrous worlds brought into being during these performances provide a space for LGBTQ people to sharpen their fangs, and in some cases to simply grow a pair, so that they might seize, shred, cut, slice, penetrate, puncture, chew up or otherwise resist the forces that mandate their assimilation, impoverishment, submission, imprisonment, and/or death. They reflect the power of (re)remembering LGBTQ histories in the face of renewed social and political erasure, and in mining them for tactics to survive the present and reimagine the future.

**Methodology**

The methodology employed in this dissertation is interdisciplinary and relies on both my academic and artistic training. Performance functions not only as an object of study and analytic, but as a method of research and writing as well. Data collected during extensive artist interviews and my co-participation in the performance scenes central to this study is complimented by additional research in public and private archives featuring LGBTQ art, performance, and history. My analyses of the cases are grounded by intersectional feminist, queer, transgender, and lesbian performance theories, some of which are outlined earlier in this introduction. I bring these theories together with unique groupings of scholarship from the broader field of gender and sexualities studies in order to situate each case socially, culturally, politically, and historically. Performance reviews published in online newspapers, magazines, blogs, and the artists’ websites, as well as essays by the artists detailing their methodologies and political investments, provide additional contextual information for my analyses.

My record as an active performance artist and enthusiast in Chicago led to me to two of my cases. During my tenure at both SAIC and Northwestern, I performed in, produced, and
attended dozens of events at Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery. My regular participation in that space led to my first encounter with Sofia Moreno during her solo art exhibition *Porn Again Vol. 1* in 2012. Less than a year later, in 2013, Moreno started making performance art regularly, and since then I have had the opportunity to attend not only *Divas*, but dozens of other performances by Moreno and her performance collaborators. In 2015, during Defibrillator’s Rapid Pulse International Performance Art Festival, I attended Felipe Osornio’s performance, *Inferno Varieté*, and in 2016 travelled to Mexico City to see two more performances by him with similar themes during Homoccult 2.0., an interdisciplinary art event exploring the connections between queerness and the occult. Given that *Dykenstein* was staged at WOW Café Theatre nearly ten years before this research began, I have relied on video documentation and interviews with members of the original cast to reconstruct and analyze it as a live event. During research trips to New York City, I observed rehearsals for and later performed in Cook’s second production of *NonConsensual Relationships with Ghosts* at WOW Café Theatre in 2017, which is also discussed in Chapter One. My first-hand experiences of these performances enable me to provide a more detailed analysis of the artists’ creative practices and to argue for their significance in the transnational queer performance communities out of which they emerge.

One of the aims of this research is to enliven the artists’ performances on the page so that they may circulate more broadly and spark future dialogue, as well as inspire new artistic, activist, and academic projects invested in promoting performance as a site for excavating, interrogating, and generating a more capacious understanding of LGBTQ identities, cultures, politics, and histories. Dolan claims that
part of the challenge of writing about performance as a public practice [...] is to make it live well beyond itself, to hold it visually in memory, to evoke it with words, and to share it widely, so that its effects and potential might be known. (*Utopia* 9).

Throughout this dissertation I endeavor to meet this challenge by utilizing performative writing to generate detailed vignettes of scenes from the performances in order to give a sense of what it was like to experience them, which I then use as the basis for building my argument about what they do. In *Critical Ethnography: Methods, Ethics, Performance*, D. Soyini Madison claims that we can understand performative writing as “an enactment” in that it braids “poetry and reportage, imagination and actuality, critical analysis and literary pleasure” (223). “In performative writing,” Madison continues, “we recognize that the body writes” and that “meanings and experiences in the field are filtered and colored through sensations of the body—that is, through body knowledge” (227). Therefore, “the act of writing becomes the enactment of an embodied voice” and the “words are inhered by a subject with a voice” (228). Performative writing attempts to bring you into the sensorial world experienced by the researcher. It acknowledges what ethnographer and performance theorist Dwight Conquergood describes as the embodied, located, and intersubjective nature of knowledge production (“Performance Studies” 37). I use my bodily senses (sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste, emotion) to apprehend each performance, and rely on my embodied memory as I commence to write about them. I pay attention to and thickly describe not only what is happening onstage, but backstage and in the audience. In my view, these latter elements are also part of the monstrous worlds produced in and through the performances, and as such warrant careful consideration when analyzing and theorizing what the performances do. While it might seem irrelevant or illogical to use this approach to write about *Dykenstein*, in my description of scenes from that performance I labor to
detail what I can of what happens both within and beyond the purview of the camera. I utilize these details along with my embodied memory of watching the video documentation alone several years after it was produced as heuristics for beginning to theorize its doing.

Following feminist anthropologist and Latin American studies scholar Mary Weismantel, I understand that my vision as an author “is not panoptic but partial and multiple” (Cholas xxiv). I therefore rely not only on my field notes and subjective experience of the performances, but on the artists’ and their collaborators’ accounting of them, in order to make my case. Throughout my field research, I conducted dozens of in depth interviews with the artists and their collaborators in person, on the telephone, and via Skype. Our conversations about their performance art and practices, and the personal experiences and politics that motivate them, inform how I think and write about their work. They are co-theorists of this dissertation and I draw conceptual frames for each chapter from our conversations. In some cases my relationships with the artists have garnered invitations to participate in talks that foster public dialogue about their art practices, aesthetics, and political investments, which further shape my thinking about their performances. The artists have also been incredibly generous in sharing their private performance archives, including rare videos, photos, event posters, and unpublished scripts and essays. Furthermore, they each maintain personal websites that I have relied on throughout the writing of this dissertation, which provide additional documentation of their performance practices that supplement my field notes and details from our conversations, as well as important information regarding their artistic influences and methods. This information is augmented by data collected from public archives such as The Herstory Archives and the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics online video library, as well as the semi-public archives of WOW Café Theatre and Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery. My connection to the artists via social
media platforms like Facebook and Instagram has also proved to be crucial for collecting reviews and critical publications about their performances, including those by the artists themselves, which do not circulate widely and are therefore rare to come by. I utilize theories of performance and gender and sexualities studies scholarship to further contextualize these materials and put the artists’ repertoires into conversation with broader discourses of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices.

My lived experiences and desires drive my political investments and afford important insights into the monstrous performances detailed in these pages. As a masculine-of-center dyke who identifies ambivalently as queer and female, I have an up close and personal connection with many of the themes and issues engaged by the artists in their performances. However, I would be remiss not to account for the frictions that have cropped up during this research for me personally. My difference to the artists—socio-economically, culturally, politically—has generated productive moments of friction that have led to deeper considerations of the stakes and possibilities of mis/representing their identities, experiences, and performances in my academic presentations and writing. As a white academic and U.S. citizen, I have power and privileges that have historically been abused in the name of mis/representing the art and practices of minoritarian culture makers. Therefore, another important goal of this research is to disrupt this cycle of violence by producing careful, dialogic, and self-reflexive research. Even still, just as the artists themselves risk reinforcing stereotypes and reproducing violent dynamics in their monstrous performances, so do I as I attempt to represent them in writing. One of the ways I have worked through the frictions I have experienced while conducting this research is to include them in my analyses as part and parcel of the dystopian-utopian doing of the performances when relevant. It is my hope that this approach will open up further conversations about the political
risks and possibilities of writing about queer and transgender monsters in the twenty-first century and beyond.

Chapter Summaries

Each chapter of this dissertation explores how queer and transgender artists deploy the monster figure as a performative tactic that resists the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices in twenty-first century U.S. Across the chapters, I track how each artist resists a particular strategy of defanging (e.g. the straight mind’s paternalistic framing of lesbians and citizenship; outsourcing homophobia in the service of sexual exceptionalism; centering respectability politics in the transwave) through their performative deployments of a particular monster figure. I argue that they thus demonstrate how performance can be used as a platform for making monstrously utopian worlds that breach the hegemonic borders of gender, sexuality, race, and the nation.

Chapter One focuses on Cook’s *Dykenstein: Sex Horror and the Tragedy of the Straight Brain*. I show how *Dykenstein* envisions an apocalyptic world centered around the lives and desires of butches, femme lesbians, and their monstrous offspring, which I argue threatens to end the straight mind and its stranglehold on U.S. social and cultural norms. My analysis focuses on how Cook and her cast refigure key elements of *Frankenstein* through the monstrous embodiments, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreographies they deploy throughout the performance. In the first section of analysis, I argue that the gender performances of Cook and her cast embody and disrupt stereotypes that position lesbians, particularly butch and femme lesbians, as sexually deviant monsters who threaten the future of the nation. I show how their costuming, interactions, and reappropriations of homophobic rhetoric reveal how these
stereotypes are driven by white patriarchal investments in controlling the bodies and sexuality of women, and how they have been, somewhat ironically, used in lesbian feminist discourse toward similar ends. I introduce the concept of *birthing monsters* as a useful analytic for exposing straight anxieties about the reproductive capacity of lesbians, which I later connect to xenophobic anxieties around the reproductive capacity of immigrant women. In the second section of analysis, I show how Cook and her cast deploy what I describe as *alienation aesthetics* to highlight the influence of the straight mind in xenophobic discourses aimed at policing the boundaries of national belonging in the U.S. I argue that the performative tactics and materials constituting their aesthetic (drag kinging, dildos and other household items, queer punning) set up and invert popular scenarios of invasion, which usually position Latin American immigrants and their children as monstrous aliens who threaten to recolonize the U.S., by positioning Dr. Dykenstein’s first creature, Tiger Lily, and the husband she is later forced to make Tiger Lily, as straight monsters who threaten to colonize her Latinx lesbian community. In the third section of analysis, I show how Dr. Dykenstein’s sudden death, a result of the drama following the birth of Tiger Lily’s husband, generates a leadership void that raise questions about the identity and future of her community. In the aftermath of Dr. Dykenstein’s death, fights, emotional meltdowns, and gender confusion amongst her community quickly dissolve their anti-virtuosic choreographies of mourning into chaos. However, while chaos is viewed by many as a sign of the apocalypse, and therefore negative, I argue that in *Dykenstein* it instead signals the dawn of lesbian futurity.

Chapter two focuses on Osornio’s performance of *la bruja* in *Inferno Varieté*. I show how *Inferno* invokes queer purgatory to incite a critical examination of the cultural contexts and colonial histories that enable homophobic violence in Mexico and the U.S. While the main
content of *Inferno* is based on Osornio’s experiences and observations of homophobic violence in Mexico, the modifications he made for its U.S. premiere at Rapid Pulse International Performance Festival in Chicago, as well as the participation of the largely U.S.-based audience, raise questions about the contours of homophobic violence in the U.S. My analysis centers around Osornio’s deployment of popular tropes of *la bruja* and *brujería* to show how his monstrous embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreographies expose parallels amongst the discourses and practices used to normalize misogyny, homophobia, racism, and ableism. In the first section of analysis, I argue that Osornio’s embodiment of *la bruja* shows how normative constructions of masculinity rely on the violent subjugation of femininity, particularly when it manifests in and through the bodies of Mexican women and gay and/or queer men. In the process, Osornio demonstrates how the misogyny underlying popular constructions of *la bruja* during the colonial period and later in Mexican popular culture is replicated in homophobic rhetoric to justify violence against gay and/or queer men. I introduce the concept of *becoming a monster* as an analytic for understanding the dehumanizing effects of homophobic violence against gay and/or queer men, which also underscores the monster figure as a performative phenomenon. In the second section of analysis, I argue that Osornio implicates his audience as potential perpetrators of homophobic violence in a series of carnivalesque games that reflect and refigure the power dynamics instantiated during scenarios of public mortification common during medieval period, during which *brujas* and other heretics were sexually humiliated, tortured, and executed. I then demonstrate how Osornio’s *alchemic aesthetics* transmute the embodied relations and cultural symbols produced during the games into sites of decolonial queer resistance that reveal how race and nationalism entwine to authorize homophobic violence in the U.S. In the third section of analysis, I argue that Osornio’s anti-virtuosic performance of
the Can-Can in the final scene of *Inferno*, which resembles medieval depictions of the Witches’ Sabbath, evokes the fraught relationships amongst homophobia, white normativity, and debility. As Osornio stumbles, falls, and is picked back up by performance volunteers, he opens a space for the audience to consider our roles and responsibilities in navigating the debilitating effects of homophobic violence both at home and abroad.

Chapter Three focuses on Moreno’s performance of the siren during *Divas from the Underground*. My analysis focuses on how Moreno adapts key elements of the Myth of the Sirens to produce an undertow to the transwave that provides respite from a hostile public sphere. In the first section of analysis, I focus on how Moreno’s embodiment of the siren refigures her into a sex-positive, transfeminist beacon. I argue that Moreno’s costuming and use of queer vernacular emphasizes the chimeric physique and seductive behavior of the siren to connect the political economy of medicalized gender transition to histories of sex work. I introduce the concept of *being a monster* as an analytic that provides insight into the pleasures and dangers projected onto and produced by transgender experience and embodiment. In the second section of analysis, I focus on how the trashy materials Moreno uses to construct the performance environment (e.g. garbage bags, pornography magazines, condoms) operate as a setup for what I describe as the trans panic scenario. My analysis demonstrates how the aesthetic composition of the performance environment reframes the site of encounter between Odysseus and the sirens to critically reflect the racialized gender dynamics that enable the trans panic scenario. I argue that Moreno’s trashy aesthetics performatively constitute a queer refuge of the undertow that resists whitewashed narratives of the transwave. The third section of analysis focuses on Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease. My analysis demonstrates how Moreno’s striptease replaces the Song of the Siren, which lures sailors near her isle with the promise of
knowledge, to resist cultural trends that compel transwomen to translate their lived experiences and desires as entertainment and education for a cisgender public. I argue that Moreno reclaims striptease as a means of exercising (sexual) autonomy and agency in the wake of the transwave.

In sum, this dissertation is a feminist project that proposes monstrosity as an embodied aesthetic tactic that reflects the lived experiences and desires of butches, femme lesbians, queer men, and transwomen of color and immigrants to resist the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices in twenty-first century U.S. It focuses primarily on artists born in Latin America who live and/or produce performance in the U.S and identify with or as women. By mining negative aspects of LGBTQ history embodied in each of their respective monsters, the artists not only question the terms by which they and other LGBTQ people are granted or denied humanity, but show how those terms are bound up with dominant constructions of race and citizenship in the U.S. While the performances central to this dissertation engage difficult themes such as social discrimination, violence, and even the murder of LGBTQ people, I argue that the monstrous worlds, relations, and critical interventions they produce are utopic in that they provide tactics for surviving and thriving while birthing, becoming, and being monsters. In the process of making and creating these performances, the artists breach the hegemonic borders of gender, sexuality, race, and the nation.
CHAPTER ONE

Birthing Creatures of the Lesbian Apocalypse: Butch Aliens, Femme Clones, and Futurity in Susana Cook’s Dykenstein

“If you are afraid of us, I want to scare you more.”
- Phone interview with Susana Cook, May 10, 2014

“To a new world of gods and monsters!”
- Dr. Pretorius from Bride of Frankenstein, directed by James Whale, 1935

I am sitting alone in the living room of my one-bedroom apartment in Chicago on a fall evening in 2012. It is dark. The only light illuminating the apartment flickers from my laptop screen as I watch the slightly pixelated video footage of New York City based, Argentinean performance artist and writer Susana Cook’s play, Dykenstein: Sex, Horror, and the Tragedy of the Straight Brain, staged at WOW Café Theatre in 2003. From the entrance of the black box theater stage left, the butch Dr. Dykenstein (Cook), wearing a black three-piece suit and purple necktie with combat boots, long brown wavy hair hanging loosely over her shoulders and down her back, rushes after her femme girlfriend, Elizabeth (Felice Shays), who is running across the stage in a short black dress with a string of pearls around her neck and knee high stiletto boots. Elizabeth’s dark brown wavy hair is combed back in a half ponytail, and her facial features are accented with bright red lipstick and black eye shadow. She clutches a small black purse to her chest with her black lace gloved hands. A melodramatic, albeit erotic, lovers quarrel commences in Dr. Dykenstein’s laboratory (see fig. 1). Dr. Dykenstein is begging Elizabeth, who has fallen onto the floor in a fit of despair, “Don’t leave me!” while slowly running a hand up her leg. She climbs on top of Elizabeth, reminding her, “We had… good…moments.” The audience chuckles offscreen. Elizabeth gets up awkwardly from her knees, still clutching her purse in one hand.

1 Video footage is available online at The Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ Digital Video Library (see: http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000505637.html, accessed 01 Jan. 2019).
adjusts her skirt with the other, and accuses Dr. Dykenstein of cheating on her with a mistress named “Science.” The recorded audience erupts in laughter. So do I. Elizabeth declares that she is ending their relationship and pushes her purse into Dr. Dykenstein’s chest, which propels her back out through the door she came in. Dr. Dykenstein, now clutching the purse, reaches inside, discovers a blood sample containing Elizabeth’s DNA, and holds it up before the audience.

The lights black out then fade back on to illuminate a large white paper screen center stage. Visible behind the screen are the silhouettes of Dr. Dykenstein’s butch laboratory assistants, Loretto (C. Riley Snorton) and Sanchez (Mel Shimkovitz). Alternating between lines, Loretto and Sanchez, voices wavering to produce a camp horror effect, welcome the audience to Dykenstein and ask a series of questions, “What is Dykenstein about? “Is it about creating life? Is it about creating dykes? Where do dykes come from […] Is society creating them?” While summarizing the plot, they play with their laboratory coats and the limbs of mannequins, making absurd, sexually suggestive shadow images (see fig. 2). Do dykes come from queer sex? Loretto and Sanchez explain to the audience that Dr. Dykenstein will attempt to create “the perfect dyke,” a clone of Elizabeth, her ex-girlfriend, but that she will fail, and her
creation will turn out to be straight. The cast of Dykenstein then bursts through the screen to transition into the next scene.

In the opening vignettes of Dykenstein described above, we meet Dr. Dykenstein, a butch lesbian version of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, the male protagonist of Mary Shelly’s classic novel Frankenstein; or, the Modern Day Prometheus (1818). The novel, which is widely hailed as a queer classic, centers around the efforts of Dr. Frankenstein to create life with the help of other male scientists. Several adaptations of Frankenstein emphasize the queerness of the relationships between these men, who form intimate bonds during their reproductive experiments. Similar to Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Dykenstein and her butch crew work tirelessly to create life, albeit dyke life. Also similar to Dr. Frankenstein, when Dr. Dykenstein’s reproductive experiments succeed she is horrified by the monster she has created. As I will demonstrate throughout this chapter, the ludic exchanges amongst Dr. Dykenstein, her crew, Elizabeth, and the monsters they birth revise the male-centered queer subplot of Frankenstein into a hilarious lesbian drama. This is significant because the women of Frankenstein in the original novel by Shelley and most adaptations are positioned as heterosexual, foreclosing the possibility of a queer subplot that includes lesbians.2 In this chapter, I explore how Dr. Dykenstein’s obsession with creating the perfect dyke raises critical questions about how lesbians are defined and represented in the U.S. How does one make the perfect dyke, or lesbian? Can there be only one perfect dyke, or many? Is she butch, femme, or androgynous? Is she a U.S. citizen? As I will demonstrate, the complex

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and at times contentious ways in which lesbian identity and communities are represented in *Dykenstein* push at the limits of and work to expand possibilities for imagining lesbian futurity.

Contentions around defining, let alone creating, lesbians beg the question of who is authorized to do so. When the play progresses to the next scene, Dr. Dykenstein claims that she is an “alien” and that she should therefore “create life.” This is not only a humorous pun on Cook’s status as a Latin American living in the U.S. but suggests that sexual identity and reproductive politics are connected to those of immigration. Indeed, *Dykenstein* was staged during the Second Bush Administration, which relied on homophobic and xenophobic rhetoric to justify limiting access to reproductive health care and parental rights for queers and immigrants. The pun, within the context of a play, functions as a multi-pronged jab against the political powers prevailing in that moment, which were heavily invested in policing the borders of gender, sexuality, human reproduction, and the nation to ensure white hegemony. Furthermore, it challenges defanged lesbian politics that privilege the lives and concerns of normative white lesbian citizens by foregrounding Dr. Dykenstein’s *alien* status, in particular, as evidence of her authority to make lesbians.

Throughout this chapter, I argue that *Dykenstein* highlights the political stakes and subversive possibilities of birthing lesbian monsters in the early twenty-first century. In the following sections, I show how the embodied, aesthetic, and choreographic tactics deployed by Cook and her cast work to challenge heteronormative discourses that monsterize lesbians not only for their gender and sexual difference, but for their capacity to birth even more lesbians. Within the heteronormative imaginary, the possibility of lesbians birthing and raising more lesbians portends a future dominated by women with no sexual desire or need for men, and thus poses an apocalyptic threat to the white heteropatriarchal foundations of U.S. society. My
analyses of Dykenstein demonstrates how the performances by Cook and her cast invoke the threat potential of lesbian reproduction in order to deconstruct these heteronormative discourses, or what Monique Wittig terms the “the straight mind,” exposing the ways in which they foreclose lesbian futurity. Indeed, if the future of the U.S. is scripted as heteronormative and those in power aim to keep it that way, then there is no place for lesbians in it. Throughout my analysis, I focus on how Dr. Dykenstein, together with her motley crew of butches, labor to birth and raise the “perfect dyke.” I argue that in the process of this highly fraught communal effort they provide glimpses of the unimaginable: lesbian futurity. This is significant because it disrupts heteronormative future imaginaries in which lesbians do not exist. Furthermore, the lesbian futurity glimpsed through Dykenstein challenges narrow, defanged definitions of lesbian identity and belonging; it features brown, black, and Latinx butches, femme lesbians, and androgynous queers who are politically and sexually promiscuous.

While it might seem more appropriate to describe the futurity glimpsed through Dykenstein as queer, as Muñoz might have, I describe it as lesbian to mark and resist the erasure of lesbians within queer theory and male-centered narratives of queer history. Despite the critical work scholars like Muñoz and his feminist antecedents have done to foreground lesbians, particularly Latina lesbians and/or lesbians of color, within queer theoretical and historical projects, the term is still largely associated with (white) gay male sexuality and cultural practices. Lesbians remain unimaginable, or at the very least unimagined, within many contemporary discourses, disciplines, and cultural productions that purport to be queer. Here I draw from and extend performance studies scholar Kate Davy’s argument in Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers: Staging the Unimaginable at the WOW Café Theatre that lesbianism is positioned as “unimaginable” within conventional theater practices, which universalize male sexuality as the
norm (144-145). The universalization of male sexuality in conventional theater productions does not render gay men unimaginable, Davy notes, but rather provides them with an extensive repertoire of male characters to play on and to (139). This trend is reflected in broader discourses, practices, and cultural productions that universalize male sexuality, straight or queer, as the norm. Fortunately, as Davy shows us, lesbian theater makers, more specifically those affiliated with WOW Café Theatre, including Cook, have developed rich and varied performance traditions that eschew “male sexuality as the universal norm” by centering lesbian desires, practices, aesthetics, and characters (144). Unsurprisingly, their theatrical interventions have often been enfolded into queer performance traditions largely associated with and credited to gay male culture, erasing the fact that they emerge from specifically lesbian milieus (145). In this chapter I mark the embodied, aesthetic, and choreographic tactics deployed by Cook and her cast in Dykenstein as part of a longer lesbian performance tradition that stages the unimaginable in order to envision lesbian desire and futurity. Thus, this chapter contributes to the fields of performance, queer, and lesbian studies. It historicizes and theorizes the performance practices of the lesbian and/or butch3 artists of Dykenstein to highlight their importance to queer performance history, which is narrated as white, gay, and male in the canons privileged in academic scholarship and the fine arts world. I chart the theme of queer reproduction in Cook’s plays from 2003-2016, which appropriate and parody neoconservative political discourse that frames LGBTQ subjects as monstrous heralds of the apocalypse. In the process, I show how the monstrous worlds Cook ushers forth throughout her practice enact utopian performatives in which lesbians are not only imaginable, but central.

3 In this chapter I distinguish between the terms lesbian and butch, the latter which is generally defined as a kind of “lesbian gender” that indicates erotic attraction to women, to account for butch-identified transmen (Rubin 472; see also 476-478).
Susana Cook “is a New York-based playwright, performer, and director who works in political theater” (Cook, Queering 177). Reviewers of Cook’s work describe it as lesbian theater (“Diamond and Haas”), “queer-oriented” performance art (McCarthy), “teatro político,” or political theater (Seone 9), and/or cultural activism that deconstructs “politics, war, class struggles, and homophobia” (Goddard 107). As Cook writes, “my style is satirical and political humor” (“Nació” 117). Indeed, most critics emphasize the dark humor, camp aesthetics, and “placement of lesbian women and butch identities at the epicenter of her work” as part of what gives it such an incisive political edge (Goddard 107; see also Costa 9; Davy 182-183). Many suggest that Cook’s identity as a butch dyke and/or Latina immigrant ground her performances in lived experience (see Costa 8-9; Goddard 105; Marks). These characterizations of Cook’s work speak to her extensive background and experience as a performer.

Born in 1961, Cook left her hometown of Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1980 in the middle of the “Dirty War,” which lasted roughly from 1976-1983, to study clowning with Jacques Lecoq in Paris, France, (see Cook, “Interview” and “CV”). She later returned to Argentina to complete her B.A. from the National School of Drama in Buenos Aires in 1983. During the mid to late 80s Cook regularly staged short experimental works at Centro Parakultural and performed with renowned Argentine theater troupes such as the Vivi Tellas Company and the Rubén Schumacher Company (ibid.). Circa 1990, she immigrated to NYC (Cook, 10 May). During her first years in NYC Cook performed original works in Spanish for spoken word events at The Nuyorican Café (Cook, “Interview”). By the mid-nineties, Cook was creating solo and collaborative performances in both Spanish and English, becoming a mainstay in the East Village performance scene and “an icon of the lesbian underground” (Cook, Queering 177).

4 “mi estilo es el humor satírico y político” (“Nació” 117).
Over the past two decades, Cook has written over twenty full-length plays, not counting several short monologues, which have been staged in theater and performance venues in NYC such as The Kitchen, P.S. 122, Dixon Place, and WOW. Several of her performances are published (see Cook, *The Homophobes; Queering*; “Résumé”). On top of establishing herself as a mainstay of the independent theater scene in NYC, Cook studied at Goddard College, receiving an M.F.A. in Playwriting in 2011 (“CV”).

Entire communities have formed around Cook’s performance practice, communities that privilege not only the voice of lesbians and/or butches, but lesbians and/or butches of color and/or immigrants. Her performance troupe, Company Tango Lesbiango, consists primarily of lesbians, butches, and/or transmen who are Latinx, black, and/or Asian. Cook has known and collaborated with some of these performers, many of whom she met at WOW, for decades. This roster of long-time collaborators includes *Dykenstein* cast members Mistah Coles and Felice Shays. Coles has been a part of Tango Lesbiango since 1997 and has performed in numerous productions by Cook. In addition, not only is she a playwright, but Cook was featured in her production, *A Work in Progress*, in 2014 (10 May). Similarly, Shays has been a part of Tango Lesbiango since 1996 and has performed in numerous productions by Cook. She also has an extensive solo performance repertoire that reflects her experiences off stage as “a political Jewish queer Femme, and a no-holds barred Sex Educator” (Hell on Wheels).

It is significant that Cook, as well as many of her collaborators, are working class and that their performances are, for the most part, independently produced. In Cook’s view, this affords her creative freedom that is not possible with performance projects funded by an

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6 For example, Cook owns a dog walking business in NYC, Shays is an independent sign language interpreter, and Coles, who is now retired, used to work for the U.S. Postal Service.
institution (Cook, et al., *Downtown*). Furthermore, by independently producing her performances Cook has more control over ticket prices, which she cites as crucial for ensuring they remain affordable for less affluent audiences (Cook, et al., 08 Aug.). Cook writes, “I prefer always to maintain a very low price at the entrance. I charge 7 or 10 dollars and if someone cannot pay it they can see the show all the same” (“Nació” 117). This suggests the communities that form around Cook’s practice are not only diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and nationality, but in terms of economic class as well.

Cook’s son, Julián Mesri, has also contributed to her performance productions in the capacity of actor, director, and musical composer for nearly twenty years, and writes of his experience:

We are confidants with our audience […] we do not purport to separate ourselves. The only things separating them from us are the lights, and the hastily assembled costumes – we are truly a community. (174).

This sentiment is confirmed by performance critic and sex educator Amy Jo Goddard, who writes, “Cook’s shows are community in their making, a dynamic, at times disjointed cultural experience for audience and performers alike” (105). While community, as many critical theorists point out, is a fraught term often used to manipulate and exclude, throughout this chapter I will argue that the community reflected in and around the production of *Dykenstein* offers multiple, rather than static, ways of thinking about what it means to participate in a lesbian community; as a femme, a butch, a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, a person of color, a transgender person, an immigrant. The lesbian community reflected in *Dykenstein* moves away

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7 “prefiero siempre mantener un precio muy bajo en las entradas. Cobro 7 o 10 dólares y si alguien no puede pagar lo puede ver igual el espectáculo” (“Nació” 117).
from and beyond gender essentialist, sex-negative definitions of lesbianism promoted by white lesbian feminists from the mid to late twentieth century, which are damaging not only in that they alienate genderqueer, transgender, butch, femme, and/or lesbians and queers of color, but because they have resulted in historically inaccurate characterizations of lesbian identity and politics in contemporary queer discourse. Throughout this chapter, I aim to drive home the fact that performance both models and troubles belonging in any community, that communities themselves are necessarily contingent and contradictory, even according to their own defining terms, and that this is a good thing. I argue that Dr. Dykenstein, her crew, and the monsters they embody and birth reflect this complex understanding of community, particularly as it relates to lesbian lives and histories.

As indicated above, Cook’s plays rely on an entire community in order to get produced, which includes not only the performers, but lighting and sound technicians, as well as members of the various theater spaces in which she performs. During my research for this chapter, I conducted telephone and in-person interviews with Cook, as well as in-person interviews with several members of Tango Lesbiango, and made two site visits to WOW, which led to my participation in rehearsals for and a public presentation of Cook’s performance, NonConsensual Relationships with Ghosts (2016). This approach allowed me not only to collect rare details about Cook’s performance practice, but to get firsthand accounts from her collaborators, as well as personal experience, that underscore its continued significance in lesbian, and more broadly queer, performance scenes and communities in NYC. I rely on published scripts and essays by Cook, performance reviews, video and photo documentation of her productions available in public archives such as Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ Digital Video Library, and artist websites, as well as unpublished essays and
performance scripts by Cook and performance videos unavailable to the public, which she shared with me throughout my research, to build my analysis of Dykenstein and Cook’s practice more broadly. Unlike the subsequent cases, I did not have the opportunity to see Dykenstein live. However, like them, I closely analyze the performance to give readers a sense of its power and ability to reach and move an audience across space, time, and media.

In what follows, I describe how Dykenstein envisions an apocalyptic world centered around the lives and desires of butches, femme lesbians, and their monstrous offspring, which I argue represents a threat to the straight mind and its stranglehold on U.S. social and cultural norms. I then provide three sections of analysis, each of which focus on how Cook and her cast refigure key elements of Frankenstein through the monstrous embodiments, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreographies they deploy in Dykenstein. In the first section of analysis, I argue that the gender performances of Cook and her cast embody and disrupt stereotypes that position lesbians, particularly butch and femme lesbians, as sexually deviant monsters who threaten the future of the nation. I show how their costuming, interactions, and appropriations of homophobic rhetoric reveal how these stereotypes are driven by white patriarchal investments in controlling the bodies and sexuality of women, stereotypes which have been, somewhat ironically, used in lesbian feminist discourse toward similar ends. I introduce the concept of birthing monsters as an analytic that connects the monsterization of lesbians to straight anxieties about their reproductive capacity. In the second section of analysis, I argue that Cook and her cast deploy what I describe as alienation aesthetics to trace the influence of the straight mind on xenophobic discourses aimed at policing the boundaries of national belonging in the U.S. I demonstrate how the performative tactics and materials that constitute their aesthetic (drag kinging, dildos and other household items, queer punning) set up and invert popular scenarios of invasion, which position
Latin American immigrants as aliens who spawn monstrous multitudes in order to recolonize the U.S., by positioning Dr. Dykenstein’s first creature, Tiger Lily, and the male husband she is forced to make her, as straight monsters who intend to colonize her predominantly butch and lesbian community. In the third section of analysis, I argue that Dr. Dykenstein’s sudden death, a result of the drama following the birth of Tiger Lily’s husband, generates a leadership void that raises questions about the identity and future of her lesbian community. In the aftermath of Dr. Dykenstein’s death fights, emotional meltdowns, and gender confusion amongst her community quickly dissolve their anti-virtuosic choreography of mourning into chaos. However, while chaos is viewed by many as a sign of the apocalypse, and therefore negative, I argue that in Dykenstein it instead signals the dawn of lesbian futurity. In conclusion, I fast forward to Cook’s play NonConsensual Relationships with Ghosts and suggest that it not only reconfirms performance as a site for staging queer lesbian futures, but for actually bringing them into existence when viewed in the context of Cook’s extensive repertoire. First, I turn to a brief discussion of Cook’s performance practice to trace how she appropriates neoconservative apocalyptic narratives of queerness in order to refigure them as utopian imaginaries.

Lesbian Apocalypse: or, the End Times for the Straight Mind

“I created you in my lab, and let me tell you something, you have a small brain, the size of a peanut. I put it there.”
- Dr. Dykenstein speaking to The Husband in Dykenstein (2003)

Dykenstein was staged in March 2003, during the first month of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, a military operation that reflected the increasing influence of neoconservative politicians in national discourse and international relations. In addition to supporting a so-called preemptive war that ultimately cost hundreds of thousands of lives and billions of dollars, neoconservatives were simultaneously focused on passing legislation to repeal women’s reproductive rights,
overturn and/or prevent new civil rights protections for gays and lesbians, and further support the
criminalization of immigrants and racial minorities. The language neoconservatives used to
justify policing the bodies of women, queers, and ethnic and racial minorities invokes the
apocalypse. Weapons of mass destruction, murder of unborn citizens, the breakdown of the
traditional family embodied by the “gay lifestyle,” “illegal aliens” sneaking across borders to
terrorize the nation, drug epidemics and poverty culture in the inner city. These taglines, staples
of mainstream newspapers, suggest imminent doom for the “American way of life,” embodied
by white, Christian nuclear families and patriotic citizens in the neoconservative imaginary.
President George W. Bush, in an effort to convince the President of France, Jacques Chirac, to
support the invasion of Iraq, even made references to biblical narratives of the apocalypse,
claiming that “Gog and Magog are at work in the Middle East […] prophesies are being
fulfilled” and the “confrontation is willed by God, who wants to use this conflict to erase his
people’s enemies before a New Age begins” (Drum; see also Brown).

_Dykenstein_ appropriates the rhetorical strategies deployed in neoconservative apocalyptic
narratives to expose their investment in reproducing and ensuring the cultural dominance of
white heteronormative Christian citizens of the U.S. From a neoconservative viewpoint,
apocalyptic narratives describe evil phenomena that must be destroyed. However, Dr.
Dykenstein, with the help of her crew, labors to birth, to bring to life rather than destroy, the
embodiment of this multifarious evil; a prototype for “the perfect dyke.” Even though the first
creature they birth, Tiger Lily, rejects lesbianism and identifies as “straight,” Dr. Dykenstein
remains determined to fix this aberration. Tiger Lily thus embodies the _potential_ to create an
army of dykes to invade and end U.S. society as we know it. Now that Dr. Dykenstein has
successfully created life, what is to stop her from conducting future experiments that will
succeed in birthing the perfect dyke? As a prototype for the perfect dyke, albeit one that needs some important modifications, Tiger Lily thus portends a lesbian apocalypse despite her straightness.

In the sections that follow I will show how the events leading up to and following Tiger Lily’s birth humorously and critically engage what French feminist philosopher Monique Wittig describes as “the straight mind.” In her 1979 essay, “The Straight Mind,” Wittig argues that “discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms” (24). This argument serves as the basis for Wittig’s theorization of “the straight mind,” which she defines as a product of “modern theoretical systems and social science” that position heterosexuality as natural and foundational to human behavior and culture (26). Wittig explains, “current ideas that I will call the straight mind […] concern “woman,” “man,” “sex,” “difference,” and all of the series of concepts which bear this mark, including concepts such as “history,” “culture,” and the “real” (27). According to Wittig, these concepts function simultaneously to degrade, confine, and erase women, lesbians, and gay men (24). They shape the laws that govern human reproduction and sexuality, as well as medical practices and cultural attitudes that pathologize women and sexual minorities, including the neoconservative apocalyptic imaginary just described. The straight mind thus acts “materially and actually upon our bodies and our minds, even if the discourse that produces it is abstract” (ibid.). Wittig argues that if gays and lesbians continue to refer to themselves via concepts like “man” and “woman,” they will perpetuate not only heterosexuality, but their own oppression within heteronormative systems (30). Wittig even goes as far as to claim that the concept of ““woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems,” and that lesbians, therefore, “are not women” (32). As an antidote to the straight mind, Wittig proposes that we
transform the “key concepts” through which it is engendered, and that we even do away with some of them (30). In the apocalyptic world of *Dykenstein*, key concepts of the straight mind, such as heteronormative gender and sexual roles, are constantly evoked, rejected, confused, and revised in and through the bodies and interactions of the main characters, signaling its immanent end and opening up possibilities for articulating lesbian lives and politics differently.

On Cook’s artist webpage for the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics’ Digital Video Library, her performances are described as parodies of “discourses of power” that draw “attention to the close ties between the state, religious and political conservatism, and the military.” In *Dykenstein*, Cook and her cast parody discourses of power deployed in neoconservative apocalyptic narratives. In the process, they reflect just how deeply embedded within U.S. culture the straight mind is; it shapes not only the contours of gender and sexuality in contemporary society, but also in the afterlife for the coming of the apocalypse precedes the rapture, an event during which the good ascend to heaven, and the bad descend to hell. Within a neoconservative apocalyptic imaginary, gays and lesbians will be among the bad who descend to hell unless they repent for their sexual sins. The queer parodies enacted by Cook and her cast expose the homophobic logic underlying neoconservative apocalyptic narratives while foregrounding the experiences and desires of lesbians.

In their introduction to the anthology, *Gender and Apocalyptic Desire*, Brenda E. Brasher and Lee Quinby point out that

the principle meaning of ‘apocalypse’ is ‘that which is revealed’ rather than

‘catastrophe,’ as many people assume. But the two ideas are closely linked. Apocalyptic

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rhetoric often proposes that there will be an end of time when, after widespread, global
destruction, ultimate truth and good will be revealed and triumph over evil. (xii).

Across her performance repertoire Cook instead reveals the social phobias and prejudices that
drive neoconservative apocalyptic narratives by appropriating and queering their rhetorical
strategies. The satiric monologues of her brazen butch personae work to undermine the
heteropatriarchal authority backing these narratives, as well as the promise that they will reveal
an “ultimate truth” or “good” that will prevail over and destroy evil.

In her monologue The Fury of the Gods (2009), Cook takes on the role of a zealous butch
prophet and describes a post-apocalyptic world ravished by a wrathful and homophobic god. As
the monologue progresses Cook pits apocalyptic prophecies that preach against non-procreative
sex and sex outside of wedlock against queer interpretations of the Bible to expose the absurd
rationale of the former. For example, she describes a fundamentalist Christian army of god that
wages holy war against infidels who dare suggest Jesus Christ did not marry because he was gay.
As they become more and more obsessed with rooting out this purported evil, the soldiers of the
Christian army of god begin warring with one another, ultimately destroying their society. The
“gays and lesbians and transsexuals and bisexuals” who are “hidden underneath the ground,” a
jokey reference to queer subcultures, or undergrounds, rise up after the dust of the holy war
settles and repopulate the earth through in vitro fertilization. Instead of being revealed as the root
of evil, as the apocalyptic narratives Cook appropriates suggest, the gays and lesbians and
transsexuals and bisexuals literally reveal themselves as the saviors of humankind.

Similarly, The Homophobes: A Clown Show (2012), scripted by Cook for a cast of over
twenty people, reveals heteronormative society as violent and self-destructive, and also positions
queers as the saviors of humankind. Such a move echoes official narratives of the scenario of
colonial encounter, in which white men are positioned as “saviors” of humankind. However, white colonizers were positioned as saviors for subjugating and killing “savage” indigenous people, who they believed to be in league with the devil. In contrast, the queers featured in The Homophobes do not subjugate or murder straight people in order to save humankind. Furthermore, the construction of the queer characters who end up saving humankind is so absurd and contingent upon constantly shifting genders and relationships that it avoids replicating the “us” or “them” power dynamics of the scenario of colonial encounter. At the beginning of The Homophobes, a “conservative minister” is impregnated by an angel of God, destabilizing both his and his wife’s gender identity. The minister’s wife is not fully convinced of his story about being impregnated by an angel, and a male one at that, and wonders if she somehow got him pregnant, and whether or not that makes her a man. The queer humor and campy eroticism of this play on The Immaculate Conception and the gender chaos that ensues work to undermine the minister’s anti-gay, transphobic, and anti-abortion sermons. After giving birth to thirty children, the minister dies. Toward the end of the performance, his former congregation, led by a new homophobic minister, go on a witch hunt for the dead minister’s babies, and destroy everything in their path. The dead minister falls out of heaven and lands on the new homophobic minister, accidentally killing him and saving his wife and children. The angel comes down from heaven too, and he and the dead minister have another romantic encounter. In the end, it turns out that the homophobes are the heralds of the apocalypse, and the queers prevent them from obliterating humankind. In the process, the binary categories structuring the straight mind (eg. male/female, gay/straight) implode and are revealed to be arbitrary and inadequate for describing human bodies and relations.
Like Dykenstein, both The Fury and The Homophobes demonstrate how the straight mind structures neoconservative apocalyptic narratives that are used to oppress LGBTQ people. The recurring themes of (queer) human reproduction and patriarchal violence centralize women’s issues, while simultaneously debunking essentialist interpretations of the category of woman. The queer characters that populate the worlds of each performance are positioned as heralds of the apocalypse for their gender and sexual difference, yet in the end are revealed to hold the key to saving humanity; queer kinship and community. Even though the performances culminate in death and destruction, I argue they are utopian in that they offer an escape, at least temporarily, from a world governed by the straight mind, thus opening up a space for imagining a different world centered around gays and lesbians and transsexuals and bisexuals. As I discussed in the introduction, the future world envisioned by Dr. Dykenstein is organized more explicitly around lesbians and lesbian communities. However, the lesbian future world Dr. Dykenstein envisions expands dominant definitions of what it means and looks like to be a lesbian or part of a lesbian community. Populated by femme lesbians and their straight clones, Latinx butches and butches of color, among other gender nonconforming characters, the world of Dykenstein challenges the defanging politics of white lesbian feminist discourse and communities, which had a strong influence on mainstream lesbian politics and representation in the early twenty-first century. In this sense, framing the world of Dykenstein as a lesbian apocalypse has two functions; it threatens to end heteronormative worlds, as well as the lesbian worlds that reproduce the logic of the straight mind by adhering to binary gender categories and other normative concepts.
Dr. Dykenstein’s Creature: Birthing Femme Monsters, Disrupting Lesbian Stereotypes

Cook: I’m daddy, or something.
Shays: I’m the daddy.
Coles: Oh, I’m the daddy.
Shays: I’m wearing the tallest heels, so that means I’m daddy […] You know how this goes.

- Interview with Susana Cook and Dykenstein cast members Mistah Coles and Felice Shays, August 8, 2014

Dr. Dykenstein is sitting with her colleague Dr. Hildebrand (Mistah Coles), a black butch lesbian scientist sporting an Afro, bottleneck glasses, and a vintage white tuxedo, who has made a surprise visit to share her research on raising sea monkeys (see fig. 3). As a point of pride, Dr. Hildebrand tells Dr. Dykenstein, “my sea monkeys are all dykes,” and describes them as masculine creatures with female genitalia. Dr. Dykenstein’s assistant, Sanchez, a white butch with short, shaggy auburn hair wearing green and purple scrubs and yellow dishwashing gloves, squeals in excitement off camera. When the camera zooms out to include Sanchez in the picture, she is hyperventilating. As she catches her breath she exclaims, “Oh my god, a butch!” and turns to Loretto, a slightly shorter, black trans butch with a buzzcut wearing a white lab coat and yellow dishwashing gloves. Loretto, who has been standing silently, in shock, gasps, “a butch

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10 C. Riley Snorton, who plays Loretto, is a Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago and is the author of Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low (2014) and Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (2017). In the early 2000s, Snorton not only performed with Cook in Dykenstein and another of her plays, 100 Years of Attitude (2004), but participated in a monthly cabaret show at WOW entitled Rivers of Honey, which featured the work of performers of color. During a telephone interview with Snorton, he discussed exploring butch as a gender identity in the early 2000s prior to coming out as trans because he
sea monkey!” Waves of laughter from the audience rise and fall throughout these queer exchanges. I cannot help but smile and wonder what it might have been like to be in the theater with them. Moments later, someone knocks loudly on the door. Loretto, startled by the unexpected knock, worries it might be the immigration police and proposes to marry Dr. Dykenstein to protect her from deportation. The knocking persists. Finally, Loretto opens the door and Elizabeth is leaning on the frame, one arm reaching seductively above her head. She walks toward Dr. Dykenstein, hips and one arm swinging exaggeratedly. Dr. Dykenstein opens her arms wide to receive her. Elizabeth wraps not only her arms, but an entire leg around her ex-lover’s torso. Dr. Dykenstein presses her face into Elizabeth’s chest, “I missed you so much!” They both make loud, moaning sounds. In between heavy breaths, Elizabeth asks mundane questions like, “How are you?” and “Baby, can we go for a walk?” As the erotic charge of their reunion cools, Elizabeth asks Dr. Dykenstein, “Why are there coffins outside the laboratory?” Dr. Dykenstein tries to convince her that it is normal for doctors to have coffins around the laboratory, “Honey, we’re doctors. We work with human bodies, remember?” Elizabeth becomes hysterical, “If a body is in a coffin, it belongs in a cemetery [...] I don’t like it at all!” Dr. Dykenstein, with the help of the other butches, escort her outside “for a walk,” the implication being that it will help calm her down.

In the above scene, we are introduced to Dr. Hildebrand, a colleague of Dr. Dykenstein who has successfully developed technology for making dykes, albeit dyke sea monkeys. The enthusiastic response of Loretto and Sanchez highlights this moment as one of butches bonding...
over new possibilities for lesbian futurity. Shortly thereafter Dr. Dykenstein’s ex-girlfriend Elizabeth returns. However, their reunion has horrifying consequences as the play proceeds; when they leave for their walk, we are introduced to Dr. Dykenstein’s creature Tiger Lily for the first time who, now unsupervised, escapes the laboratory and drowns a baby in a river. In what follows, I show how, during these and subsequent scenes from Dykenstein, Cook and her cast invert the gender roles of the main characters in Frankenstein, refiguring its male-centered queer subplot to foreground lesbianism. I argue that the gender performances of Dr. Dykenstein, her butch crew, Elizabeth, and Tiger Lily play on filmic tropes and political discourse that positions lesbians, particularly butch and femme lesbians,11 as sexually deviant monsters who endanger the future of the nation. I focus on how their costuming, interactions, and inversion of homophobic rhetoric reveal how these stereotypes are driven by white heteropatriarchal investments in policing the bodies and sexuality of women. As I will demonstrate, these investments are reflected in classic horror films that center around lesbian monsters birthing monsters like themselves to usher in the apocalypse and the end of mankind. Throughout Dykenstein, stereotypes that position butch and femme lesbians as monsters are disrupted by the erotic and comedic performances of Cook and her cast. During my analysis, I show how these stereotypes are not only reinforced in films and political discourses invested in white heteropatriarchy, but in white lesbian feminist discourse invested in policing what it means to be a lesbian or belong in a lesbian community. First, I turn to a discussion of the queer history of Frankenstein to situate my analysis.

11 In her essay, “Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections on Butch, Gender, and Boundaries,” anthropologist and sexualities studies scholar Gayle Rubin claims that the femme lesbian identifies “predominantly as feminine” and/or prefers “behaviors and signals defined as feminine within the larger culture,” as opposed to the butch, who is “more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles, or identities” (472; see also Case, “Toward”).
The main protagonist of Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Dr. Victor Frankenstein, devotes his scientific career to finding the secret to life, and after many failed experiments, uses electric currents to animate a creature stitched together from the body parts of various dead people.\(^{12}\) When the monstrous creature awakens and gazes upon Dr. Frankenstein with a “dull yellow eye,” he flees in horror. Later, Dr. Frankenstein returns to his laboratory, and after making sure the creature is gone, destroys the formula and the scientific instruments used to bring him to life. Abandoned by his maker, the creature is forced to survive alone, a hideous monster “whom all men disowned” (108).

Gay culture makers like James Whale, who directed two films based on the novel, *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), draw attention to the queerness of Dr. Frankenstein’s obsession with creating life in a laboratory without the aid of a biological female’s reproductive system. In Shelley’s novel, Dr. Frankenstein repeatedly and passionately states his affection not only for his male friends, but the male mentors who support his reproductive experiments, refiguring the site of human conception as a series of intimate exchanges between men. Whale foregrounds this homoerotic subplot by replacing Dr. Waldman, Dr. Frankenstein’s primary mentor from the original novel, with the flamboyant and effeminate Dr. Septimus Praetorius in *Bride of Frankenstein*. Dr. Praetorius, enthusiastic about the results of Dr. Frankenstein’s experiments, suggests that together they make an equally monstrous bride for his creature. Dr. Frankenstein refuses, fearing that the two creatures will wreak havoc on society. Dr. Praetorius then befriends the creature and convinces him to kidnap Elizabeth, Dr. Frankenstein’s fiancé. Dr. Praetorius holds the helpless and passive Elizabeth as ransom until Dr.

\(^{12}\) Although Dr. Frankenstein never describes his scientific methods for fear of someone using them to make another monstrous creature, there are implications throughout the novel that he uses galvanism and obscure electrical technology to animate the monster.
Frankenstein agrees to make the creature’s bride. This positions Dr. Praetorius, whose effeminate
gender performance codes him as gay, as a queer villain who threatens both the sanctity of
human reproduction and heterosexual marriage, the latter not coincidentally being an institution
that assumes authority over the former (see Russo 50-52; Young 409-410). Ultimately, Dr.
Praetorius and the monstrous bride are killed in a murder-suicide initiated by the original
creature in order to save Dr. Frankenstein and Elizabeth. Thus, even though *Bride of
Frankenstein* is lauded as a queer classic for its allusions to gay male sexuality and camp
aesthetics, heterosexuality is represented as the only viable option by its end. This is also true of
subsequent queer adaptations of *Frankenstein* that the film inspired, such as *The Rocky Horror
Picture Show* (1975), directed by Jim Sharman.

In her essay “Lesbian Panic and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein,*” English scholar Frann
Michel argues that the queer subplot of *Frankenstein* positions gay male sexuality as a danger to
women (248). In Shelley’s novel, Dr. Frankenstein’s fiancé Elizabeth and her childhood friend
Justine perish at the hands of his creature, the result of an intimate intellectual union between
men. Shelley’s novel reflects the dominant sexual politics of Great Britain in the early 1800s,
which pathologized gay male sexuality as narcissistic and grossly neglectful of women, who
were understood as wives or potential wives that relied on men for economic and emotional
survival (ibid). Michel argues that “the homophobic link between homosexuality and “neglect of
women” has relied on women’s investments in heterosexual institutions” (ibid.). Thus, the
critique of male homosexuality structuring the queer subplot of *Frankenstein* “relies upon a
suspension of erotic connections between women in the novel” (ibid.). It would seem, then, that
it is not so queer in the end.
Similarly, male homosexuality in Whale’s *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* is positioned as dangerous to women. In the latter film, Elizabeth and other female characters are used as pawns and/or sacrificed to mitigate the conflicts produced in and by the queer relationship between Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Praetorius. Their heterosexuality is presumed and never questioned, unlike the leading male characters, whose queerness is implied throughout the film. Like Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Whale’s films reflect the dominant sexual politics of the era in which they were produced; 1930s U.S., when new laws and research reflected a growing concern for “the effects of gay men’s participation in homosexual society […] because it made it possible for them to reject the prescriptions of the dominant culture” (Chauncey 3). Prescriptions that involved providing economic sustenance for their wives, as well as the children they would presumably have together. However, it should be noted that the camp aesthetics and queer puns constituting the social worlds of the films simultaneously replicate and poke fun of homophobic constructions of gay men, details not lost on their queer and queer savvy audiences.

By inverting the gender of characters in *Frankenstein*, the cast of *Dykenstein* foreground, rather than foreclose, lesbianism. Cook’s and Cole’s performances in *Dykenstein* invert the gender of two important characters from *Frankenstein*, Dr. Frankenstein and his mentor. Whereas Cook’s performance of Dr. Dykenstein borrows from both Shelley’s and Whale’s Dr. Frankenstein characters, both of whom are tragic and somewhat self-important, Cole’s performance of Dr. Hildebrand borrows more from Dr. Praetorius by matching his camp effeminacy with her camp butchness, signaled by her jokey bottleneck glasses, kitschy vintage tuxedo, pseudoscientific dyke discourse, and queer humor. Cook’s and Cole’s performances not only refigure the plot to foreground butch dykes but refigure the unequal and antagonistic dynamic between Dr. Frankenstein and Dr. Praetorius, which plays on stereotypes that position
older gay men as predators of younger men, into one that is more egalitarian and collaborative. Dr. Dykenstein and Dr. Hildebrand are colleagues, rather than mentee and mentor. Instead of coercing and later threatening Dr. Dykenstein into making dykes, Dr. Hildebrand simply offers to share her research findings. Whereas Dr. Frankenstein ultimately recoils from the idea of collaborating with Dr. Praetorius after witnessing the horrific results of his first experiment, Dr. Dykenstein remains interested in Dr. Hildebrand’s research, which is potentially useful to her own, since, as Dr. Hildebrand boasts, “my sea monkeys are all dykes.” Sanchez and Loretto are also interested in Dr. Hildebrand’s research and show obvious enthusiasm over the fact that her sea monkeys are butches. Moving away from the pathos of Frankenstein, in which Dr. Frankenstein becomes increasingly isolated as his creature wreaks havoc on his loved ones, this meeting of butch minds celebrates the possibility of developing new technology for birthing new dyke life, and by extension dyke, or lesbian, futurity. This works against popular stereotypes of lesbians that position their capacity to make more lesbians as evidence that they are monsters, which I will discuss further in what follows.

Dr. Dykenstein’s goal to create “another Elizabeth” signals an additional difference between her and Dr. Frankenstein. Dr. Dykenstein not only aims to create life from reanimated corpse parts, but to develop the science to clone living dykes. This particular move seems to affirm stereotypes that position butches as no better than male chauvinists who sexually objectify women, which are prevalent in classic horror films in the U.S. Within this filmic genre, lesbians are represented as masculine, or butch, female monsters who prey on conventionally feminine, and therefore presumably heterosexual, women. This is different from the siren or la bruja discussed in later chapters, each of whom use their feminine wiles to prey upon men. The female vampire of Dracula’s Daughter (1936), Countess Marya Zaleska, is a well cited example of the
butch lesbian represented as monster in classic horror films. She is coded as masculine; she lives independently of men and is sexually aggressive toward women. During the film, Countess Marya attempts to seduce and manipulate a young, pretty blonde with her hypnotic powers, thus positioning her as a butch lesbian monster who sexually objectifies women. One could argue that Dr. Dykenstein also reflects this stereotype of the butch lesbian monster, albeit her mode of sexual objectification is radically different and is complicated by Elizabeth’s sexual agency and lesbian identity. When Elizabeth leaves, Dr. Dykenstein decides that she will simply clone her rather than continue trying to convince her to stay. This suggests that she views Elizabeth as a replaceable sexual object. Furthermore, when Elizabeth returns, Dr. Dykenstein averts directly answering her question regarding the coffins (“Honey, we are doctors”), infantilizing Elizabeth by suggesting that she cannot handle the truth, a classically chauvinist move that further conflates butch masculinity with heteromasculinity.

In addition to reflecting stereotypes of the predatory butch lesbian monster in classic horror films, Dr. Dykenstein’s and Elizabeth’s over-the-top, sexy gender performances invoke stereotypes circulating in lesbian intellectual communities during the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, during which butches and femmes were accused of imitating heteronormative gender and sexual roles (see Case, “Toward” 296-297; Hollibaugh 73-74). While butch and femme lesbian role playing is not as central to lesbian subculture as it once was, the rationale used to critique their gender and sexuality has implications for subsequent generations of lesbians, bisexual women, and transmen, as I will discuss in more detail later. Former sex worker and femme lesbian activist Amber Hollibaugh recalls in a conversation with Chicana lesbian playwright and feminist theorist Cherrie Moraga, that during the feminist sex wars lesbian feminists argued that butches were “sexual oppressors” for their so-called aggressive, and thereby masculinist, role in
seducing femmes, and that femmes were “sexual oppresees” for their so-called passive role in being seduced by butches (80). This positioning is reflected in the dynamic between Countess Marya and her pretty blonde victim discussed earlier in this section. The erotic gender performances of butches and femme lesbians flew in the face of white lesbian feminists, who argued that they were objectifying and therefore complicit with patriarchy (Case, “Toward” ibid; Hollibaugh 73-74). WOW has been and continues to be an important venue for representing butch and femme lesbian identities, eroticism, and desires in a positive light, with Dykenstein being just one example.

When Elizabeth returns to the laboratory and begins seducing Dr. Dykenstein, she simultaneously embodies and disrupts lesbian feminist stereotypes of femme lesbians that position them as sexual objects and oppresees. On the one hand, when Elizabeth leans seductively in the doorway and then sashays across the laboratory as Dr. Dykenstein watches her, she seems to confirm lesbian feminist arguments that femme role playing is sexually objectifying to women. From a lesbian feminist standpoint, one might argue that Elizabeth, in this moment, embodies the femme sexual object of Dr. Dykenstein’s butch gaze, reinforcing discourses of the straight mind that degrade, confine, and erase women and lesbians. However, Elizabeth’s playful, erotic performance highlights her sexual subjectivity and agency—she chooses to return to the laboratory and put her body on display to seduce Dr. Dykenstein after having chosen to leave. Her lesbian identity is not a result of the wiles of a coercive butch monster. When Elizabeth wraps her leg and arms around Dr. Dykenstein and loudly expresses her pleasure in the erotic exchange that follows, she further disrupts the notion that femme lesbians are passive, “sexual oppresees.” Elizabeth is clearly in charge; she is sexually dominant, active, and in control. Dr. Dykenstein, at least in this moment, plays a more passive role.
Together, they disrupt pathologizing stereotypes of butches and femmes by campily embodying and continuously switching up the sexual roles they are presumed to play. Elizabeth and Dr. Dykenstein thus disrupt and challenge representations of butch lesbians as sexually aggressive monsters who objectify feminine, presumably heterosexual, women in classic horror films.

Representing lesbians as masculine in horror film supports the historical conflation of homosexuality with gender inversion. According to this straight logic, gay men are positioned as excessively feminine and lesbians as excessively masculine—gays and lesbians are different than straight men and women, and their sexual deviance is made visible through their gender nonconformity. Dr. Dykenstein and her crew disidentify with the characterization of lesbians as excessively masculine.

For example, the butch Sanchez and Loretto go to the bathroom together and cross-stitch flowers during the play, practices that are associated with femininity, not excessive masculinity (see fig. 4). Feminist scholar Biddy Martin argues that the conflation of lesbian sexuality with gender nonconformity “makes the femme lesbian completely invisible” (108). While Martin is addressing trends in queer scholarship and political discourse that focuses narrowly on the subversive potential gender nonconforming lesbians, her argument also applies to representations of lesbianism in classic monster films. During the Golden Age of Cinema, the period during which Dracula’s Daughter and similar monster films were produced, Hollywood coded lesbians as masculine because they were invested in representing them as different, rather
than similar, to heterosexual women, who were coded as normatively feminine. It was not until the Cold War Era that cinematic tropes of the lesbian expanded to include representations of femme lesbians. As Robert J. Corber argues in *Cold War Femme: Lesbianism, National Identity, and Hollywood Cinema*, it is precisely the invisibility of the femme lesbian, presumed to be heterosexual given her gender presentation, that rendered her dangerous in the heteronormative imaginary. She could surreptitiously engage in same-sex sexual relations under the guise of homosocial women’s culture, and her gender conforming appearance made it easier for her to befriend and then convert innocent heterosexual women to lesbianism (2). The femme lesbian was also considered a threat to the stability and future of the traditional family in that she embodied the potential to subvert or refuse the roles of wife and mother (12). These stereotypes were exacerbated by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the late 40s and into the 50s, who monsterized lesbians, and gay men, as Communist threats. He argued that their closeted sexual identities positioned them as prime targets for blackmail by Communists, and thereby threatened the security of the nation (D. Johnson). Therefore, the surreptitious femme lesbian was not only a gender traitor, but a potential traitor to the nation. Throughout his study, Corber tracks how these constructions of the femme lesbian were represented in U.S. Hollywood films from that period.

The films included in Corber’s study do not fall within the monster or horror genre. However, his analysis of cinematic tropes for representing the femme lesbian during the Cold War Era applies to trends in horror films produced later in that period. As Benshoff notes, several vampire films produced during the 1970s, such as *Lust for a Vampire* and *Countess Dracula*, instead of representing the lesbian monster as masculine, figured her as a “hyper-feminine,” sexually insatiable vampire (192-193). In fact, most femme lesbian monsters are figured as vampires in popular cinema (ibid.). Corber’s study shows us that the danger of the
femme lesbian is linked not only to her potential subversion or refusal of the roles of wife and mother, but her capacity to make more lesbians. Anxieties around the femme lesbian are therefore strongly linked to their reproductive capacity, a theme that is prevalent in lesbian vampire films. The femme lesbian vampire does not birth the next generation of heteronormative citizen subjects. Instead she births, or attempts to birth, more lesbian vampires, who will in turn birth even more lesbian vampires. The means through which she reproduces is highly eroticized; in most cases she must penetrate the flesh of a woman with her fangs and drink her blood to turn her into a vampire, actions easily interpreted as metaphors for penetrative sex and cunnilingus, among other lesbian sex acts. The femme lesbian’s monstrous capacity to reproduce is positioned as an apocalyptic threat in most horror films; by reproducing more femme lesbian monsters, she threatens to replace men as sexually and culturally dominant, thereby ending the patriarchal rule of society. As a clone Tiger Lily can be reproduced exponentially, and each new clone has the potential to turn out straight, like her prototype, or lesbian, like her creator. It is important to note that Elizabeth is not a monster and takes a rather humanist stance when discussing the ethics, or lack thereof, of Dr. Dykenstein’s experiments. However, here I focus on Tiger Lily as a surprisingly queer version of the femme lesbian monster. Surprising in that even though Tiger Lily is straight, she can potentially reproduce without Dr. Dykenstein’s queer technology, assuming she has the biological capacity to do so. Tiger Lily’s reproductive capacity thus renders her doubly threatening, for there is no telling what kinds of monstrous spawn she might birth given her queer lesbian origins. As a prototype for the perfect dyke, even if a failed one, Tiger Lily thus poses an apocalyptic threat to the patriarchal foundation of U.S. society, and by extension, the nation, like the lesbian monsters preceding her.
As the performance proceeds, the melodic sounds of a toy piano fade on at a low decibel and Tiger Lily (Lisa Gluckin) is introduced to the audience for the first time. She wears a black dress and a large black overcoat and takes halting, stiff jointed steps in black pumps from the greenroom upstage to center stage. Her long, brown hair is frizzy and knotted with black extensions piled on top of her head. Her skin is pale, bruised, and full of stitches. She has a dark brown Band-Aid on her forehead (fig. 5). A white baby doll wearing a dress and holding a bouquet of flowers lowers from a rope tied to the lighting grid above the stage. Tiger Lily stumbles over to the baby and reaches out to touch her. The baby, ventriloquized by Shimkovitz (Sanchez) from backstage, invites her to play, “Let’s throw flowers to the river!” The soundtrack transitions into a foreboding organ melody played in minor key as Tiger Lily plucks flowers from the baby’s bouquet. Tiger Lily, excitedly, hurls her flowers at the audience, breaking the fourth wall, and in a raspy voice exclaims, “I like it!” When the flowers are gone, Tiger Lily grabs the baby and throws her into the audience. Tiger Lily squeals in joy, then after a moment calls out, confusedly, “Baby?” A noisy mob wearing white masks bursts onstage from the greenroom, surrounds her, and chains her up.

Like the creature from Whale’s films, Tiger Lily’s flesh is stitched together from disparate body parts. Although some of those body parts were cloned from Elizabeth, others came from cadavers, such as her brain, which an androgynous gravedigger named Carlos (E.J. Rand) delivers to Dr. Dykenstein in a previous scene. Also, like Whale’s creature, Tiger Lily appears to be in a state of decay; her skin is pale, greyish, and splotchy. Her appearance is especially horrific when viewed in contrast to Elizabeth’s. Tiger Lily’s long dark hair is
disheveled and knotted together with mismatched extensions, while Elizabeth’s is combed back in a stylish half-ponytail. Tiger Lily’s lips are pale, there are dark circles under her eyes, and her complexion is pasty. Elizabeth’s lips are painted red, eye liner and eye shadow enliven her gaze, and her complexion is rosy. Tiger Lily’s dress and coat hang off of her in a lumpy fashion, obscuring the contours of her body. The dress Elizabeth wears is form fitting and accentuates the feminine curves of her body. Tiger Lily’s appearance renders her a monstrous reflection of the femme lesbian she was meant to replace. However, her grotesque appearance, compounded by her gravelly voice and violent behavior, does not make her an ideal femme candidate for secretly infiltrating society, but rather makes her hypervisible as a threat.

After Tiger Lily accidentally drowns the baby, she is hunted down by an angry mob. The mob apprehend Tiger Lily then tie her up with ropes and yell absurd things at her such as “Lesbians crash babies against the walls!” and “Baby Eaters!” They thus insinuate a connection between infanticide and lesbianism. It would, perhaps, be more accurate for them to yell, “Lesbians drown babies!” or “Pussy Eaters!” However, the absurdity of their comments does critical work in the performance and connects the scene following Tiger Lily’s birth to controversies around gay and lesbian parenting. The early 2000s saw a resurgence of neoconservative politicians and religious leaders who argued that gays and lesbians were dangerous to children. Within these arguments gays and lesbians were conflated with pedophiles and depicted as sexual predators who coerced children to engage in same sex behavior and join the “gay lifestyle.” In this sense, they parallel the horror narratives discussed earlier in this section in which lesbians use their seductive power to make, or birth, more lesbians. However, within neoconservative arguments lesbians not only make more lesbians out of innocents but endanger the very lives and souls of these innocents by exposing them to queer sexual behaviors
that supposedly result in death and damnation. The screaming mob plays on such fear-mongering tactics, which, when deployed in neoconservative political discourse in the early 2000s, were aimed at delegitimizing and forestalling newly won civil rights for gays and lesbians that would not only allow them to marry in individual states, but to adopt children.\textsuperscript{13} Understood within this political context, it makes sense that the mob in \textit{Dykenstein} associate infanticide with lesbianism. However, the homophobic rhetoric the mob deploys is so exaggerated and nonsensical that it works to lampoon the everyday homophobic rhetoric it mimics. As Cook discussed in an interview, gay and lesbian parenting at that time, at least in NYC where she lived, was becoming a new norm, and to her it seemed as though, “all of the queers I know are having kids” (10 May). The humor of the mob scene in \textit{Dykenstein} relies on an understanding of their rhetoric as utterly ridiculous, behind the times, and “on its way out” (ibid.).

The mob scene in \textit{Dykenstein} echoes the one depicted in Whale’s \textit{Frankenstein}, when the creature is chased down by torch and pitchfork wielding townsfolk after he accidentally drowns a little white girl while they are playing near a river. In “Here Comes the Bride: Wedding, Gender and Race in \textit{Bride of Frankenstein},” feminist scholar Elizabeth Young argues that the mob scene in Whale’s \textit{Frankenstein} is analogous to postbellum lynch mobs wherein white men hunted down and murdered black men, usually under the false premise that they had assaulted a white woman (424) and that the creature’s phenotypic traits, which were aimed at giving it “a

\textsuperscript{13} Massachusetts paved the way for this trend by being the first state to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003, which opened up pathways for gays and lesbians to adopt children ("What to"). While gays and lesbians could have children through fertility services, it was illegal for them to adopt in many states due to laws that required prospective parents to be married (ibid). In response to the decision to legalize same-sex marriage in Massachusetts, neoconservative columnist Maggie Gallagher portended “losing American civilization” (qtd. in Rauch). A year earlier, the Uniform Parentage Act, which terminated the parental rights of sperm donors, stopped requiring that women impregnated by artificial insemination “be married in order for the rights of the donor to be terminated,” opening up new pathways for women, including lesbian parents, to achieve parental rights outside of marriage (Ball 131). Also, in 2002 the National Center for Lesbian Rights won a landmark case that granted sole parental rights to a lesbian mother in Mississippi over the father, her abusive ex-spouse (NCLR).
primitive, Neanderthal appearance,” emphasized such a reading by signifying his racial otherness (Jack Pierce qtd. in 423). Furthermore, that the creature’s body parts are not only composed from the corpses of criminals, but are supplied by graverobbers, further emphasize a connection between the creature and stereotypes that criminalize men of color. The fact that Tiger Lily is wearing hair extensions, which are largely associated with black beauty culture, as well as that her Band-aid is dark brown, highlights her racial otherness, despite her white pasty countenance. Her racial otherness is also indicated by the fact that the butches who birthed her include not only Dr. Dykenstein, a self-described “alien” (e.g. Latin American immigrant), but her assistant Loretto, who is black. Although Sanchez, Dr. Dykenstein’s other butch assistant, appears to be white, her Latinx name suggests otherwise. In the white heteronormative U.S. imaginary that Cook and her cast lampoon throughout Dykenstein, all Latinxs are presumed to be Mexican and therefore brown, a point to which I will return in the next section. The emphasis on Tiger Lily’s racial otherness, evidenced by her appearance and parentage, coupled with the fact that the people in the mob are all wearing white masks suggests that, at the core of homophobic rhetoric used to bar lesbians and gays from having parental rights is an investment in preserving white heteronormative family structures.

It is interesting to note that Tiger Lily’s name is a direct reference to a racist caricature of Native American women from the Disney animation Peter Pan (1953). Based on J.M. Barrie’s novel The Little White Bird (1902), Peter Pan features a mythic Native American princess named Tiger Lily, who after falling into the grips of dangerous pirates, is saved by the white male protagonist for which the animation is named. Peter Pan is awarded for his bravery with the love and loyalty of Tiger Lily, which positions him as a white savior and Tiger Lily as an exotic, sexually available prize, a stereotype that has been used to disregard the racialized sexual
violence that Native American women have historically been and continue to be subjected to in the U.S. This is different from the racialized sexual stereotypes evoked by Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, which position men of color as monsters who threaten and assault white women, figured as the responsibility and sexual property of white men. As the multiply raced spawn of butches, the Tiger Lily of Dykenstein, like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, presents a masculinized threat to whiteness, which is confirmed when she throws the white baby into the river. As a racialized femme clone, she is also positioned as an exotic sexual object. However, her monstrous appearance challenges the white male gaze that would position her as such. That Tiger Lily embodies these stereotypes simultaneously functions as a disidentificatory tactic; she is neither/both/and something more.

Fortunately for Tiger Lily, two nurses rescue her from the mob and return her to Dr. Dykenstein, who chastises her for going out by herself, “Tiger Lily! […] Who gave you permission to go out?” Turning to Loretto and Sanchez, Dr. Dykenstein scolds them for their negligence. Tiger Lily interrupts, “Daddy!” Dr. Dykenstein, horrified, exclaims, “I am your creator! […] Call me Dr. Dykenstein if you want to call me anything.” Tiger Lily, grinning, blurts, “Mom!” When Dr. Dykenstein tells her, “There’s no mom, and no dad!” Tiger Lily growls and lunges at her. Loretto attempts to placate Tiger Lily, “I can be her mother!” Sanchez chimes in, “I can be her father!” When Dr. Dykenstein insists that “there is no mom and daddy,” Tiger Lily throws off her chains and roars, “You made me ugly! Nobody likes me! I’m ugly. I’m lonely. I will never marry.” The nurses, doctors, and assistants pause, befuddled by Tiger Lily’s last statement. Loretto then utters, quietly, “She’s straight!”

In this humorous scene, in which the gender of Dr. Dykenstein and her assistants are destabilized to further disrupt stereotypes that reduce butches to mimics of heteronormative
masculinity (Mom!; I can be her mother!), it would seem as though Dr. Dykenstein’s mission to create the perfect dyke has failed. However, unlike Dr. Frankenstein who abandons his creature, Dr. Dykenstein does not abandon Tiger Lily, despite her violent behavior and straight identity. Instead, Dr. Dykenstein becomes even more committed to her project, and with help from Dr. Hildebrand and her assistants, performs an emergency surgery to see if they can save what is left of Tiger Lily’s “100% dyke, lavender” brain, as Sanchez describes it. In the surgery scene, methods of gay conversion therapy popular at the turn of the twentieth century, such as the lobotomy, are invoked and inverted as the doctors remove Tiger Lily’s brain to examine it. It turns out that her brain has only one lavender spot left. Sanchez and Loretto confess that they introduced Tiger Lily to Martha Stewart magazines and the television series Friends so that she could learn about the world outside the laboratory. Dr. Hildebrand claims that the decrease of lavender in Tiger Lily’s brain must be a result of “straight brain damage” caused by her exposure to these heteronormative materials. Dr. Hildebrand’s claim thus challenges the presumption that heterosexuality is a natural or even a good human trait, a presumption underlying apocalyptic narratives of lesbianism. The unfolding of the surgery scene positions heterosexuality as an adverse effect of social conditioning via popular culture, and lesbianism is positioned as a biological phenomenon evidenced by the queer color of the brain; lavender, which has been long been associated with same-sex sexuality. Dr. Dykenstein’s experiment was initially a success that was then spoiled by heteronormative social conditioning, or straight brain damage. Thus, even as Tiger Lily embodies the threat of lesbian monsters making more lesbian monsters to invade and take over white heteropatriarchal society, she reveals the ease with which the straight mind can invade and take over a “100% dyke, lavender” brain, which endangers Dr. Dykenstein’s entire community, as I will discuss in the next section.
“They say that aliens created life. I am an alien; therefore, I should create life.”
- Dr. Dykenstein in *Dykenstein* (2003)

“Dr. Dykenstein must make decisions that could forever change the face of the Lesbian Nation. What’s the good dyke doctor to do?”
- Excerpt from flier for *Dykenstein*, 2013

After Dr. Hildebrand reinserts the damaged brain back into Tiger Lily’s skull, the nurses remove the bloody sheet covering her body. Tiger Lily, head and torso now unshrouded, is grinning ear to ear, staring out at the audience, many of whom laugh out loud as she rasps, “I want…husband! *Husband!* […] You have to create husband for me, one *just like me!*” The operation has been a failure, but Dr. Dykenstein will not give up, “No! No, you don’t need a husband, you don’t want one! You are a dyke! You are the perfect dyke […] You have been brainwashed!” Her last statement elicits laughter from the audience, as if it is a joke rather than a tragic statement. Tiger Lily jumps to standing and roars, “No! I want a husband!” She lunges at Sanchez, grabs her by the neck, slams her onto the operating table, an office desk on wheels, and begins sliding her across the stage while choking her and the audience laughs even harder. The camera shakes as it zooms in and out to catch the details. Dr. Dykenstein and the rest of her crew stand on the sidelines in horror as Sanchez cries for help. To save Sanchez, Dr. Dykenstein agrees to make a husband for Tiger Lily, who then releases her grip on Sanchez, causing her to tumble to the floor. Tiger Lily sings, “I get a husband… *husband*…” Dr. Dykenstein, as if jolted back to the reality of the situation, exclaims, “I’m not going to create a straight couple!” while Carlos drags a body wrapped in a white sheet into the laboratory. Dr. Dykenstein spins around to her crew, “Are we at their mercy now? Are we gonna have to give them kids and paint their house?” Her questions come too late for reconsideration. Her crew is already huddled around Dr. Hildebrand, who is waving a green and a beige dildo like surgical instruments over the body,
now slumped on the operating table. The body shakes as a rock ‘n’ roll song begins playing loudly. It is “Full Grown” by the Jon Spencer Blues Band. The Husband (Stacey Whitmire), bursts out from under the sheet and starts running from stage right to stage left. A short black wig sits askew on top of his head and a black pencil mustache is drawn crookedly onto his garishly pale face just above his lips. He is wearing a dress shirt with a mismatched tie and brown slacks open at the fly. A large dildo flops around from the open fly as he jumps up and down, tap dances with arms spinning wildly, thrusts his hips, plays air guitar, and lip syncs to the song (“I need a full-grown woman!”). The audience hoots at The Husband’s antics. Tiger Lily joins him upstage. As they dance together, The Husband bends Tiger Lily over and thrusts his pelvic area, flopping dildo and all, into her backside to the rhythm of the song. Dr. Hildebrand covers her face and turns away. The music stops abruptly. Dr. Dykenstein looks up at the ceiling, “What have I done?” The Husband turns around, noticing Dr. Dykenstein and her crew for the first time, “Baby, who are all of these people?” Tiger Lily grips his arm and pulls her body close to his, “I don’t know, groom.” As if having an epiphany, The Husband blurts out, “They’re lesbians!” To which Tiger Lily replies disdainfully, “Eeew, let’s kill them.” The Husband yells, pointy finger and dildo wagging at Dr. Dykenstein and her crew, “Hey lesbians! I’m gonna kill you! Get outta my house before I call the police!” which elicits more laughter. Tiger Lily tells him he is amazing, grabs his pants, then pauses, “I feel sorry for them, they look sad.” Dr. Dykenstein and her crew look on in shock as Tiger Lily gets down on her knees and blows on The Husband’s dildo while he taunts them, “Hey lesbians! You don’t know what you’re missing!”

In this section, I argue that Cook and her cast deploy what I describe as alienation aesthetics to trace the influence of the straight mind in xenophobic discourses aimed at policing
the boundaries of national belonging in the U.S., which, similar to the lesbian monster stereotypes discussed in the previous section, reflect white heteropatriarchal investments in controlling who can and who cannot reproduce. I demonstrate how the performative tactics and materials that constitute their aesthetic (drag kinging, dildos and other household items, queer punning) set up and invert popular scenarios of invasion, which stereotype Latin American immigrants and their children as monstrous aliens who threaten to recolonize the U.S., by positioning Tiger Lily and The Husband as straight monsters who intend to colonize Dr. Dykenstein’s predominantly butch and lesbian community. I show how, by inverting gender, sexual, and racial dynamics featured in popular scenarios of invasion, Cook and her cast challenge early twenty-first century discourses of U.S. nationalism. During my analysis, I also show how their alienation aesthetics, in addition to constituting the world of Dykenstein, reconstitute the theater space, which has historically excluded the voices of lesbians, as a platform for articulating lesbian politics and desire.

Alienation, as an aesthetic practice, is associated with the performance methodologies of Bertolt Brecht, a German modernist playwright and poet who gained international notoriety in the early 20th century. Inspired by traditional Chinese theatre, Brecht developed the neologism "Verfremdungseffekt", or V-effect, as an antidote to what he viewed to be the manipulative use of realism in Western theater (158). Translated variously as alienation effect, estrangement effect, distantiation, and/or making strange, Brecht’s V-effect worked to expose the mechanisms of realist theater in order to prevent “the spectators from losing themselves completely in the character” and the social world the character represents (152). Empathy and identification with the theatrical character, Brecht argued, prevents the spectator from critically assessing the ideological underpinnings of realist theater, or theater that purports to mirror reality. Brecht
outlines a variety of techniques for accomplishing the V-effect, such as gestus, juxtaposing styles and symbols from different cultures and epochs, breaking the fourth wall through direct audience address, and/or exposing technical devices of the theater (184-186). These performance methods render the figures, relationships, and scenarios represented as universal in realist theater alien, which encourages critical reflection on the ways in which they are constructed to naturalize social orders (187).

The V-effect is used frequently throughout the history of queer performance. For example, drag performers render heteronormative gender alien through the use of excessive make-up, costumes, and ludic scenarios that work to expose the mechanisms through which it is constructed (see Butler 174-180). LGBTQ artists have long criticized realist theater for its universalization of heterosexuality, which forecloses queer and transgender subjectivity (see Dolan, Theatre 32; Case, “Toward” 305). As Dolan notes, WOW in particular “became a vital proving ground for a generation of lesbian performers who rejected the tenets of realism” (Theatre 27). Indeed, as Shays reminisced during an interview, “WOW was a gift, you could do absolutely, almost, anything (Cook, et al., 8 Aug.). WOW co-founder Lois Weaver has even taught workshops based in Brechtian methods, and her lesbian performance troupe, Split Britches, deployed what could be described as the V-effect in their use of props, drag, and queer puns to challenge gender and sexual norms (Case, “Introduction” 8; 18). Cook also cites Brecht as an influence (“Re: AlieNation). Like her lesbian forefathers at WOW, she uses drag and other aesthetic techniques to make heteronormativity strange, and to expose its underlying investment in preserving white patriarchy. One of the ways in which Cook makes white heteropatriarchy alien in Dykenstein is through the introduction of The Husband into the plot.
In the above scene, Dr. Dykenstein and her crew birth yet another straight monster. He is never given a proper name but is instead referred to as “groom” and “husband” by Tiger Lily, and “The Husband” in the original script for Dykenstein. Notes for the scene also refer to The Husband as Johnny Kat, Whitmire’s drag king persona, popular in queer nightlife scenes in NYC in the early 2000s (Cook, et al., 08 Aug.). In Female Masculinity, queer theorist Judith Halberstam defines the drag king as “a female (usually) who dresses up in a recognizably male costume and performs theatrically in that costume” (232). Halberstam cites Judith Butler’s now famous argument that drag performance exposes the performativity of gender, but also points out that the means through which drag queens and drag kings accomplish this are different. Since signifiers of femininity are broadly understood as artificial and theatrical, it is not a far stretch for the drag queen to expose femininity as performative (234). Masculinity, on the other hand, especially white masculinity, is broadly understood as a “nonperformative” trait that “adheres “naturally” and inevitably to men,” which suggests that it cannot be staged (235). White masculinity simply is. Therefore, drag kings must make it “visible and theatrical” in order to make it legible as a kind of performance (ibid.). In other words, successful drag king performances produce the V-effect to render white masculinity, the invisible norm against which all other genders are measured, alien. In the case of The Husband, Whitmire produces the V-effect by hyperbolizing the sexism that serves as “the basis for masculine realness” and layering it with a lesbian subtext (255). What results is a send-up of white masculinity that exposes its fragile, interdependent, and performative nature.

When The Husband is first introduced, a large, beige dildo flops around from his open fly as he lip syncs to “Full Grown.” Here the dildo signifies the penis, the marker of male sexual difference within the heteronormative imaginary. Possession of the penis positions (white) men
as superior to women, who not only lack the penis, but are dependent upon it for sexual fulfillment. Thus, as the dildo/penis flops around, it enacts a kind of gestus, or a combination of gesture, symbolic movement, and affect used to convey specific social attitudes. It renders heteronormative attitudes toward gender difference, symbolized by the flopping dildo/penis, and sexuality, gestured toward through The Husband’s exhibitionist behavior, grotesquely visible and alien. However, the lyrics of the song counteract The Husband’s gestus; the singer needs a “full grown woman” to drive him “wild.” The Husband’s masculinity, signified by the aggressive virility of his performance, is dependent on and subordinate to the sexual performance and receptivity of a woman. Thus, the white masculine superiority signified by the beige dildo/penis is undermined as it swings to the beat of a song that suggests the opposite. Lip syncing here reveals the masculinity The Husband displays as incongruous with the masculinity he professes, underscoring its performativity.

In the queer context of WOW, drag king performances do not simply critique masculinity, but function as platforms for subversive embodiments of lesbian desire. As Halberstam notes about drag kinging, “layering a masculine performance over a butch appearance […] encourages lesbian audiences to applaud not the maleness they see but the dyke masculinities that peek through” (261). The Husband is a drag king played by a woman lip syncing a song about needing a woman, rather than a man, to drive her wild. Heteromasculinity is revealed as a performance and superseded by dyke masculinity, and the sexism upon which it depends is refigured into an erotic lesbian subtext. Furthermore, the dildo, which is deployed to call attention to the inordinate amount of importance attached to the penis as a signifier of male sexual difference in heteronormative culture, is also associated with lesbian sex, among other queer practices. This is especially true in a context like WOW, often presumed to have a lesbian
and/or lesbian savvy audience (see Davy 8, 82-83). As The Husband and Tiger Lily simulate heterosexual copulation, the audience can be heard laughing over the loud music. The humor lies perhaps, in the fact that this sexual performance is lesbian underneath the costuming, and thus challenges heteronormativity even as it emulates it. Here, heterosexuality is not the norm, but the punchline to a lesbian sex joke. The alienating aesthetics of Whitmire’s performance of The Husband not only expose sexism as “the basis of masculine realness,” but appropriate heteromasculine signifiers and recode them as symbols of lesbian critique and erotic desire.

Whitmire is not the first drag king that Cook has invited to be in one of her plays. In fact, Cook first met Coles when she was performing as part of a drag king duo with Dréd Gerestant in a NYC queer club (Cook, et al., 08 Aug.). Additionally, both Shimkovitz (Sanchez) and Snorton (Loretto) first met Cook following one of their drag king duets at WOW (Snorton, 27 Mar.). Cook’s use of drag and other unconventional performance tactics is both an aesthetic and a political choice. While many critics belittle lesbian theater’s so-called failure to achieve the standards of traditional theater (see Davy 122; Hughes “Preface”), lesbian playwrights like Cook make it clear that they have no intention of replicating those standards. When writing of her beginnings as a director and performer Cook recalls

I had no interest in being part of the mainstream. I did not identify with the aesthetics and values of what we used to call ‘commercial theater.’ In my opinion, the function of mainstream expressions—whether intentional or not intentional—was to legitimate the injustice and the repetition of the bourgeois class ritual. (“Underground” 2).

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14 As lesbian performance artist Holly Hughes so humorously puts it, “Our assumption was you came to WOW looking for two things: pussy and a place to perform” (“Introduction” 15).
15 For more about Dréd Gerestant’s career as a drag king, see Halberstam’s chapter “Drag Kings: Masculinity and Performance” in Female Masculinity (1998), as well as Venus Boyz (2002), a documentary on drag kings directed by Gabrielle Baur.
Like other performers at WOW, Cook transforms the black box theater into a space that privileges lesbian-centered subcultural practices. Yet, while drag kinging is most often associated with lesbians parodying men, it is also a gender affirming practice for transmen. As Snorton recalls, “being a drag king helped me to understand myself as trans” (27 Mar.). Cook might write the script, but the process of staging her plays leaves space to incorporate the embodied politics and interests of the cast. This results in a more complex representation of lesbian culture and history, defanged accounts of which elide the participation and contributions of transgender people, racial minorities, and working-class people. The rehearsal process often includes script, role, and prop changes suggested by the performers. For example, using the dildos as surgical instruments in the above scene was Shays’ idea (Cook, et al, 08 Aug.). While a small detail, it adds an important layer to the aesthetics of Dykenstein, for such egalitarian practices are antithetical to Western theatrical traditions, which position the director as the only voice of authority and requires the actors to leave their personal histories backstage. Drag kinging, what I frame as a practice of alienation aesthetics cultivated in lesbian subcultures, is thus utilized to reflect something about the lived experiences and desires of the performers.

In Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910, theater historian Daphne Brooks discusses how alienation, in addition to a performative tactic, is “a trope that reflects and characterizes marginal cultural positions” (4). In her analysis of nineteenth and early twentieth century theater in the U.S. and Great Britain, Brooks shows how the physical and cultural alienation of black people in particular is challenged by performers through what she terms “Afro-alienation acts” (4). Like Brecht’s V-effect, Afro-alienation acts are anti-realist and produce “alternative forms of cultural expression that cut against the grain of conventional social and political ideologies” (ibid.). Brooks emphasizes how black performers
deploy Afro-alienation acts to expose the intersections between popular constructions of blackness and the dehumanization of black people in white dominated societies. I draw from Brooks’ theorization of Afro-alienation acts to consider how Cook’s aesthetic works to foreground how race and racism impact dominant cultural understandings of lesbianism. Alienation is a popular trope not only for representing blackness, but racial otherness in general, especially in the U.S. The trope of alienation, as well as the alien, is deployed in mainstream representations of the immigrant other, usually figured as nonwhite, as a strategy of estrangement. In Dykenstein, alienation is taken up as a multi-pronged aesthetic and performative tactic that exposes how discrimination against lesbians, and queers more broadly, supports white heteropatriarchy and its mandate that cultural others assimilate or face violent consequences.

When Dr. Dykenstein’s crew begs her to submit to Tiger Lily’s demand for a husband, she responds by asking, “Are we at their mercy now? We’re gonna have to give them kids and paint their house?” The first two questions allude to heteronormative privilege; queers are vulnerable to backlash when they refuse to be in service to the reproduction of the nuclear family, embodied by Tiger Lily and her future husband, as well as the future children the couple will presumably want to have. Tiger Lily’s attack on Sanchez is a literal example of violent heteronormative backlash. By making heterosexuality monstrous, and by questioning heteronormative privilege, Dr. Dykenstein and her crew make the familiar strange, opening up a space for critical analysis. Dr. Dykenstein’s last question, however, makes an indirect reference to white privilege and its impact on nonwhite bodies. Within the U.S., house painting, as well as landscaping and other manual work, is associated with low paid immigrant labor, particularly the labor of undocumented Latin Americans, or “illegal aliens.” This stereotype, which dates back to the turn of the twentieth century, was reinforced during the second Bush Administration, when
popular discussions of immigrant labor raised questions about just want kinds of jobs should be available to Mexican nationals (see R. Gutiérrez). While not all Latin Americans are Mexican, the U.S. mainstream media often conflates Latin American immigrants with Mexicans. Furthermore, mainstream representations of Mexicans often emphasize their racial otherness in order to distinguish them from proper citizens, historically represented as white in the U.S. (ibid.). Thus, when Dr. Dykenstein asks this question, she draws attention to how brown immigrant labor is used to sustain the growth and economic prosperity of heteronormative citizens and their descendants. As a self-identified dyke alien who refuses to participate in this anti-queer, racist dynamic, Dr. Dykenstein threatens to disrupt cycles of exploitation meant to ensure that the future is the domain of white heteronormative citizens.

Underlying white heteropatriarchy is a fear of cultural miscegenation and extinction. These fears are reflected in scenarios of alien invasion, a staple of science fiction horror films and literature. Within these scenarios, an alien monster seeks to invade, colonize, and/or obliterate human civilization, generally represented by a white nuclear family. The alien reproduces via cloning, parasitism, or other supernatural means in order to raise an invading army. Human armies, generally led by a white heteropatriarch, are then deployed to isolate, imprison, and indiscriminately kill the alien invaders in order to save human civilization from an apocalyptic ending. Versions of this scenario of invasion are included in other kinds of monster tales, such as the lesbian vampire films discussed earlier and Frankenstein. To emphasize the potential dangers of creating an equally monstrous mate for his creature, Dr. Frankenstein conjures an image of them birthing a “race of devils […] who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (155-156). According to media studies scholar Charles Ramírez Berg, aliens in science fiction horror films function as stand-ins
for undocumented immigrants in the U.S. imaginary. Like lesbians, they are represented as surreptitiously infiltrating society and repopulating it with monsters. However, while lesbian monsters are depicted as threats for their ability to turn white, presumably heterosexual, female citizens against the nation, aliens are generally depicted as threatening because they breach the borders of the nation, anchor themselves like parasites, and then commence to reproduce more aliens, some of which are humanoid and can pass as citizens. Immigrant women, particularly those from Latin America, are central figures in this racist fantasy; dominant discourses warn that once they cross the border they will churn out “anchor babies” who will deplete the nation’s resources and colonize the U.S. with a “foreign” population. As anthropologist Leo R. Chavez argues, Latin American immigrants, particularly Mexicans, are stereotyped as “highly fertile invaders” in U.S. media, “whose reproduction, both social and biological, threatens to destroy the nation’s identity” (42; 41). Cook, as a Latina and a mother, is no stranger to this stereotype. Although she is from Argentina, predominantly characterized as a “white” country with close ties to Europe unlike other South American countries (see Chamosa; Kerr), Cook’s cultural roots position her as part of what Chavez describes as “the Latino threat narrative.” Furthermore, as a lesbian mother, she embodies heteronormative fears of gender and sexual contamination, especially given that her son was raised amidst a queer, woman-centered performance community. Like the performers Brooks writes about, Cook deploys alienation as an aesthetic performative tactic that doubles as a reflection of how culturally marginal people, including herself, are positioned in both fiction and in real life. However, in Dykenstein, the scenario of

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16 Chavez notes that the characterization of Mexicans in particular as foreign threats to the U.S. persists despite the contested history of the U.S.-Mexico border and the fact that many Mexicans are native to the U.S. (30-31).
17 In an interview, Cook recalled how Shays would sometimes pick her son, Julián Mesri, up from school in high femme fashion, and how Coles attended his high school graduation in a suit and tie (Cook, et al., 8 Aug).
invasion is deployed toward different ends. Rather than justifying hostile treatment of immigrants, key components of the scenario are inverted in order to critique what Brooks terms “(white) ontological anxiety” and reveal its relationship to the making of cultural monsters (10).

*Frankenstein*, despite its queer subplot, ultimately adheres to the trajectory of popular scenarios of invasion in its treatment of the creature; not only is the creature not allowed to reproduce, he is driven from town by a monster-hating mob that sees him as a threat to human society. *Dykenstein*, however, alters the course of the scenario by saving Tiger Lily and introducing The Husband, who not only thrives, but attempts to take over Dr. Dykenstein’s laboratory. Immediately after his birth, The Husband threatens to kill Dr. Dykenstein and her crew, then tells them to get out of *his* “house” or he’ll “call the police.” As if by default, The Husband assumes control of his immediate surroundings and attempts to regulate who belongs there and who does not, a colonizing move that reflects white masculine entitlement and privilege. Although The Husband, like Tiger Lily, could be viewed as multiply raced given his parentage, his appearance and attitude suggest a white positionality. Furthermore, he relies upon the police, a state power that privileges the needs and concerns of (white) normative citizens, to back up his authority. By uttering these initial threats, The Husband mimics the authoritative behavior of the white heteropatriarch poised to save the nation in scenarios of alien invasion, often pictured as a “regular Joe” with a wife and children in need of protection from dangerous foreigners, or a lone cowboy committed to policing the borders of the nation. That Dr. Dykenstein is an “alien,” a pun on her Latin American roots that doubles as a reference to science fiction monsters, and several of her crew have Latinx names (e.g. Carlos, Loretto, Sanchez), positions them as prime invaders according to popular scenarios of invasion.
While Dr. Dykenstein’s alien-ness and her crew’s Latinx-ness render them prime invaders, it is important to note here that The Husband initially reacts to them this way because Tiger Lily tells him they are lesbians; his threat is preceded with “Hey lesbians!,” not “Hey aliens!” or “Hey Latinas!” It is feasible then to argue that The Husband is simply concerned with purging lesbians from the territory he has appropriated. This supports the everyday social reality in which queer-identified people, including lesbians, are kicked out of their homes for not conforming with the heteronorm. However, the threat of calling the police is generally one reserved for criminal intruders, who, more often than not, are pictured as Latinx and/or black in the dominant imaginary. Here then, the ethnic and racial identities of Dr. Dykenstein and her crew become even more salient. Besides being Latinx by virtue of their names, two of the main crew members, Dr. Hildebrand and Loretto, are also black. This would make them doubly suspect as intruders in a white male dominated space. Yet, within the world of the performance, it is actually The Husband who is the intruder, not Dr. Dykenstein or her butch crew. By inverting the roles scripted into popular scenarios of invasion, Cook and her cast challenge the physical and cultural alienation of immigrants and people of color in the service of white heteropatriarchy. In so doing, they provide a link between the scenario of colonial encounter and popular scenarios of invasion by showing how the racist dynamics of conquest normalized in the former, which are used to establish a new national identity, are reproduced in the former to police its borders.

Alienation, in addition to a Brechtian theater method and dehumanizing trope in popular representations of racial minorities and immigrants, is also a queer affect heavily associated with lesbians. Ostracized by society for her sexual nonconformity, the lesbian is doomed to live out her life in miserable solitude. When Tiger Lily says to her husband, “I feel sorry for them, they
look sad,” she projects this stereotype, perhaps most famously associated with Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), onto Dr. Dykenstein and her crew. This is different from, but not unrelated to, stereotypes of the lesbian monster discussed in the previous section. The promise of alienation is a scare tactic used to discipline lesbians and convince them that if they “choose” to live out their lives as such, they will end up alone and unhappy. It is also used to assuage heteronormative fears of the lesbian who is not alone and has the capacity to team up with and make more like herself. When applied to lesbians specifically, alienation is meant to coerce them back into the heterosexual fold to fulfill their societal duties as wives and mothers subservient to the (sexual) needs of men. This intent is corroborated when The Husband taunts Dr. Dykenstein and her crew: “Hey lesbians! You don’t know what you’re missing!” As Tiger Lily proceeds to mime fellatio on him, the suggestion is that sex with a male lover is the antidote to lesbian alienation, which also reflects the invisibility and illegibility of lesbian sex within the heteronormative imaginary.

In classic and more recent films such as *The Children’s Hour* (1961) and *Mullholland Drive* (2001), the fate of the lonely lesbian is suicide. Other dismal fates involve prison, a trope reinforced by the television series *Orange is the New Black*, or the lesbian is murdered or becomes a murderer, a trope that reflects reality in the case of Aileen Wuornos (see Millward, et al.). Dr. Dykenstein and her crew reject heterosexuality as a solution to their sadness. In fact, they are not sad because they are lesbians, but because they created more heterosexuals; in this case a white passing heterosexual male ready to enforce and benefit from his position at the top of gender and racial hierarchies. Indeed, Dr. Dykenstein laments her new creation soon after he

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is born, (“My life sucks, looks what I did!”). While lesbian, or dyke, alienation is an important theme in *Dykenstein*, within the monstrous world of the play and WOW it means something different. It is an inside joke poking fun at straight stereotypes of lesbians and is used to valorize and promote a diverse spectrum of lesbian identities and practices. Dr. Dykenstein is not alone, she has a devoted crew of butches to help her perfect her reproductive experiments and bring about an apocalyptic ending to the straight mind and the normative subject positions it reinforces. The experiments of Dr. Dykenstein and her crew, despite their failures, hold the promise of birthing a *Dyke AlienNation*. However, the *Dyke AlieNation* they promise to birth is different from that pictured in Jill Johnston’s infamous book *Lesbian Nation: A Feminist Solution* (1973), which advocated for lesbian separatism, and *Queer Nation*, an activist organization that black feminist theorist Cathy Cohen argues pits queers against heterosexuals in ways that elide the intersections of sexuality with race, gender, and class (448-452). The *Dyke AlieNation* that Dr. Dykenstein and her crew promise to birth critiques the alienating effects of nation building projects on minorities. As I will demonstrate, it offers a future imaginary that challenges not only the essentialist foundations of white heteronormative society, but those of white cisnormative lesbian communities and discourses.

**Choreographies of Chaos: Death, Mourning, and Lesbian Futurity**

“A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should […] I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although now I found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.”
- Dr. Victor Frankenstein in *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*, by Mary Shelley (1818)

“This is what you were neglecting me for, to create a straight version of me and her husband?” A hysterical Elizabeth has just returned to the laboratory to discover the monstrous
creations of Dr. Dykenstein and her crew, all of whom stand with their hands behind their backs looking up at the ceiling like children being admonished. Dr. Dykenstein, arms gesticulating wildly, attempts to explain herself, “She wasn’t supposed to be straight, but I am bigger than God, bigger than nature! For millennia people tried to triumph over death, but I did! Death is a lie. Death doesn’t exist. Death was the failure of science.” Turning toward the audience, she breaks the fourth wall to address them, yelling, “Don’t throw your dead people away! I can bring them back to life!” The Husband, arms wrapped around Tiger Lily protectively, asks, “What did you do to my wife?” Dr. Dykenstein points at Tiger Lily, “I created her! I am an alien!” Elizabeth, incredulously, “If you find a way to keep people alive, you better find a way to feed them!” She then turns to the rest of the crew, “and that’s not the only problem, she’s going to need a Green Card now!” Dr. Hildebrand, Sanchez, and Loretto join the debate casually, as Elizabeth falls to her knees dramatically, then gets back up to list all of the terrible things that may result from Dr. Dykenstein’s experiment. Tiger Lily yells at Dr. Dykenstein, “What have you done to me?” Then, looking at The Husband, “What is this thing? I am a monster!” She crouches in devastation on the floor. Dr. Hildebrand notifies Dr. Dykenstein their collaboration is over. Sanchez cries, “We’re all going to hell!” Loretto worries he’ll never become a doctor. Soon everyone is walking toward Dr. Dykenstein, blaming her for future atrocities. Their accusations produce a cacophony of sound as they yell over one another at her. Encircled by her disgruntled community, Dr. Dykenstein lies down on the operating table and dies.

It would seem that Dr. Dykenstein’s efforts to birth the perfect dyke have truly backfired. Not only has she failed, but her failure has turned her entire community against her. In this section, I argue that Dr. Dykenstein’s sudden death, a result of the drama caused by the birth of Tiger Lily’s husband, generates a leadership void that raise questions about the identity and
future of her community. In the aftermath of Dr. Dykenstein’s death fights, emotional meltdowns, and gender confusion amongst her community quickly dissolve their anti-virtuosic choreography of mourning into chaos. However, while chaos is viewed by many as a sign of the apocalypse and therefore negative, I will demonstrate how in Dykenstein it signals a dawning of lesbian futurity.

In mainstream theater, as well as televisual and filmic productions in the U.S., minority death scenes usually portray the deceased as a one-dimensional stereotype in contrast to a white protagonist, represented as a unique and psychologically complex individual. In many such scenes, minority characters are killed while trying to save the white child of a white nuclear family that the overall story revolves around. Minority characters often provide surface-level diversity for mainstream television and films so that they can avoid charges of racism, and then are sacrificed, or wasted as Roach would have it, to solidify white heterosexual hegemony. These performances of waste alienate the minority demographics they supposedly represent by positioning them as expendable props that advance the plot of a story that privileges white heterosexuals. However, in Dykenstein this trope is intentionally averted.

Cook is critical of minority death tropes in traditional theatrical productions (“Underground” 4). Following French novelist and playwright Jean Genet, she seeks to present the lives, and deaths, of minority characters as “heroic, poetic, and beautiful” (“Underground” 3). In her unpublished essay, “Underground,” Cook suggests a connection between theatrical death tropes and the rhetoric used by the military dictatorship in Argentina during the “Dirty War” to justify the “disappearance” of “subversives.” Disappearance, in this context, was a euphemism for kidnapping, torturing, and/or assassinating political dissidents. In both cases, minority lives are flattened and silenced in the service of dominant culture. In the case of the “Dirty War,” so-
called “subversives” were constructed by military government propaganda as political and/or gender minorities who constituted a terrorist threat that needed be rooted out and eliminated in order to preserve the nation (see Taylor, Disappearing 11; 83). Cook reverses this dynamic in her plays to raise questions around the political function of minority death scenes. She claims that in all of her plays, “there’s a character who dies but who is somehow still around, haunting the stage” (“Underground 4). These characters, often played by Cook herself, refuse to fade, or disappear, thus inviting the audience to critically examine the social context in which their deaths take place. The final scene in Dykenstein is a prime example of this critical deployment of death in Cook’s plays; even though Dr. Dykenstein dies, she remains center stage as her crew fights over the meaning and consequence of her death. In the midst of their fighting, however, Dr. Dykenstein’s dead body is reanimated by some mysterious force and she is reborn – as a zombie. This latter detail, Dr. Dykenstein’s reanimation, becomes especially interesting when considering the short rant preceding her death in which she claims, “death is a lie.”

Independently produced performances like Dykenstein are important sites for interrogating and resisting theatrical death tropes that position minorities as wastable. While Dr. Dykenstein is referring to her success in reanimating the dead when she claims that “death is a lie,” there is another way of interpreting this statement; the death that minorities usually suffer in mainstream cultural productions are lies; they do not truly represent the complexity and diversity of their lives. Cook is not the first butch lesbian playwright to expose minority death tropes as lies. In Split Britches’ adaptation of the Grimm Brothers’ fairytale Beauty and the Beast, staged at WOW twenty years before Dykenstein, Shaw performs the death scene of The Beast, a monster widely interpreted as a stand-in for butch dykes in lesbian subculture. As she lies on the ground in her death throes, the butch Shaw repeatedly pauses and stands up, imploring the
audience not to believe what they see, then lies back down again to die. Case contrasts this fantastic scene of death interrupted to realist representations of violence against women in U.S. theater. Ultimately, Case claims, “the closure of these realistic narratives chokes the women to death,” sometimes literally, in order to affirm heteropatriarchal authority (“Toward” 305). When The Beast refuses to die in order to be reborn as a prince, she refuses the mandates of heteronormativity, in which monogamous romantic relationships between a man and a woman are the only valid and viable ones, and insists on an ending to the story in which butch dykes not only survive, but thrive. When Dr. Dykenstein is reborn at the end of the performance, she refuses the minority tropes that require her death in order to restore the white heteronormative order, which are replicated in Whales’ adaptations of *Frankenstein*, albeit with a generous sprinkling of queer references and camp twists. Furthermore, her rebirth presents the possibility of continuing in her mission to create the perfect dyke.

In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that children are positioned as proxies through which their biological parents may achieve something akin to immortality. In other words, parents may live on through their children. The gender and sexual traits of children, among others like skin and hair color, are therefore praised when they reflect those of the parents. Doesn’t Johnny Jr. look just like Johnny Sr.? When Dr. Dykenstein rises from her death bed and rants, “for millennia people tried to triumph over death, but I did!” and “death was the failure of science,” she decenters reproductive sex as a means of achieving immortality. Instead science, more specifically technologies of queer reproduction and reanimation that are not based in sexual acts, makes her immortality possible. Furthermore, the price of immortality in *Dykenstein* need not be the perpetuation of sameness. The sexuality of Tiger Lily, in this context, is thus rendered unimportant—she does not have to be “the perfect
“dyke” in order for Dr. Dykenstein to triumph over death. What is important is that Dr. Dykenstein has developed the science to reanimate the dead, period.

The events leading up to Dr. Dykenstein’s death raise critical questions about the ethics of her research, her role as leader of her community, and by extension her community’s future. Not only has she left Tiger Lily and The Husband without resources like food and Green Cards, which they will need to survive, their very existence threatens to ruin the lives of all who are close to Dr. Dykenstein, similar to Dr. Frankenstein’s creature. They are doomed to hell, according to Sanchez, and at the very least, Loretto’s career goals are ruined. Yet, different from *Frankenstein*, the crew blames Dr. Dykenstein, not her creatures, for ruining their lives. As Roach points out, leaders symbolically embody the values of their community (38-39). When faced with the death of a leader, a community “reproduces and re-creates itself” through surrogation (2). Roach gives the much-quoted example, “the King is dead, long live the King,” to illuminate his point. Even though the king is mortal, and as such must die, his position is deemed eternal and therefore a surrogate must take his place following his death so that the monarchy can live on. The surrogate, Roach argues, “promote[s] a sense of timelessness based on apparently seamless repetition of traditional roles” (18). Hence, the surrogates of deceased leaders also embody not only cultural history and tradition, but the future of their communities. Dr. Dykenstein, however, fails to live up to her community’s values when she makes more straight people. Not only that, her failure has ruined, rather than ensured, their futures.

Furthermore, in many traditions, the first heir of the deceased leader performs as surrogate in the event of his or her death. Yet, even though her creature Tiger Lily calls her “Daddy”, and sometimes even “Mom,” Dr. Dykenstein consistently denies the role of parent. Who then, if anyone, should succeed Dr. Dykenstein? In the wake of her death, there is no clear path in sight
for how Dr. Dykenstein’s community should proceed, and the manner in which they mourn her seems only to confirm this.

In choreographies of mourning based in Western Christian traditions, frequently reproduced in and affirmed by U.S. popular media as the norm, the dead are put on display so that their community may pay respect and offer eulogies in their honor. The order of viewing the body, or objects displayed in lieu of the body, as well as the order of the subsequent eulogies, begins with the deceased’s immediate biological or legal family members, then proceeds with the deceased’s extended community, including friends and colleagues. One by one, they are allowed to approach the body, one by one they are allowed to eulogize the deceased. Interspersed throughout the viewing and eulogies are individual embodiments of grief, the scale of which should properly reflect one’s closeness to the deceased according to heteronormative kinship structures. In Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Every Day Movement, Andrew Hewitt argues that modern dance is not only a metaphor for the social order, but that it embodies “the production and presentation of social order” in and of itself (19). Hewitt offers the term “social choreography […] to denote a tradition of thinking about social order that derives its ideal from the aesthetic realm and seeks to instill that order directly at the level of the body.” Social choreography, as Hewitt demonstrates, can manifest in a “continuum of bodily movements” including ballet, walking, and even convulsive vomiting (3; 19). Hewitt’s theory can thus be productively applied to what I am describing here as a choreography of mourning, or the order of bodily movements, relations, and affective expressions constitutive of funeral and memorial events such as those described above. As Roach shows us, choreographies of mourning reinforce and performatively reproduce the social hierarchies and norms of a community. Their aesthetic composition is meant to reflect the ideal social order of a given
community. Given the gravity of such events, it is highly taboo to violate the social hierarchies affirmed in choreographies of mourning, or to bring up traits of the deceased that violate community norms. This is especially so when the deceased is a community leader and therefore meant to exemplify those norms, like Dr. Dykenstein. Yet, as Elizabeth and the crew gather around Dr. Dykenstein’s body to mourn her death, rather than reinforcing and reproducing the social order, they sow seeds of chaos and discontent.

The shock of Dr. Dykenstein’s death seems, at first, to bind her former community back together. Gathered around her body, Elizabeth, then Tiger Lily, are the first to address the dead Dr. Dykenstein. It appears as if they are proceeding along the orderly lines of Western choreographies of mourning. Then, Dr. Hildebrand, the closest in professional rank to Dr. Dykenstein, begins to wail and falls to her knees next to the operating table. Her wailing, in contrast to everyone else, is too loud and too soon; it is off rhythm and disruptive. Dr. Hildebrand’s wailing incites a ludic scene of eulogizing around the body of the late Dr. Dykenstein. Sanchez moans, “She was a genius!” Elizabeth tells her dead lover, “Baby I love you so much! I just wanted to go on one vacation!” Dr. Hildebrand promises, “Your contributions to the medical and scientific community will never be forgotten!” Sanchez cries, “She was like a mother to me!” Then Loretto, “Like a father!” Then Sanchez, “Like a mother and a father!” Their statements contradict and compete with one another. Very quickly, their choreography of mourning explodes into conflict and disorder. Loretto blames Elizabeth for Dr. Dykenstein’s death, claiming she stressed her out. Tiger Lily then screams at Elizabeth, “You killed my father!” The Husband, confused, asks, “Why do you keep calling her your father? She was a bulldagger!” The accusations and derogatory insults against the deceased Dr. Dykenstein violate the norms of comportment and memorialization expected in choreographies of mourning. Rather
than peaceful and orderly, their behavior is reactionary and violent. Dr. Hildebrand tries to calm everyone, “Stop [...] we’re here to mourn our dear friend.” They momentarily heed Dr. Hildebrand, then quickly devolve back into fighting. Sanchez reopens old wounds by bringing up the fact that it was Loretto who let Tiger Lily watch the television series *Friends*, which was in part what caused her straight brain damage, suggesting if she had not done so Dr. Dykenstein might still be alive. Again, Dr. Hildebrand calms them. After a moment the rest of the crew, along with Elizabeth and the creatures, begin crying and wailing together and slowly make their way backstage, leaving the dead Dr. Dykenstein alone on the operating table. The community, once again, is in crisis.

But just what *kind* of community are, or were, they? A lesbian community? Given that Dr. Dykenstein and her ex-lover were a butch-femme lesbian couple, the investment of many of the crew in creating the perfect dyke, and the many references to lesbian sex and culture, one might answer yes. For the purpose of argumentation, let us assume for a moment that Dr. Dykenstein’s community is in fact a lesbian community. How then do we account then for the variable interpretations of Dr. Dykenstein’s gender, in addition to the androgynous and masculine-of-center gender presentation of many in her crew, and the straight creatures? Aren’t lesbian communities composed of *women* who have sexual desire for other women? The chaotic aftermath of Dr. Dykenstein’s death challenges such gender essentialist and exclusionary definitions of lesbian communities, which reinforce the power of the straight mind by reaffirming the borders of one of its core conceptual categories: woman. Dr. Dykenstein is memorialized as a butch lover-mom-daddy-bulldagger-scientist by a group of people who run the gamut of gender and sexual orientation.
Many lesbian communities and organizations, dating back to the Daughters of Bilitis, have maintained gender essentialist and sex-negative definitions of lesbianism in order to gain traction in heterosexual-dominated feminist movements (Case, “Toward” 296), a defanging strategy that persists to this day within mainstream lesbian politics. This has reinforced the pathologization of butch and femme lesbians, as discussed in section one, and more recently, transwomen and transmen, the latter whom took the place of butch lesbians as cultural pariahs in lesbian communities in the early twentieth century (see Halberstam 149; Rubin 476-478). As a result of contentions like this, Elizabeth Freeman argues that the terms lesbian and lesbian feminism have come to be associated with a “gravitational pull” that mires queerness in a less radical past (62). Dykenstein asks us, what kinds of lesbian (feminist) histories (and presents) are overwritten by this narrative? This is an important intervention for, as Davy points out, cultural productions by lesbians at WOW “manifested most of the attributes of the queer years before the word made the transition from an adjective—queer politics, queer theory—to noun” (18-19). The crew’s chaotic and conflicting accounts of Dr. Dykenstein’s scientific legacy and gender offer an understanding of lesbian identity and history at odds with most official accounts. In Dykenstein, butches, transmen, and femme lesbians, aliens and proper citizens alike, are united in their desire to support and promote the growth of lesbian communities, even if they do not always get along. The chaos that unfolds across the final scene of Dykenstein is productive in that it allows us to question who belongs to and gets memorialized as a member or leader of lesbian communities, and who is forgotten in order to ensure that the cultural norms and social boundaries of lesbian identity and community appear consistent over time.

Furthermore, the chaos characterizing the final scene, a result of Dr. Dykenstein’s investment in discovering the secret of what makes a perfect dyke, reflects the friction present in
the social dynamics and organization of WOW at the time it was produced. WOW, which stands for Woman One Woman, is the oldest collectively run theater to promote women artists, and later women and/or transgender artists, exclusively (“Welcome”). Historically, a significant portion of these artists and the plays they have staged at WOW have been identified as lesbian (see Case, “Introduction” 7-8; Davy 82-85). Indeed, as Cook reminisced in an interview, being a part of WOW in the earlier years felt like being part of a dyke army (Cook, et al., 08 Aug.).

However, around the time Dykenstein was staged, there were many heated debates about how and whether to support the work of transgender artists at WOW, particularly transmen, which led to several transmen leaving WOW (Cook, 10 May; Davy 107-108; Léger; Snorton, 27 Mar.). Some of these debates included discussions of the relationship between gender and racial privilege, raising the specter of WOW’s struggle to remain inclusive of minority women, particularly since it was founded by white women and in the early years predominately featured performances by white women and lesbians (Cook, 10 May; Snorton, 27 Mar.; see also Case, “Introduction” 5; Davy 24-25, 182; Hughes, “Introduction: Secret” 5-6). These local politics, which reflect and expand on national debates around gender and sexual normativity, undoubtedly influenced the performance, reception, and interpretation of Dykenstein. Besides the fact that Dykenstein showcases a multi-racial cast that spans the gender and sexual spectrum, the performance and the context in which it was produced suggests that lesbian communities are more capacious and queer than many are willing to accept or admit. However, it is significant to note that much of the scholarship on WOW features white lesbian artists, and that Cook, although a prominent member credited with increasing its racial and gender diversity, is only mentioned cursorily, or not at all, despite her extensive performance record.

Roach argues that narratives of community and cultural identity are provisional, and that
performance is the site at which they “congeal into full-blown myths of legitimacy and origin.”

Therefore, it is necessary to forget certain histories to ensure “collective perpetuation” (2-3). This is why, he argues, “surrogation rarely if ever succeeds” (2). The fictions of community origin and cohesion make it so that the surrogate “cannot fulfill expectations, creating a deficit, or exceeds them, creating a surplus” (ibid.). This is why the chaos brought on by exposing fictions of community origin and cohesion, while destructive, is also productive. It demonstrates how performance, which is often used to solidify community norms, can also be deployed to deconstruct and disrupt them. The mayhem and confusion brought on by the death of Dr. Dykenstein and the subsequent conflicting eulogies raise questions about how lesbian communities are formed, how they are defined, and how we imagine their futures. Who is qualified to replace Dr. Dykenstein? How does that define, or redefine, her community? Like the body of Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, communities are stitched together from disparate parts, and the body that results of such an assemblage is unpredictable and mutable by nature.

As Dr. Dykenstein rises from the operating table, it becomes clear that the questions her untimely death raises will not be answered, at least not within the space of the play. Dr. Dykenstein, arms outstretched like a zombie, shuffles across the stage after her community. Screams sound from behind the curtain. Then everyone, including Dr. Dykenstein, runs back onstage as the song “Masacre en el Puticlub” by the Argentine pop rock group Los Redonditos de Ricota blasts from the house speakers. The crew has been zombified by Dr. Dykenstein. They begin dancing in a line together, swinging their arms up, side to side, then hooking their thumbs in their belt loops and grinding their hips. It is significant that the performance ends with a zombie outbreak. Undead and unthinking monsters, zombies are associated with cultural hegemony in the U.S. popular imaginary. The symmetry of the line dance choreography seems to
underscore this association and to serve as an omen of what results from policing community boundaries along lines of difference. As they repeat their dance moves, Dr. Dykenstein and her community face the audience and stumble toward them, threatening to contaminate them as well. It seems as though the lesbian apocalypse has indeed arrived. However, despite the various threats it embodies, the campy affect and dance moves of Cook and her cast make it look and feel like a queer dance party.

Building on Muñoz, I would like to offer here that lesbian futurity is and has been queer; it is on our horizon and we can catch glimpses of it in the anticipatory illuminations of performances like *Dykenstein*. It questions and challenges the status quo that stifles so many and offers us different options for belonging inside of complex, shifting communities and political landscapes. In the final scene of *Dykenstein*, while difference might create chaos and conflict, it need not destroy people, or monsters. However, it might well initiate the destruction of the limits we place on the identity categories we take on to define ourselves and our communities. As I watch the performance yet again, I wonder how my disidentification with the term lesbian has limited my access to queer community, as well as limited how I imagine my own future. The definitions of lesbianism popularized by the mainstream media and politically conservative, upwardly mobile white lesbian feminists in the late 80s and early 90s did not reflect my experiences as a masculine-of-center dyke raised working-class. I fantasized about being a part of a community like WOW, but until I encountered their archives for the first time during graduate school, I had no idea that such a community even existed; it was beyond the scope of my experience and my imagination.

Fifteen years later, *Dykenstein* remains just as politically relevant, if not more, than when it was produced. LGBTQ communities continue to divide along lines of gender, sexuality,
ethnicity, race, and generation in the wake of a newly oppressive political regime. As lesbian bars and independent queer community spaces continue to close, one after another, platforms for addressing these issues narrow. How are we to imagine a future together in light of all of these problems? Dykenstein is an example of how performance is a crucial site for working on and through them; wherever and however we can make it. Following both Muñoz and Dolan, I see performance as not only crucial for imagining and rehearsing lesbian community and futurity, but for mining the embodied, aesthetic, and choreographic tactics that enrich our understanding of what is and has been possible in queer pasts and presents.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the apocalyptic world envisioned in Dykenstein, which centers around the desires of and relationships between butches, femme lesbians, and their monstrous spawn, calls for a more capacious understanding of lesbian identity and community. I show how the characters of Dykenstein challenge the gender and sexual norms reinforced by the straight mind and highlight their racist and xenophobic complicities. I provide three sections of analysis, each of which examine how Cook and her cast refigure key elements of Frankenstein through the monstrous embodiments, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreographies they deploy in Dykenstein. In the first section of analysis, I argue that the gender performances of Cook and her cast embody and disrupt stereotypes that position lesbians, particularly butch and femme lesbians, as sexually deviant monsters who threaten the future of the nation. I show how their costuming, interactions, and appropriations of homophobic rhetoric reveal how these stereotypes are driven by white heteropatriarchal investments in controlling the bodies and sexuality of women, and how they have been, somewhat ironically, used in white
lesbian feminist discourse toward similar ends. I introduce the concept of *birthing monsters* to connect these representations of lesbians in mainstream cinema to straight anxieties about their reproductive capacity. In the second section of analysis, I argue that Cook and her cast deploy what I describe as *alienation aesthetics* to trace the influence of the straight mind in xenophobic discourses aimed at policing the boundaries of national belonging in early twenty-first century U.S. I show how the performative tactics and materials that constitute their aesthetic (drag kinging, dildos and other household items, queer punning) set up and invert popular scenarios of invasion to expose how white hetropatriarchy is not only invested in controlling the bodies and reproductive capacities of white women and lesbians, but those of immigrants and people of color regardless of their gender or sexuality. In the third section of analysis, I argue that Dr. Dykenstein’s sudden death, a result of the drama caused by the birth of Tiger Lily’s husband, generates a leadership void that raise questions about the identity and future of her community. In the aftermath of Dr. Dykenstein’s death, fights, emotional meltdowns, and gender confusion amongst her community quickly dissolve their choreography of mourning into chaos. However, while chaos is viewed by many as a sign of the apocalypse and therefore negative, I conclude by claiming that in *Dykenstein*, it signals a dawning of lesbian futurity.

Much has changed in the political landscape of the U.S. since *Dykenstein* was produced, yet it remains just as relevant today, perhaps more. The Trump Administration has inspired a newly invigorated and more openly racist right wing with its divisive rhetoric, attempted to institute new policies that criminalize immigrants from majority brown and black nations such as refugee bans, set into motion the gutting of public healthcare, threatened to build a wall separating the U.S. from Mexico and make it more difficult for women to get abortions, removed LGBTQ people from the national census, and suggested banning transgender people from
serving in the military. The list of political atrocities literally gets longer each day, and evidence the fact that gender, sexual, racial, and/or ethnic minorities, as well as disabled people, poor people, and/or the elderly, are still incredibly vulnerable to the violence of a white heteropatriarchal U.S. government. Ironically, during my first telephone interview with Cook, I recall her saying that when she wrote *Dykenstein*, she took extreme pleasure in parodying the neoconservative policies and attitudes promoted by the second Bush Administration because she knew it could only last for one more term. In other words, President Bush and his ilk would soon be out of power, and in the meantime LGBTQ activists and politicians were gaining steam in the civil rights arena. While the Obama Administration left much to be desired politically—it was led by a president appropriately dubbed the “Deportation King” and who also approved the use of drone fighter planes that caused an unknown number of civilian casualties in other countries—it at least attempted to give the appearance of desiring to unite the nation and cooperate with others, rather than actively incite divisions along lines of difference. Barack Obama, after all, was the first black president of the U.S., a country torn by racism since its founding. Furthermore, images of President Obama and Vice President Joe Biden running through the halls of the White House with gay pride flags left a lasting impression on the national imaginary. Indeed, I never expected to see such a thing in my lifetime. However, the backlash for what small amounts of social change that did occur during the Obama Administration, embodied in many actions of the Trump Administration, has been devastating nationally and globally. It should not be surprising then, that Cook’s latest performances critically, and humorously, engage this political roller coaster, which many fear is becoming the new normal.

In the summer of 2016, I made a trip to NYC to conduct another interview with Cook and some of her performance collaborators, and to observe rehearsals for and the production of her
most recent show at WOW, *NonConsensual Relationships with Ghosts*. The show, as Cook describes it, is a musical, with original scores by Mesri, and is about how the ghosts of dictators past continue to haunt us in the present (Cook, et al., *Downtown*). On the back of a postcard flier that I found in the greenroom at WOW, Karen Finley, another well-known NYC-based performance artist, claims *NonConsensual Relationships* is “an antidote to our discouraging times and a gift to our wounded world.” While originally, Cook planned to write a performance about positive hauntings to memorialize her recently departed mother, when Trump was named President of the U.S., she decided to change the story to expose how his divisive and fear-mongering strategies, rather than something new and unprecedented, replicated those of dictators past from Caligula to Hitler to the military officials in power during Argentina’s “Dirty War” and beyond (Cook, 01 Aug; Cook, et al., *Downtown*). Cook thus challenges the U.S. government’s positioning of itself as a proponent of free speech and exemplar of democratic rule by highlighting similarities between the strategies used by Trump and dictators. Furthermore, Cook’s decision to change the direction of *NonConsensual Relationships* underscores how vital performance is as a site for responding to contemporary political phenomena as they unfold in real time.

Within the haunted world of *NonConsensual Relationships*, dictators of the past are represented as menacing ghosts. Trump, however, is positioned as a dictator of the present who takes pleasure in exploiting homeless people, immigrants, women, butches, and gay fairies, among other queers. Throughout the play Trump, played by Michael Freeman, who drags him up in a long curly blonde wig and a red robe, is referred to as both a “thing” and a “king” (see fig. 6). The “thing-king” has several acolytes who fight over the chance to serve him, all of whom wear blonde wigs, including Mistah Coles. While waiting for the first rehearsal to begin, one of
the cast members, Moira Cutler, another long-time butch collaborator of Cook’s and a mainstay in the NYC queer theater scene, noted that one of the performers had not shown up. While my original intent for the research trip was to observe rehearsals and later the public performance of *NonConsensual Ghosts*, Cook immediately turned to me and invited me to read the missing performer’s lines for the rest of rehearsal. When the performer did not show up again for the next rehearsal, another long-time collaborator of Cook’s, a butch Italian American dyke performer and writer named Annie Lanzillotto, glanced at me sideways, then asked in her thick Bronx accent, “Susana, don’t you think Rae should be in the show?” “Yes!” I thought. Cook, who was busy getting props together and gathering the rest of the cast, looked over to me and replied, “Sure! Yeah—then you can write about your experience in your thesis!”

I was now a part of Cook’s lesbian performance community, at least temporarily. For the rest of the rehearsals, Lanzillotto, along with cast member and dancer Simba Yangali, her adopted daughter, and many others, took me under their collective wings and helped me learn the lines of the songs and the dance choreographies. They told me that the improvised style of the rehearsals, including my spontaneous integration into the performance, was characteristic of Cook’s directorial style. The haphazard way in which I stumbled onto and learned my role in the performance reminded me of Brecht’s writing on using alienation methods in the rehearsal process, in which he argues that having actors rehearse their lines from memory prior to memorization incites interesting innovations to the script that would not otherwise be possible. I
had already watched a video of a previous production of *NonConsensual Relationships* at Dixon Place, so when I jumped into the production at WOW my role was familiar, but still strange. As I tried to keep up with the pace of the other performers, interesting “mistakes” occurred that led to tiny modifications of the script; an improvised aside, an impromptu fight, a new dance move.

On the opening night of the show Cook pulled out a crumpled trench coat from a plastic garbage bag full of costumes and props and told me that I should wear it. When I tried it on, she told me, “Oh yeah, that’s perfect on you” then asked, “do you realize that is one of the costumes from *Dykenstein*?” Before I could answer she told me that the trench coat was worn by one of the members of the mob that chained Tiger Lily up after she drowned the baby. Tonight, I would wear it from behind a theatrical police barricade made from red ribbon while protesting the dictatorship of the “thing-king” (see fig. 7). The trench coat thus travelled from one monstrous world into another, haunted by the lesbian history it once clothed. However, this haunting was consensual.

Before I knew it, the entire cast and I were singing the final number of *NonConsensual Relationships* and the audience was joining in, “Dear Converted, welcome, to this moment of community […].” Like the lesbian monsters who threaten to convert innocent women to lesbianism, we were converting our audience into members of our haunted community as we invited them to sing along, “Who made this *thing* President???” Critics of political performances,
particularly those that are organized around a category of identity such as lesbian or queer, argue that they simply “preach to the choir,” rather than converting, or transforming, anyone’s thoughts. However, this presumes the hegemony of such groups. Furthermore, as Cook often responds to this critique in relation to her own performance practice, “we need our church too.” As I watched the smiles on my fellow performers’ faces, both in the cast and in the audience, I felt the salience of this statement deeply. Performances like NonConsensual Relationships are crucial not only because they provide sites for transferring tactics that work to resist oppressive social and political realities, but because they also provide sites for being together—with strangers, familiars, monsters—and participating in the world re/visions initiated by the artists. This is part of the utopian doing of Cook’s performance practice. Furthermore, one could interpret the even more gender diverse, transnational queer community reflected in NonConsensual Relationships, which include long time and new collaborators and handful of queer men, as a manifestation of the lesbian futurity glimpsed in Dykenstein. Therefore, one could also argue that performance is not only a site for imagining queer lesbian futures, but for bringing, or birthing, them into existence.
CHAPTER TWO

Becoming La Bruja in/and Queer Purgatory: Transmutations of Homophobia and Misogyny in LDVT’s Inferno Varieté

It is June 6, 2015 and I am sitting on the floor of Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery in Wicker Park, a historically Polish-cum-hipster neighborhood in the West Town area of Chicago. In front of me in the center of this white box gallery is a small portable stage with a microphone stand. The house lights are off, the space is nearly pitch black. Light from a projector illuminates the wall behind the stage and the silhouettes of people sitting on the floor around me. It is silent, except for the occasional cough or throat clearing sounds made by individuals in the audience. The title screen for a video slowly fades onto the wall, opening tonight’s feature for Rapid Pulse Performance Festival International. White letters on a black background read “LDVT,” an acronym for Querétaro-based artist Felipe Osornio’s performance moniker, Lechedevirgen Trimegisto. Tonight, Osornio will present Inferno Varieté (Hell’s Variety Show), a multi-media, interactive solo performance that interrogates the relationship between hegemonic masculinities and homophobic violence in the twenty-first century. After a moment, the title screen crossfades into a text that reads:

Uganda, East Africa, February 27, 2014

Following the enactment of the law that criminalizes homosexuality with death, a group of citizens set fire to a young man for his alleged homosexuality, burning him alive on the streets […]

The video proceeds with silent footage of a man flailing about on the street, his entire body aflame. Someone from the “group of citizens” squirts kerosene on him; the fire grows bigger and
flickers more rapidly. A recording of “Marcha Fúnebre: Cruz Pesada,” a symphonic number used for Catholic funeral marches in Latin America during Holy Week, fades on in the background. A chorus of wind and brass instruments crescendo as the video depicts the horrific execution of this anonymous victim of homophobic violence. All of a sudden, the video stops abruptly and transitions to a black screen with white type that reads, “A Mexican Horror Classic!” The house lights go up and Osornio, a thin, brown man with short black hair and a point-tipped handlebar mustache, walks briskly out from behind the projection wall. Acupuncture needles pierce the skin of his forehead; they glint and sparkle as he marches toward the stage. The red ribbons hanging from the sleeves of his turquoise cowboy shirt float behind him as his arms swing in rhythm with his gait. He ascends one step onto the stage and positions himself just behind the microphone stand. A holy card of an Anima Sola, or Lonely Soul, picturing a woman reaching up out of the flames of purgatory, is clipped onto the front of his collar, which is decorated with red and white roses. Osornio’s black slacks are tucked into turquoise cowboy boots with matching portraits of the same Anima Sola from the holy card printed on their sides. He faces forward, grips the stem of the microphone dramatically with his left hand, and swings open his right knee slightly, tipping his right hip downward. Augustín Lara’s 1930 classic bolero, “Como Dos Puñales” (“Like Two Daggers”) plays through the house speakers. A video montage of classic Mexican monster films featuring sadistic and seductive brujas (female witches) raising the dead and scheming with other monsters fades onto the projection wall (see fig. 8).

1 “Funeral March: Heavy Cross.”
In this opening scene of *Inferno*, the audience is barraged with images, words, and actions that conjure the figure of *la bruja* (female witch) – a shape-shifting, spellcasting, sexually deviant monster in league with the devil – and the medieval practices widely associated with torturing and killing her, such as death by burning. Structured as a participatory variety show complete with spectacular displays of cultural difference, karaoke, tests of physical endurance and strength, games of chance, and burlesque dance performance, *Inferno* refigures the processes through which one becomes *una bruja* (a witch) to critique the gender and sexual norms that incite homophobic violence in the twenty-first century. One of my arguments throughout this chapter is that Osornio’s embodiment of *la bruja* connects contemporary homophobic violence against gay and other queer men to misogyny. My analysis shows how Osornio’s performance contributes to women of color feminisms by deploying *la bruja* to interrogate how, as he puts it, “bodies and subjects that do not fit with the hegemonic figure of “man” live a hell in life.”² I demonstrate how Osornio’s monstrous embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography invoke this living hell, or queer purgatory as I refer to it throughout this chapter, to demonstrate how the negative association of gay and other queer men with femininity incites homophobic violence in the different cultural contexts addressed.

² The original text reads, “donde los cuerpos y sujetos que no se ajustan a la figura hegemónica de “hombre” viven un infierno en vida” (Trimegisto, “Inferno Variebé”).

Figure 8: LDVT and la reina bruja from *Caperucita y Pulgarcito Contra los Monstruos.*
throughout the performance. While the term la bruja refers to a female witch, I utilize this term throughout the chapter to emphasize this connection between the misogynistic treatment of women and homophobic violence aimed at punishing gay and other queer men for being too effeminate in their gender presentation and/or sexual practices in the eyes of heteronormative societies. Furthermore, the witchy iconography and symbolism that Osornio mines throughout the performance refer directly to brujas or are heavily associated with these feminine monsters.

That the iteration of Inferno analyzed in this chapter was staged in the U.S. and is framed as a “Mexican Horror Classic!” yet begins with footage of the public burning of an “alleged” homosexual in Uganda, is significant. In the early twenty-first century, both Mexico and the U.S. implemented laws granting gays and lesbians civil rights while the Ugandan government continued to criminalize same sex sexuality. The opening video thus sets the audience up to interpret homophobic violence as a spectacular event that occurs in so-called developing nations, like Uganda, rather than so-called developed nations, like Mexico and the U.S. However, Osornio’s discursive framing of Inferno and performative deployment of la bruja emphasizes the prevalence of homophobic violence in both Mexico and the U.S. As I will demonstrate, Osornio’s use of tropes of la bruja and brujería (witchcraft) allow us to trace homophobic violence as a legacy of European settler colonialism in both countries, which leads to my second argument, which builds on Osornio’s description of Inferno; that homophobic violence is a transnational and systemic phenomenon that often works in the service of hegemonic masculinity. My analysis of Osornio’s deployment of la bruja demonstrates how the entwinement of colonial racism and nationalism in Mexico and the U.S. motivates overlooking homophobic violence, albeit in different ways and for different reasons in either country.

By foregrounding the physical and psychological damage wrought by homophobic
violence, Osornio’s performance points to the fraught relationships amongst hegemonic, or normative, masculinity, racism, and debility. However, rather than recuperating the body debilitated by violence, I show how Osornio utilizes practices that he describes as being associated with popular magic in Mexico, including brujería, to mine physical and psychological pain as important sites of embodied knowledge. This chapter thus contributes to performance studies scholarship that examines the political connotations of re/staging social violence and/or the body in pain. I bring this scholarship together with gender and sexualities studies from Mexico and the U.S., Latin American media studies, and women of color feminisms to theorize Osornio’s monstrous embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography as tactics that invoke and refigure queer purgatory as a site of decolonial queer resistance.

Felipe Osornio “is a visual artist that specializes in performance art focused on themes like sexual dissidence and violence, sickness and death” (Osornio, “Lechedevirgen”). Born in Querétar o, Mexico in 1991, Osornio has made a name for himself locally as a public figure who challenges the status quo (see Ruiz). Osornio often uses his personal experiences of homophobia and living with end stage renal disease as raw material for his performances (see García; Martínez Pérez; Ruiz). A graduate of La Facultad de Bellas Artes de la Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro, Osornio is not only a prolific visual and performance artist whose work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, but a prolific writer as well. Among his influences, he lists Chicana feminist authors like Gloria Anzaldúa, queer performance artists based in the U.S. like Ron Athey, the international performance troupe La Pocha Nostra, Mexican performance artists like Rocío Boliver, and Mexican horror cinema (S. Lara). His artist website, in addition to

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3 “es un artista visual especializado en arte de performance, enfocado a temas como disdencia sexual y violencia, la enfermedad y la muerte” (Osornio, “Lechedevirgen”).

4 Department of Fine Arts at the Autonomous University of Querétaro.
archiving photo and video documentation of his performances, contains detailed blogs about
their production and reception, as well as links to critical essays and poems he has published in
anthologies on *cuir* (queer) theory and body-based art.\(^5\)

Critics usually refer to Osornio via his performance moniker, Lechedevirgen Trimegisto,
or Milkothevirgin Trimegistus, and Osornio credits his performances and much of his creative
writing to this name. Therefore, throughout this chapter, when I refer to Osornio within the
context of his performance art and writing, I use the acronym for Lechedevirgen Trimigisto,
LDVT. During an interview with Beto Ruiz for *Strambotix*, a website that features articles and
videos about alternative culture and entertainment, Osornio unpacked some of the meaning
behind the name, explaining that

The milk of the virgin is an alchemical concept, it was believed that if a virgin woman
was lactating, said liquid would have sacred and healing properties, Trimegistus is the
last name of the father of alchemy: Hermes Trimegistus. I chose these two concepts
because I believe that art is a process of profound transformations, such as alchemy,
which in fact, in some remote past, was considered to be “great art” or “real art” because
of the spiritual transmutations that it entailed.\(^6\)

It also should be noted that, when appropriated to refer to a self-identified queer man, milk,
virginal or otherwise, might invoke a different bodily fluid: ejaculate. This juxtaposition of text
with body not only queers the imaginary associated with the milk of virgins, which is populated

\(^5\) See [http://www.lechedevirgen.com](http://www.lechedevirgen.com).
\(^6\) “La leche de la virgen es un concepto alquímico, se creía que si una mujer virgen lactaba, dicho líquido tendría
propiedades sagradas y curativas, Trimegisto es el segundo nombre del padre de la alquimia: Hermes Trimegisto.
Escogi estos dos conceptos porque creo que el arte es un proceso de transformaciones profundas, como lo es la
alquimia, que de hecho, en algún pasado remoto, fue considerado como el “gran arte”, o el “arte real”, debido a las
transmutaciones espirituales que conllevaba.”
by young, sexually “pure” women, but appropriates the sacred and healing properties associated with the milk of virgins. When one considers the fact that the ejaculate of gay men in particular is associated with disease and death, this appropriation, which suggests the healing potential of queer sex, becomes particularly poignant (see Bersani).

LDVT’s understanding and deployment of art as an alchemic process is apparent in his use of symbols and rituals associated with “popular magic” in Mexico – Santería, curanderismo (folk medicine), shamanism – to address and transform the effects of homophobic violence and disease (Osornio, 22 Feb.). Catholic holy saints that double as references to indigenous spiritual practices, limpias (cleansings), and flesh piercings are regular features of LDVT’s performance repertoire. Similar to Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, LDVT claims that popular magic is akin to performance art, in that artists, similar to curanderos (healers), use creative, body-based methods to achieve their results (Ruiz; see also Gómez-Peña, Dangerous 232-233). This approach also informs LDVT’s performance pedagogy, which he has developed through a series of workshops entitled Alquimia del Cuerpo (Alchemy of the Body). During these workshops, participants learn to blend performance methodologies with occult practices “to recover the magical dimension of art” as a politically radical and transformative embodied phenomenon (“Alquimia”).

In this chapter, I investigate themes of popular magic and alchemy in LDVT’s performance art vis-à-vis his deployment of tropes of la bruja and brujería during Inferno. While the chapter centers on LDVT’s performance of Inferno at Rapid Pulse, I situate this work within his broader practice between 2015-2017. I draw from performance scripts, photos, and videos archived on LDVT’s artist website, critical essays and poems LDVT published that reflect his

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7 “busca recuperar la dimensión mágica del arte” (“Alquimia”).
aesthetic, political, and theoretical investments, and reviews of LDVT’s work published online. These archival materials are supplemented by Skype and in-person interviews with LDVT in both the U.S. and Mexico, as well as my field notes from Rapid Pulse and Homoccult 2.0.

In what follows, I describe how Inferno invokes queer purgatory to incite a critical examination of the cultural contexts and colonial histories that enable homophobic violence in Mexico and the U.S. While the main content of Inferno is based on LDVT’s experiences and observations of homophobic violence in Mexico, elements specific to its U.S. premiere at Rapid Pulse, including the participation of the largely U.S.-based audience in the performance, broaden its context to raise critical questions about gender and sexual politics in the U.S. I provide three sections of analysis, each of which center around LDVT’s deployment of popular tropes of la bruja and brujería to show how his monstrous embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography expose parallels amongst discourses and practices of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and ableism. In the first section of analysis, I argue that LDVT’s embodiment of la bruja shows how normative constructions of masculinity rely on the violent subjugation of femininity, particularly when it manifests in and through the bodies of Mexican women and gay and other queer men. In the process, LDVT points to how the misogyny underlying popular constructions of la bruja during the colonial period and in Mexican popular culture is replicated in homophobic rhetoric to justify violence against gay and other queer men to bolster patriarchy. I introduce the concept of becoming a monster as an analytic for understanding the dehumanizing effects of homophobic violence against gay and other queer men, which underscores the monster figure as a performative phenomenon. In the second section of analysis, I argue that LDVT implicates his audience as potential perpetrators of homophobic violence in a series of carnivalesque games that reflect and refigure the power dynamics instantiated during scenarios
of public mortification common during medieval period, during which *brujas* and other heretics were sexually humiliated, tortured, and executed. I then demonstrate how LDVT’s *alchemic aesthetics* transmute the embodied relations and cultural symbols produced during the games into sites of decolonial queer resistance that reveals how racism and nationalism entwine to authorize homophobic violence in the U.S. This is important because defanged narratives of queer life in the U.S. tend to ignore or minimize the roles that racism and nationalism play in homophobic violence. In the third section, I argue that LDVT’s anti-virtuosic performance of the Can-Can in the final scene of *Inferno*, which evokes medieval representations of the Witches’ Sabbath, highlights the fraught relationships amongst homophobia, hegemonic masculinity, and debility. As LDVT stumbles, falls, and is picked back up by performance volunteers, he opens up a space for the audience to consider our roles and responsibilities in navigating the debilitating effects of homophobic violence both at home and abroad. In conclusion, I trace the theme of *brujería* in LDVT’s recent performance, *El Árbol de Sangre* (2017), which underscores the relationship between embodied knowledge and debilitated states of being. I now turn to a brief discussion of queer purgatory that connects it to recent trends in gay and lesbian civil rights discourse in Mexico and the U.S.

Fanning the Flames of Purgatory: A Queer Response to the Outsourcing of Homophobia

LDVT performed *Inferno* during a propitious month for gay and lesbian civil rights in both Mexico and the U.S. On June 3, 2015, the Supreme Court of Justice in Mexico ruled that state bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. Just a few weeks later on June 26, 2015,

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8 *The Blood Tree.*

9 While the ruling officially recognizes same-sex marriage, it has not yet been fully implemented in each of the 31 states of Mexico. Same-sex marriage licenses are still rejected in most states (Bell), making it so that same-sex
the U.S. Supreme Court made a similar ruling, effectively legalizing same-sex marriage across the nation.\textsuperscript{10} LDVT’s performance at Rapid Pulse was staged between these two events, both of which generated international discussions of gay and lesbian rights infused with a spirit of hope and optimism. \textit{Inferno}, however, sends anything but a hopeful and optimistic message regarding the state of gay and lesbian civil rights. It instead highlights how homophobia continues to rend the day-to-day existence of many into a queer purgatory. This is emphasized in the very first scene of \textit{Inferno} with video footage of a very real, very gruesome assault on an “alleged” homosexual in Uganda, a horrific reminder of the extreme violence that gays and lesbians continue to face, even in the twenty-first century. Surrounded by a jeering crowd, the man’s body is consumed in flames, recalling the public execution of \textit{brujas} during The Inquisition. It is no coincidence, then, that homophobic murders such as this are frequently described as the results of anti-gay witch hunts on international news platforms. In 2014, the implementation of the Ugandan Anti-Homosexuality Act, which revitalized and extended British colonial law that criminalizes sodomy, fueled homophobic backlash across the country, including the public outing, hunting, and murder of gays and lesbians (Thapa). Although the law has since been rescinded, gays and lesbians in Uganda still face violence and discrimination at the hands of the state and homophobic vigilantes (ibid.). LDVT’s use of this video to frame a performance that interrogates homophobia in Mexican society thus raises some critical questions. What is the significance of highlighting homophobic murder in Uganda to breach a conversation about homophobia in Mexico? Furthermore, what are the political implications of highlighting couples must get a writ of amparo, or protection, from the federal government in order to officially ratify their marriages in such cases (“Mexico: Situation”).

\textsuperscript{10} In the ruling for Obergefell v. Hodges, the U.S. Supreme Court, relying upon the fundamental rights argument described in The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, extended marriage rights to same-sex couples across the country (Gerstmann).
homophobic violence in non-western nations during an international performance festival in the “heartland” of the U.S.? As my analysis will demonstrate, by framing Inferno with the video, then deploying tropes of la bruja to reflect homophobic violence in Mexico and the U.S. throughout the rest of the performance, LDVT challenges the tendency of either nation to overlook homophobic violence by emphasizing it as a phenomenon that occurs elsewhere, or at the very least that is committed by cultural outsiders.

The day following LDVT’s performance at Rapid Pulse, I attended a panel discussion at Hub11 entitled, “Performance, Activism, and the Politics of the Social Body,” which featured artists from the festival, including LDVT.12 Directly following the panel, which debated whether or not performance is a productive site for inciting social responsibility and activism, I conducted a short interview with LDVT about Inferno. During, I asked him why he used the video of the Ugandan man being murdered. I was disturbed by the graphic images of black-on-black violence, which, in the context of the U.S., are packaged and consumed as entertainment, used to reinforce stereotypes that position black men as naturally violent, and normalize acts of violence against black people (see Holland). LDVT replied, “I used the video to critique how Mexican media “outsources” homophobia by focusing on homophobic violence in third world countries […] this gets Mexico off the hook for homophobic violence still taking place on its soil.” LDVT’s response to my question, which did not resolve the friction I experienced while watching and reflecting on the video, generates an interesting parallel to queer theorist Jasbir Puar’s theory of “U.S. sexual exceptionalism” (Terrorist 3). Drawing from feminist scholar

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11 Hub is “a temporary space secured for the [Rapid Pulse] festival as headquarters, artist gathering place, and as a location for artist talks” and discussion panels (The Visualist). During this particular year of the festival, it was located at a former bicycle repair shop on Chicago Avenue near Defibrillator Gallery.
12 Other artists from the festival who participated on the panel were Mary Coble, Amitis Motevalli, Paris Legakis, and Yolanda Benalba. The panel was moderated by performance studies scholar Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson.
Inderpal Grewal, Puar argues that the U.S. positions itself as sexually exceptional by condemning homophobic and misogynistic violence in other nations, particularly those located in the Middle East, while “ignoring such abuses within its borders” (*Terrorist* 4). One could argue that this is a form of outsourcing homophobia in that Puar is referring to instances of homophobic violence that are packaged in mainstream news media as violent spectacles that occur elsewhere in less liberal, less developed countries, thus positioning the U.S. as sexually progressive, or exceptional, in contrast. Puar’s study shows us how U.S. sexual exceptionalism is deployed in mainstream media and politics to rationalize military intervention in the Middle East and heightened policing of communities of color in the U.S.

While there are no studies to date that highlight the outsourcing of homophobia in the mainstream news media in Mexico, scholarship on the effects of media reporting on gender violence in Mexico, as well as sociological studies on homophobic violence in Mexico, may provide some insight. In *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*, editors Ignacio Corona and Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba argue that mainstream media coverage of femicide in Mexico is represented as a violent spectacle for the public to consume, which leads to misinterpretations of the violence (6; 9). Often, the mainstream media’s coverage of the gruesome femicides in Juárez include details from the victims’ personal lives to suggest that they are to blame for their own murders. As Domínguez-Ruvalcaba points out in, “Death on the Screen: Imagining Violence in Border Media,” even

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13 When stories of femicide in Juárez finally made it to mainstream media outlets in the early 2000s, state spokespersons would emphasize whether or not the victims, a majority of whom were migrant workers employed in *maquilas* (factories), went out late at night and/or had sexually loose morals (Diebel; Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán). Subsequently, the term “maquiloca” began circulating to connote the sexual impropriety of maquiladoras (female factory workers) who did not adhere to traditional gender norms. This focus on the lifestyle and sexuality of the maquiladoras aided in framing the victims as somehow deserving of or at fault for the violence and deflected attention from the social and material conditions that enable femicide.
though the perpetrators of these murders are rarely caught, local news outlets often suggest that they are from elsewhere; migrant workers from rural communities of Mexico outside of Juárez, drug users, and cartel members (74, 76-77). National news outlets, in turn, depict border cities as sites of lawlessness that enable femicide and other types of criminal violence, thus positioning them on the margins of Mexican society (62-64). In either case, the blame for gender violence is outsourced to nameless, cultural outsiders. Outsourcing gender violence does not, however, produce Mexican sexual exceptionalism. It instead reinforces a climate of fear in the regions in which it is prevalent, which over time has given way to widespread fatalism wherein the public feels helpless to prevent gender violence and comes to view it as the norm (72). However, when stories of femicide circulate north of the border, they become fodder for discourses of U.S. sexual exceptionalism that seek to justify increased border surveillance and racial profiling of Mexicans, and Latin Americans more broadly.

Mainstream media coverage of homophobic violence in Mexico is less common, but not because the phenomena itself is. Despite legal advances in gay and lesbian civil rights, in 2015, Mexico was ranked as “the second worst country worldwide for homophobic crimes, after Brazil” (“Mexico No. 2”). According to Letra S, Sida, Cultura y Vida Cotidiana, a Mexican civil rights organization focused on the intersections of sexuality, health, and society, there were “1,310 homophobia-motivated murders in the country between 1995-2015” (Letra S; see also Del Collado). Drawing from Letra S’s report, la Comisión Ciudadana contra los Crímenes de Odio por Homofobia (CCCOH), an organization that assists the victims of homophobic hate

14 Letter S: Aids, Culture, and Everyday Life.
15 “In our most recent Report, we counted 1,310 murders motivated by homophobic hate in Mexico that were committed between the years of 1995 and 2015” (“En nuestro más reciente Informe, se contabilizan 1,310 asesinatos por odio homofóbico en México cometidos entre 1995 y 2015”).
16 The Citizen’s Commission against Homophobic Hate Crimes.
crimes and their families, claimed that 976 of the murder victims were men, 226 were travesti, transgender, or transsexual, and 16 were women (Pantoja). The numbers are likely higher; intolerance for sexual diversity, internalized homophobia, and fear of violent backlash contribute to the underreporting of these crimes (Del Collado). To make the situation worse, employees of the Federal Public Ministry of Mexico have refused to investigate cases of homophobic violence due to personal bias against the LGBT population (“Mexico: Situation”). Despite the fact that the Mexican national government has signed human rights treaties promising to protect LGBT citizens, neglect and discrimination at the state level, including police abuse of gay and transgender populations, compounded by widespread violence in areas occupied by the military and criminal organizations, make following through on this promise difficult (Dayan García García 69-70; Castillo, et al. 25). Thus, while homophobic hate crime is prevalent, it has been deprioritized in public discourse and mainstream news reporting, and its perpetrators are rarely held accountable for their violent acts.

Sociologist Efraín Rodríguez Ortiz argues that the impunity with which homophobic hate crimes in Mexico are committed ensures that they will be repeated. Furthermore, he argues that the homophobic construction of traditional (hegemonic) masculinity, or machismo, is the root cause of this violence, and that if we critically examine homophobic hate crimes, we will gain

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17 CCCOH claims that “the murders of lesbians are “underreported” because the media does not identify them as homophobic homicides, but as femicides” (Pantoja). The original text reads, “los asesinatos contra lesbianas están “subreportados” pues los medios de comunicación no los identifican como homicidios homofóbicos, sino como feminicidios.”

18 Rodríguez Ortiz writes, “since it is such an invisible phenomenon that the press scarcely accounts for this type of crime, the investigative authorities do not effectively attend to the cases, and in many cases the victim’s family prefers to forget the matter, so that impunity is the constant with its foreseeable consequence: the reproduction of the crime” (15). The original text reads, “ya que es un fenomeno tan invisibilizado que la prensa apenas si da cuenta de este tipo de crímenes, las autoridades investigadoras no atienden eficazmente los casos e incluso muchas veces los mismos familiares prefieren olvidarse del asunto, por lo que la impunidad es la constante con su previsible consecuencia: la reproduction del delito” (15).
insight into other forms of gender violence in Mexico, such as femicide. Rodríguez Ortiz claims that violence is widely accepted as a fundamental element of machismo and is thus naturalized as a response toward those who violate masculine authority and norms, such as independent maquiladoras and gay men.\(^{19}\) Outsourcing homophobia as well as other forms of gender violence functions then to protect the interests of patriarchy because it averts critical discussion of the role gender norms may play in its perpetration. Similar to public responses to femicide, the impunity with which homophobic violence is perpetrated generates fatalistic attitudes in LGBT populations, who come to view it as the norm (see Castillo, et al.). Yet, rather than reinforcing this fatalism by outsourcing homophobic violence, as LDVT claims the Mexican mainstream media does, *Inferno* brings it home so that we might critically examine it as a toxic effect of hegemonic masculinity.

As the video of a mostly male mob in Uganda watch the flailing body of an alleged homosexual man go up in flames, the flutes and horns in “Cruz Pesada” crescendo. This musical composition, written by Alberto Velázquez Collado for Catholic funeral processions during Holy Week, positions the victim as a Christ-like martyr innocent of wrongdoing, thus challenging the mob’s violent condemnation. LDVT thus appropriates a figure central to Catholicism, a religion infamous for fanning the flames of homophobia, to condemn homophobic violence. The music also connects this scene to Latin American context, where Holy Week funeral processions are

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\(^{19}\) Rodríguez Ortiz argues that, “violence is one of the fundamental elements in the construction of masculinity in its traditional version […] Homophobia is another important element in the construction of that masculinity” (15). He later draws parallels between the masculinist motivations for murdering women and for murdering gay men, claiming that, “both hate crimes, the misogynistic and the homophobic, have a sacrificial meaning. They require the sacrifice of the transgressor, to atone for their supposed guilt (22). The original text reads, “la violencia es uno de los elementos fundamentales en la construcción de la masculinidad en su versión traditional […] La homofobia es otro elemento importante en la construcción de esa masculinidad” (15) and “ambos crímenes de odio, tanto los misóginos como los homofóbicos, tienen un sentido sacrificial. Requieren del sacrificio de la transgresora o transgresor, para expiar su supuesta culpa” (22).
practiced annually. When the video ends and crossfades to the title screen for “A Mexican Horror Classic!” the Latin American context is further specified as Mexican. The music and video transition thus work together to bring the homophobic violence enacted in Uganda closer to home. When LDVT steps onstage, his forehead pierced in a crown of needles similar to Christ’s crown of thorns, he signals queer affinity with the Ugandan man and his own vulnerability as a queer man living in, as he describes it, a “homophobic climate.” LDVT then proceeds to perform a series of morbid variety acts that conjure the queer purgatory that gay men suffer in heteronormative societies, including the U.S. Indeed, while gay citizens in the U.S. have been granted some civil rights in the last decade, these rights do not fully extend to gay men of color and/or immigrants, who are frequently monsterized as violent sexual criminals deserving of violent punishment in popular culture and politics. As the performance proceeds, a voiceover by queer Chicano poet Yosimar Reyes compliments LDVT’s performative deployment of la bruja to emphasize the vulnerability of gay men of color and/or immigrants to homophobic violence in the U.S., highlighting the fraught intersections of racism and citizenship with gay and lesbian civil rights activism and discourse. The fact that the U.S. government often turns away gay refugees fleeing homophobic violence in Latin America also increases the chances that they will be victimized again upon returning to their countries. Therefore, while the performance is framed as a Mexican Horror Classic!, LDVT’s use of video montage and voiceovers implicate the role of the U.S. in perpetuating homophobic violence, at home and abroad. However, before delving deeper into homophobic violence in the U.S., I will first analyze LDVT’s embodiment of la bruja to demonstrate how he conjures and challenges the gender norms that render purgatory a queer reality in Mexico.
Embodying la Bruja: Feminist Collusions, Monstrous Becomings

“The monster stands at the threshold […] of becoming.”
- Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” 1996

A video projection of la reina bruja (the witch queen) from Caperucita y Pugarcito

Contra los Monstruos fades on, framing LDVT’s body as he steps up to the center of the stage. Augustín Lara’s voice croons over the house speakers, “Como dos puñales…” LDVT lip-syncs along while slowly raising one hand to his forehead to remove an acupuncture needle. Blood streams quickly in thin rivulets down over his eyebrows and into his eyes as a video montage of cinematic brujas projects through and around his body. With one hand on the microphone and the other on its stand, he swings his hips to pivot his body from one side to the other. The long, red ribbons attached to the sleeves of his shirt sway gently as he reaches an arm seductively toward the audience.

At first glance, LDVT’s masculine presentation contrasts sharply with the abject femininity of la reina bruja and the other brujas and bruja-like monsters that appear later in the video montage. However, the performative modes through which LDVT sets this contrast up connects the misogynistic treatment of indigenous women in popular Mexican culture, a legacy of European colonization reflected in the construction of las brujas from the video montage, to the homophobic treatment of gay and other queer Mexican men in the twenty-first century. Rather than reinforcing heteronormative understandings of gender that oppose masculinity to femininity, LDVT’s performance demonstrates how these oppositions are socially constructed and violently reinforced. In what follows, I show how LDVT becomes una bruja by initiating embodied transmutations through his use of the video montage, lip sync performance, and flesh

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20 Red Riding Hood and Tom Thumb versus the Monsters, directed by Roberto Rodriguez, 1962.
piercings. I argue that LDVT refigures the violent processes entailed in *becoming a monster* as tactics that resist the patriarchal subjugation of femininity, particularly as it is projected onto and/or manifested in the bodies of Mexican gay and other queer men. LDVT’s embodiment of *la bruja* thus fosters a feminist collusion between Mexican women and queer and/or gay men by disrupting the heteronormative gender and sexual roles that position them in antagonism to one another.

Tropes of *la bruja* popularized in Mexican horror cinema reflect European definitions of the monster that travelled to the Américas during colonization, in which she is described as a young, attractive, sexually promiscuous woman who uses magic to seduce and destroy men, or as an unattractive, older woman who uses magic to transform into a younger, more attractive woman in order to accomplish similarly deviant ends. Much of her power is attributed to her alchemic talents; *la bruja* can not only transmute her body from young into old, but from human into animal. She has the power to enchant both the living and the dead, as well as ordinary objects, and compel them to serve her at her bidding. Blood sacrifice, incantations, cannibalism, and herbal concoctions grant her supernatural powers. Women accused of *brujería* were charged with doing the devil’s work. They were blamed for causing male impotency (Asma 110), as well as illness, famine, and social chaos (Federici 44, 225-226). Witness testimonies of their participation in orgiastic rituals evidenced the depths of their depravity and collusion with the devil (Federici 194-196). Anthropologist Laura Lewis writes in *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico*, that during the Mexican Inquisition, *brujería* was widely associated with the spiritual and healing practices of indigenous and Afro-diasporic communities (see also Behar). The association of *brujería* with the practices of racial minorities was an import from Spanish colonizers who used it as a rationale for subjugating indigenous and
black people, which included forced religious conversion to Catholicism. This practice was mirrored during the colonization of New England when Puritans and other English colonizers rationalized the subjugation of Native Americans and black people, including forced religious conversion to Christianity, by conflating their cultural practices with witchcraft (see Godbeer; Poole). Chicana feminist Irene Lara claims that dominant cultural constructions of *la bruja* in Mexican and Chicanx culture, as well as in Latin America more broadly, were, and still are, used to invalidate indigenous and African *conocimientos*, or knowledge, particularly as it is considered the domain of women (4-6). Lara’s claims are reflected in historical records of colonial Mexico that conflate Vodou, Santería, and shamanism with *brujería*, and which figure the practitioners of these indigenous and Afro-diasporic spiritual traditions as malicious, spell-casting, hypersexual brown and black women who threaten patriarchal authority (see Behar; Lewis).

Sexualized and racialized tropes of *la bruja* are often deployed in classic Mexican monster films like those featured in the video montage of *Inferno*. Latin American media studies scholar Gustavo Subero argues that *las brujas* of the silver screen tap into misogynistic narratives of female sexuality dating back to the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Namely, those describing the life of La Malinche, an indigenous woman sold as a concubine to the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. La Malinche, named Malinal or Malintzin at birth, became Cortés’ translator, which aided him in his mission of conquering the Aztec Empire and consolidating Spanish rule of Mexico (Taylor, *The Archive* 96). Historical accounts and interpretations of La Malinche’s relationship with Cortés are contradictory; some describe her as a willing companion and aide to Cortés who betrayed her people, and others describe her as a slave Cortés raped and forced to work for him (see Franco). There are records that indicate La Malinche gave birth to a
son and that Cortés was the father (Franco 74). This led Octavio Paz, a prominent Mexican intellectual in the 1930s, to famously describe her as “our Mother, La chingada (the fucked one)” and claim that Mexicans are thus “the fruit of violation”” (qtd. in Taylor, The Archive 92).21 As a result of the popularity of Paz’s writing on La Malinche, she has often been positioned as a cultural traitor in the dominant Mexican imaginary; someone who slept with, aided, and abetted the enemy. This latter understanding of La Malinche functions to police the sexuality of Mexican women, as well as Chicanas, the latter whom are already positioned as traitors to Mexico, or vendidas (sellouts), by virtue of being born and/or living in the U.S. (see Alarcón; Gutierrez; Moraga, Loving). Subero’s research shows how Mexican cinematic tropes that signify la bruja’s monstrosity by coding her as indigenous and sexually promiscuous reflect dominant narratives of La Malinche. The films LDVT uses to make the video montage for Inferno utilize similar tropes to construct their brujas. Yet, cut up, respliced, and projected through and across his body, they work to connect misogynistic interpretations of La Malinche to homophobic violence against gay and other queer Mexican men.

On the projection wall behind LDVT, la reina bruja looms large on her throne, the high Victorian collar of her cape framing her dark green face. Her bejeweled, golden crown sparkles like the needles and blood drops marking LDVT’s forehead (see fig. 9). I interpret LDVT’s crown of needles not only as a signifier of his affinity with the alleged homosexual Ugandan man from the opening video, as I suggested in the previous section, but also of his affinity with la

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21 Taylor argues that this positions La Malinche “not as the source of mestizo identity but as the origin of Mexican self-hatred and racial violence,” and rechannels colonial racism as misogyny (The Archive 92; 96).
reina bruja in that it reflects, albeit in a distorted fashion, her crown. La reina bruja’s supernaturally dark skin, accentuated with the accoutrements of European royalty, conform with the cinematic tropes Subero describes. What is perhaps most monstrous about la reina bruja, however, is not her symbolic association with indigeneity, suggested by her dark skin color, and the colonization of Mexico, signified by her royal position and garb, but the power that she has over the rest of the monsters in the film, whom she mobilizes against innocent children like Caperucita and her friend Pulgarcito, thus threatening the future of society. Similar tropes are highlighted in the other films excerpted in the montage; brujas and bruja-like monsters are visually linked to Mexican indigenous cultures as a means of signifying their malinchismo, or their association with La Malinche, and they are shown colluding with other monsters and/or women. A clip from Alucarda\(^\text{22}\) shows the young Justine in her coffin after she is killed by Catholic priests who use the medieval torture method of witch-pricking to determine whether or not she is una bruja after she is outed as a lesbian. She awakens from the dead after her lesbian lover fills her coffin with blood, an act of brujería that invokes Aztec blood sacrifices practiced in precolonial Mexico (see fig. 10). Justine is then pictured wreaking havoc in a Catholic monastery.

\(^{22}\) Directed by Juan López Moctezuma, 1977.
with her lesbian lover. Tundra, the vampire priestess from *Santo contra Las Mujeres Vampiro*, uses a magic incantation to raise a group of vampire women from the dead and transform them from mud caked hags—a possible reference to the mud people of the Mayan creation myth, *Popol Vuh*—to femme fatales, who then seduce and destroy police officers and any other men who get in the way of their evil plans (see fig. 11). In these clips, indigeneity and female sexuality are coded as monstrous. Furthermore, relationships between and amongst women are represented as evil collusions against patriarchal authority, similar to the lesbian monsters of the classic Hollywood films discussed in the previous chapter. However, by visually aligning himself with *las brujas* and their monstrous cohorts, LDVT expands the breadth of their female-centered, anti-patriarchal collusions to include gay and other queer men.

Figure 10: LDVT and Justine from *Alucarda*.

The song LDVT chooses for his lip sync performance, “Como dos Puñales,” seems to counteract the feminist collusion his crown of needles and physical merging with the cinematic *brujas* suggests. Viewed through a heteronormative lens, the lyrics to “Como dos Puñales” position the singer as the victim of a deceptive female lover whose steely black eyes are like two daggers (“Tus ojazos negros, ojos de acerina […] como dos puñales/Your black eyes, eyes of

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23 *The Saint versus the Vampire Women*, directed by Alfonso Corona Blake, 1962.
steel [...] are like two daggers”). LDVT’s decision to lip sync the song to a backdrop of *brujas* who use magic to seduce and destroy men thus might be viewed as a confirmation of the stereotypes of female sexuality they reflect. However, lip syncing is widely associated with drag performance, which, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, plays on gender and sexual stereotypes to expose how they are socially and aesthetically constructed. In the case of lip syncing, the disembodied voice of the singer, coupled with the quavering lips and histrionic gesturing of the drag queen or king, works to underscore gender as a performative illusion by highlighting the gap between the drag persona and the person who performs it. As LDVT lip syncs to the song, seducing the audience with his own *ojazos negros* while turning from one side to the other to strike dramatic, statuesque poses, he drags the masculine persona constructed through the lyrics, marking it clearly as a performance. However, after wiping the blood dripping down his face with his hands, smearing it across his cheeks and shirt, he begins to more closely approximate the image of Justine awakening in her coffin of blood.

While “Como Dos Puñales” could easily be interpreted as a song about a sordid romance between a man and a woman, the song’s specific lyrics, coupled with the fact that A. Lara rubbed shoulders with openly bisexual and lesbian Mexican artists and musicians like Frida Kahlo and Chavela Vargas, and is considered a camp icon in Latinx nightlife culture, infuse it with a queer identity.
subtext (see Sandoval-Sánchez 145). In Mexico, puñal is synonymous with joto (faggot), a derogatory term for gay men (Carrillo, The Night 40). During a Skype interview with LDVT, he claimed that the queer connotations of a man being apuñalado (stabbed) by his lover was the reason he decided to use “Como dos Puñales” for Inferno (Osornio, 22 Feb.). As he explained it, the phrase apuñalar en la espalda (to stab someone in the back) doubles as a derogatory reference to penetrative anal sex between men in Mexico (ibid.). In other words, men who have sex with other men are back stabbers, or gender traitors who violently penetrate and thereby emasculate other men, making them feminine. This play on words is reflective of what Laura G. Gutiérrez describes as albur in her monograph Performing Mexicanidad: Vendidas y Cabareteras on the Transnational Stage. Albur, Gutiérrez states, is a type of “(homo)sexually inflected” “double entendre” specific to Mexico that was first popularized in the sardonic songs and monologues of women performers in teatro de revista productions of the 1920s (83; 106). It is a tactic used frequently in cabaret político, a “mixture of different early-twentieth-century performance practices that incorporated farce, parody, and satire as strategies of representation” cultivated in Mexico City by queer artists like Astrid Hadad and Jesusa Rodríguez to deconstruct and critique gender norms and political corruption (102). Similarly, LDVT deploys albur within a cabaret style performance to reappropriate and deconstruct homophobic discourses that position gay men as gender traitors in order to challenge the cultural norms through which they are perpetuated.

In LDVT’s poem, “Pensamiento Puñal” (“Faggot/Dagger Thought”), which he recites in a voiceover for a performance of the same title and in iterations of Inferno produced in Mexico, he claims:
“I am a Faggot/Dagger […] I am a traitor […] because I go against the natural law, the social order and good customs, because I penetrate men in the ass until they bleed.”

(Trimegisto).24

Here, rather than repent for his sexual sins, LDVT claims ownership of them. Since gay men are stereotyped as threats to good customs like machismo and heterosexual marriage, and by extension the social order of Mexican society,25 they are not simply gender traitors, but cultural traitors, like la Malinche. Also, like la Malinche, sexual penetration is the site at which their traitorous potential climaxes. Similar to the queer Mexican cabareteras (cabaret performers) from Gutierrez’s study like Hadad and Rodriguez, LDVT utilizes performance as a platform to resist dominant constructions of La Malinche that work to reinforce misogynistic gender and sexual norms (see Hadad; Rodriguez 231-234). Dissimilarly, LDVT’s dead serious delivery lacks the playful and satiric humor common in cabaret politico.

While the references to gay male identity and sexuality coded into “Como Dos Puñales” might be lost on those unfamiliar with Mexican sexual politics and vernacular, especially without the added context of the poem, LDVT’s embodiment works to drive them home on a visceral level. As he removes the needles, or tiny puñales, from his forehead, LDVT highlights the penetrability, or femininity, of his body, rather than its masculinity. Furthermore, his crown of needles also references BDSM practices that involve piercing and cutting the flesh, and thus might be interpreted as a subversive embodiment of queer pleasure that may or may not lead to

24 Soy Puñal […] soy traidor, por ir en contra de la ley natural, del orden social y las buenas costumbres, por penetrarles el culo hasta que sangran” (Trimegisto).

25 Carrillo writes that discourses of nationalism promoted by thinkers like Paz in the early 20th century emphasized defending good customs such as machismo and the institution of marriage to curb what they viewed as a U.S.-based cultural invasion following the Mexican Revolution (“Cultural” 224-225).
sex between and amongst men. Yet, during the same Skype interview cited earlier, LDVT emphasized that, rather than queer pleasure, his intention with the piercings was to symbolize the pain of what I term queer purgatory. As blood drips onto the flames of the Anima Sola card pinned to LDVT’s shirt collar, the connection between queerness and purgatory is underscored. According to homophobic interpretations of the Bible, gay men and/or queers must burn in purgatory until their sexual sins are cleansed, similar to the woman pictured in the Anima Sola card, or face suffering an eternity in hell. Yet, rather than wait for this punishment to be doled out in the spirit realm, some take it upon themselves to initiate it in here on earth by hunting down, humiliating, attacking, and sometimes even killing gay men and other queers.

The performative tactic of piercing or otherwise penetrating the flesh is not uncommon in the repertoires of feminist and queer artists, some of whom LDVT cites as influential. Mexican artist Rocío Boliver, aka La Congelada de Uva (The Frozen Grape), uses piercing and cutting to create strikingly morbid images that critique misogynistic attitudes toward female sexual agency and aging. Ron Athey, a U.S.-based queer artist, uses piercing, cutting, hook suspension, and other penetrative acts to address homophobic violence, including the U.S. government’s neglect of gay communities decimated by AIDS in the 1980s (see Doyle). In each case, the artist literally opens up her/his body to reflect the physical and psychological punishment of feminine and feminized subjects in patriarchal societies like Mexico and the U.S. In some of Athey’s performances, this punishment is in direct reference to the persecution of brujas. For example, in Judas Cradle (2004-2005), a performance collaboration with opera singer Julianna Snapper,

26 Boliver’s performance Between Menopause and Old Age, Alternative Beauty (2014) offers just one example from her practice that uses piercing and cutting to reflect and resist misogynistic stereotypes of older women (see https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/enc14-performances/item/2350-enc14-performances-boliver-menopause.html, accessed 3 Apr. 2019).
Athey anally penetrates himself on the medieval torture device for which the performance is named, a wooden pyramid that inquisitors forced *brujas* and other heretics to sit on in order to violently coerce them to confess to their alleged crimes (see Jones; Snapper).

As artists like LDVT and Athey remind us, people we would describe as gay or queer men in the twenty-first century, like *brujas*, both alleged and actual, were also punished for their gender and sexual transgressions during the colonization of both Mexico and the U.S.27 Like the British colonizers of New England, the Spanish colonizers of Mexico imported their own rules and regulations regarding gender and sexual norms and those who dared transgress them risked being charged with *brujería*. As Lewis notes, records of court trials conducted by Spanish officials during the Mexican Inquisition show that, while for the most part, indigenous and black women were incriminated for practicing *brujería*, men who engaged in same-sex sexual acts were also tried for and found guilty of *brujería* (112-113). In addition to their queer sexual practices, their association with femininity and/or feminine presentation, was cited as evidence that they were *brujas* (ibid.). The trial and executions of *brujas* in medieval Europe, particularly during the Inquisition, were replicated in European colonies in the Américas, including Mexico and New England. Women and men accused of *brujería* were tasked with proving their innocence before a crowd by enduring various trials by ordeal, such as walking over hot coals or getting submerged in a pool of holy water while their arms and legs were bound. Survival, of course, was nearly impossible given the conditions under which the accused were forced to

27 It is important to note that *Judas Cradle* was not merely a spectacular reflection of homophobic violence. As performance studies scholar Marla Carlson points out, Jones, who focuses on the “painful eroticism of the piece […]” never mentions the Abu Ghraib video projections that serve as background for the live performance,” which links homophobic violence to the sexual torture of ethnic minorities enacted in the name of the nation (114).
endure their torture. In many cases, those found guilty of *brujería* were sentenced to death by hanging, beheading, or, more infamously, fire.

Performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood, building on Foucault’s discussion of torture in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), describes medieval trials and torture methods as “theatres of death,” wherein “the state dramatizes its absolute power and monopoly on violence” via “awesome rituals of human sacrifice” that are “inserted within a cosmic spiritual drama of sin and salvation” (“Lethal Theatre” 466; 468). In the case of those being tried and tortured for *brujería*, theatres of death functioned as public performances that purged co-conspirators of the devil from society, confirming cultural norms and warning others against transgressing them. Thus, theatres of death are performances of waste with disciplinary aims. However, unlike those discussed in the previous chapter, these performances of waste do not simply represent deadly cultural purging, but *literally enact it*. LDVT’s embodiment of *la bruja* demonstrates how public performance continues to play an important role in disciplining, punishing, and purging those who transgress gender and sexual norms by connecting medieval theatres of death to homophobic violence in the twenty-first century.

As I noted earlier in this section, one of the essential qualities of *la bruja* is her alchemic talent, which includes but is not limited to her ability to transmute from old to young, human to animal, and vice versa. These performative acts make her legible as *una bruja* by flaunting her monstrous capacity to manipulate matter, including her own body. She is not monstrous in and of herself but becomes so via her embodied transmutations and other acts of magic, which evidence her evil (Subero 19). Here I would like to suggest that there is another site at which *la bruja* becomes legible as such; during medieval theatres of death which literally rend her human form into that of a monster through psychological and physical torture, which, by way of a circular
logic, works to confirm her monstrosity. LDVT’s performance reflects both of these processes of becoming a monster in order to subvert heteronormative gender and sexual norms and connect misogyny to homophobic violence in Mexico. By projecting brujas through and across his body, he initiates his own monstrous becoming. The queer subtext of LDVT’s lip sync performance further aligns him with brujas who, like gay and other queer men, become monstrous through their actions, particularly those that are perceived as sexually deviant and therefore traitorous to the nation. LDVT’s crown of needles and lip sync performance suggests that he too is una reina bruja, a subtle reference to drag queen performance that further unravels the masculine persona indicated by the lyrics of “Com Dos Puñales” and his vaquero (cowboy) attire. As blood drips from his wounds, LDVT becomes abject and monstrous, similar to la bruja during medieval theatres of death, and the classic Mexican horror films in which her deaths are restaged.

It is significant here that, in addition to referencing the trials by ordeal that brujas were forced to endure during the Inquisition, LDVT conjures the suffering of Christ. By blending the imagery of these figures across his body, LDVT condemns homophobic violence as akin to the persecution of Christ but does so without disavowing his queer affinity with brujas and the indigenous and black women they represent in colonial narratives of Mexican history and horror cinema. He therefore repurposes Christ iconography, often deployed to justify the persecution of queer people, to launch a feminist critique of homophobic violence in the twenty-first century. Violence against gay and other queer men, like violence against indigenous and black women, should be condemned as horrific like the violence done to Christ. LDVT thus brings queer purgatory home to Mexico, fostering feminist collusions that challenge the patriarchal subjugation of feminine and feminized subjects, which was normalized during the colonial period. However, LDVT simultaneously sets up the primarily U.S.-based audience to outsource
homophobia to Mexico, a dynamic he exacerbates then disrupts in a series of interactive, carnivalesque games to further examine the violent legacies of colonization, as I will show in the next section.

Alchemic Interventions: Transmuting Queer Purgatory into a Site of Queer Resistance

“I am the alchemic Faggot/Dagger, because I am forged between politics and magic.”
- Lechedevirgen Trimegisto, “Pensamiento Puñal,” 2012

As the final bars of “Como Dos Puñales” fade to silence, LDVT sets a plinth on the stage then places two jalepeños on its surface. Nick Anderson, co-founder of Glasgow’s performance festival Buzzcut and another guest artist of Rapid Pulse, walks up from behind the audience in a black and white tuxedo suit and pauses to the right of the stage. Anderson’s voice booms, “Good evening ladies and gentlemen and everyone in between!” He then invites two volunteers who “have a relationship with masculinity” to participate in a match of arm wrestling with LDVT, who stands stage left facing the audience. A muscular man in a white t-shirt and jean shorts with a buck knife clipped to the belt loop, and a tattooed woman in a blouse and skirt, both of whom bear phenotypic markers of whiteness, volunteer to participate. Anderson explains that the loser of two out of three games in each match will have to eat a jalepeño. Both volunteers easily beat LDVT within the first two games. When LDVT eats the first jalepeño, his bloodied face turns even more red. As he lifts the second jalepeño to force it into his mouth, his arm shakes.

In this section, I show how LDVT brings queer purgatory home by inviting the audience to participate in carnivalesque games that reflect and refigure scenarios of public mortification staged during medieval theatres of death. I then argue that LDVT’s alchemic aesthetics, which

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28 “Soy Puñal alquímico, por ser forjado entre la política y la magia.”
draw from syncretic tactics used in popular magic, transmute the embodied relations and cultural symbols invoked during and after these games to reveal how white normativity authorizes homophobic violence in the U.S. In conclusion, I suggest that these transmutations refigure queer purgatory into a decolonizing site of queer resistance that breaches national borders. First, I turn to a brief discussion of scenarios of public mortification in order to situate my analysis.

Medieval theatres of death often included the enactment of what I describe as scenarios of public mortification. Here, I define public mortification as the practice of humilitating and/or physically torturing a person before an audience in order to punish and purge them of sin. The psychological and physical forms of public mortification practiced during the European Inquisition operated in tandem with one another to dehumanize those accused of brujería and other heretic acts, and were replicated in Mexico and the U.S. in order to reinforce the cultural hierarchies set into play during scenarios of colonial encounter. During scenarios of public mortification, brujas were publicly humiliated before jeering crowds as inquisitors read accounts of their crimes, often with great attention to salacious details, as well as when they were stripped naked so that inquisitors could search their body for signs of evil, like the Devil’s Mark. Against many odds, they were then expected to prove their innocence, as I noted in the previous section, and if they could not, they were physically tortured, oftentimes to death.

Performance studies scholar Marla Carlson draws attention to a different kind of medieval scenario of public mortification, one in which participants voluntarily subject

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29 In Mexican and U.S. horror films, the spectacular forms of violence developed and enacted during the medieval period, particularly during the European Inquisition, are largely associated with the persecution of women accused of brujería and/or sexual nonconformity. It should be noted, however, that purging religious and ethnic minorities was the primary motivation for the Inquisition in several countries. In Spain, inquisitors sought to purge Jews and Muslims in order to ensure the predominance of Catholicism. In England, inquisitors sought to purge Wiccans and other pagan spiritual practitioners in order to ensure the predominance of Christianity. As medieval feminist scholar Silvia Federici argues, this enabled the government to expropriate the lands of those imprisoned and/or executed during the Inquisition (68).
themselves to physical torture before an audience in order to protect and bind their communities.

In *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists*, Carlson notes how penitents of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe participated in flagellant processions to stave off the plague and “atone for sins in preparation for the end of the world” (108). While this “mass mobilization of lay piety […] presented a challenge to ecclesiastical control and a source of disorder,” local communities generally welcomed the flagellants, and “the rituals quite literally dissolved boundaries and spectators were moved to join the group” (109). Carlson argues that performance artists like Athey invoke a similar sense of community through the “performative suffering” evoked through piercing, cutting, and other painful acts, which enables them “to form connections with other people” (125). Furthermore, these tactics provide a means for marginalized artists and social groups who are subjected to regular social violence, or who are living with debilitating disease, to “attempt to control bodily experience through volitional pain” (124). When LDVT reflects and refigures medieval scenarios of public mortification in the performance, he invokes the suffering caused by homophobic violence and invites social bonding via empathetic engagement with this suffering. In the process, he blurs the boundaries between these two displays of suffering to incite audience accountability for homophobic violence, thus taking control of his embodied experience through the staging of volitional pain.

While the arm-wrestling matches staged during *Inferno* seem like a far cry from medieval scenarios of public mortification, they generate painful physical consequences for LDVT that are symbolic of the torture of *brujas* commonly associated with the Inquisition. Like *brujas* forced to endure trials by ordeal in order to prove their innocence and avoid additional torture, such as death by fire, LDVT must compete in the arm-wrestling matches to demonstrate his relationship
to masculinity. If he wins, he demonstrates a heteronormative relationship to masculinity, which is characterized by physical domination and mastery, and gets to avoid the fire of the jalepeño. When LDVT loses both matches without posing a formidable challenge to either of his opponents, his relationship to masculinity is codified as feminine, and thereby queer. As the audience claps and laughs after each game, they simultaneously cheer the victors and ridicule LDVT, the loser. However, the audience response recalls homophobic bullying wherein gay and other queer men are publicly ridiculed for being excessively feminine according to heterosexual gender norms. One might also interpret the volunteers as bullies rather than simply honest victors of the match in that they literally have LDVT’s blood, which he repeatedly wipes from his eyes with his fingers during each game, on their hands after arm wrestling him. By positioning the U.S. based audience as bullies, the game reverses the trajectory of outsourcing homophobia set up in the beginning of the performance and brings it back home.

After the victors of the arm-wrestling match return to their seats, Anderson summons three men, also bearing phenotypic markers of whiteness, to the front of the stage. They each hold red gasoline cans given to them prior to the performance. LDVT stands in the middle of the stage facing the audience, arms extended at his sides. After directing the men to line up their cans in front of the stage, Anderson tells them that one actually contains gasoline. He then asks one of the men to pick a number between one and three. “Two,” the man replies. Anderson begins counting, “One, two…” then picks up the can in the middle of the lineup and hands it to LDVT, who sets it down on the stage next to his feet. Lux Occulta’s sensuous gothic ballad, “Yet Another Armageddon” (2014), plays on the speakers as LDVT removes his clothing and boots while swinging his hips slowly to the rhythm. Once he is completely nude, LDVT picks up the can, raises it over his head and pours out its contents while slowly shimmying up and down.
Yellow liquid mixes with blood and drips down his torso and legs as he squats to pick up a box of matches. LDVT stands, pulls out a single match, lights it on the side of the box, then drops it on his head. Lucky for him, this can is not the one filled with gasoline. After a moment, he puts out the small match burning on top of his soaked pate with his palm, turns again toward the audience, which has remained silent during his strip tease, and claps his hands. Following his cue, the audience claps. LDVT bows and spins around to prepare for the next act.

This second game restages a common medieval scenario of public mortification—death by fire—which, from the beginning of the performance is connected to homophobic violence in the twenty-first century. While it could be argued that the game simply reinforces the purgatorial reality that homophobia produces, it is important to consider the modifications LDVT makes to this scenario before doing so. LDVT chooses to remove his own clothes and pour the contents of the gas can over his body. Rather than an angry mob, he strikes the match and attempts to light his own body on fire. By performing the above actions while shimmying slowly to the rhythm of the music like an exotic dancer, he underscores how scenarios of public mortification, designed to inspire the loathing of brujas, gay men, and other culturally marginal subjects, work to further sexualize their victims. The forced stripping, examination, and/or display of their bodies for consumption by an audience, lewd steps toward proving and purging the world of their sinful ways, turns them into erotic spectacles, as Conquergood argues. Such displays of the body echo the historical dynamics of staging cultural otherness for the entertainment and education of white citizens in the U.S., exemplified by the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. During the World’s Columbian Exposition and other fairs like it, “white U.S. citizens could

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30 Conquergood writes, “Executions encouraged spectators to gaze intently at the body on display and granted extraordinary ritual license for the condemned, especially if they were women, to make spectacles out of their bodies” (“Lethal Theatre” 471).
compare their culture to other villages from around the world,” which were depicted as exotic and primitive to reinforce narratives of colonial conquest (Brooks 15). Not coincidentally, it was during such fairs that burlesque, an antecedent of striptease performance, as well as other kinds of variety acts, were first introduced to a U.S. audience. LDVT’s striptease performance thus highlights his position as an exotic and primitive cultural other within the dominant U.S. imaginary. By restaging the scenario of public mortification as a striptease performance, LDVT suggests that homophobic violence is a horrific effect of suppressed queer desire while simultaneously inviting the audience to view his body as an object of queer desire. When he asserts control over his body, he opens up a space to imagine a different outcome to medieval scenarios of public mortification aimed at punishing and purging sinners. In the process, he disrupts the colonial gaze that haunts histories of performance in the U.S., which works to objectify and symbolically subjugate the bodies of cultural others. After putting the match out, LDVT directs the audience to applaud this feat of survival. Today, he is the winner in this game of chance.

Although LDVT pours the contents of the gas can over his body and strikes a match to set himself on fire, the audience volunteers are complicit in this potentially suicidal action. They follow Anderson’s order to supply the gas cans and choose which one LDVT will use in his striptease. If they refused, they would violate the logic of the game and potentially disrupt the trajectory of the performance. Like good volunteers, they stick to the audience contract and follow along, even with the knowledge that one of the cans supposedly contains gasoline. It is important here to consider the demographic of the volunteers; they are all phenotypically white, U.S. citizens. Interestingly, one of the volunteers, Charles L. Rice, is an out gay artist, and another, Bow Ty, is a genderqueer artist. Both of them are regular participants in LGBTQ art and
performance events in Chicago. Thus, the choice of volunteers raises important questions about the complicity of white gay men in homophobic violence against gay men of color.

In the U.S., like in Mexico, instances of homophobic violence are rarely addressed in mainstream news or politics. When it is, the victims featured are usually white gay men, and the perpetrators are constructed as individuals who act alone and beyond the purview of the state. Yet, not only do gay men of color also suffer from homophobic violence, it is often sanctioned or overlooked by the state because of their status as racial and/or ethnic minorities. ICE detention of undocumented immigrants hailing from majority non-white countries and police racial profiling places gay and other queer men of color in contexts where their chances of becoming victims of homophobic violence is increased (see Stanley and Smith). Since it is difficult to document homophobic hate crimes enacted or enabled by state officials, and because homophobic hate crimes are not recognized as such in every state, they are underreported. Gays and lesbians of color are statistically less likely to report homophobic hate crimes, which suggests a fear of revictimization by or mistrust of law enforcement due not only to the prevalence of homophobia, but of racism, within its ranks (see Marzullo and Libman 11). These factors combined make homophobic violence against people of color invisible to the broader public, supporting the illusion of U.S. sexual exceptionalism, which, by design, benefits white citizens, both straight and queer, as Puar argues (Terrorist 127). The gender and racial composition of the game works to remind us of this; although one of the participants is gay and another is genderqueer, they are all white, or at the very least pass as white. The volunteer who guesses the “correct” number, the number that corresponds with the position of the can containing the gasoline, would be designated as the winner according to the logic of games of chance. In other words, the volunteer has something to gain from LDVT’s continued mortification; the title of “winner,” which
connotes superiority. However, it is LDVT, a brown gay man from Mexico, who “wins” the game, disrupting the expected outcome of this public scenario of mortification. In the process, he becomes even more monstrous. However, LDVT utilizes his monstrous body as the base material of his alchemic aesthetics, which work to transmute the queer purgatory materialized during the games into a site of decolonial queer resistance.

Alchemy, often referred to as the precursor of modern chemistry, is largely understood as a pseudoscientific field of study concerned with the transmutation of base metals into precious metals. It was also concerned with the transmutation of the human body into a more pure and perfect form through the development of elixirs and medicines derived from primary substances thought to have magical properties (Hyde). Hence the belief that healing and protective properties could be extracted from the milk of virgins, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter. In either case, the basic intent of alchemy is to transform a base material (lead; breast milk) into one that is viewed as more precious, or valuable (gold; healing elixir). Somewhat ironically, while medieval alchemists of Europe were often charged with being “devil-worshipping sorcerers,” many drew from Biblical concepts such as the Eucharist as inspiration for their experiments and were members of the Catholic clergy (“History: Ancient”; see also Hyde). I am interested here in thinking more broadly about the term “base” in order to theorize LDVT’s alchemic aesthetics as a monstrous performative tactic. While in alchemy base refers to the principal element or ingredient of something, secondary definitions of the word describe it as that which is immoral, invaluable, and/or inferior. In a homophobic climate the bodies and practices of gay men are understood as base, and the punishment for their baseness renders them even more so, as LDVT’s performance makes abundantly, even painfully, clear. It is this secondary understanding of the word that I see as operative in LDVT’s alchemic aesthetics,
although it is not unlinked from the former. Indeed, the blood of gay men is base in both senses of the word; while it is a primary substance of their body, it is also associated with HIV/AIDS, which, according to homophobic rhetoric, is a consequence of queer, or immoral, sexuality. In a series of tableaux vivants following the games, LDVT transmutes his “base” body through subversive appropriations of Western European masculine iconography to demonstrate how white normativity produces queer purgatory.

Kneeling with his back to the audience, LDVT reaches behind the stage, picks up a pair of football shoulder pads and puts them on. Flamenco guitar music fades on as he reaches to the side of the stage to pick up a pair of red pom-poms. A photo of the sculpture Atlas of Rome holding the weight of the celestial spheres on his shoulders fades onto the projection screen as he turns around (see fig. 12). While directing his gaze at the audience, who remain silent, LDVT raises his pom-poms to his shoulders, mimicking Atlas. The photo crossfades into one of The Discobolus of Myron, another sculpture from the Classical Period. The voice of Chicano poet Yosimar Reyes booms over the speakers, “For colored boys who speak softly, I would crucify myself like Christ…” LDVT turns to the side and raises a pom-pom like the discus in the sculpture as the photo fades into an image of a realist painting of Jesus Christ nailed to a
cross. He faces the audience again, stretching his arms out horizontally with the pom-poms. Reyes continues, “Let my blood purify and sanctify these words […] Letting the people know that the messiahs are here, that we are all messengers, even though we embody the word queer…”

When LDVT puts on the football shoulder pads, they emphasize the vulnerability, rather than the invulnerability, of his body, the most sensitive and intimate parts of which remain uncovered and open to further mortification. By repurposing the shoulder pads thusly, and then accessorizing with the pom-poms, accoutrements of the feminine sport of cheerleading, LDVT disrupts football’s association with USAmerican machismo, which, similar to Mexican machismo, is characterized by physical strength, aggression, virility, the devaluation of femininity, and a will to dominate. The gender performances of cheerleaders are meant to celebrate and contrast with those of the football players. However, when LDVT wears these objects simultaneously, he queers the gender binary they are designed to uphold. When he transmutes his body into reflections of *Atlas of Rome* and *The Discobolus of Myron*, he connects the gladiator-like sport of football to these ancient representations of ideal masculinity. While on the one hand, LDVT’s appropriation of these images bring to the surface their homoerotic associations, on the other, the contrast generated by his monstrous femininity as he slips around on the stage covered in bodily and other fluids serves as a reminder of the ways in which they are deployed in the service of white normativity. As art historian Kate Nichols argues, “it’s important to think about who’s excluded” from these classical depictions of ideal masculinity, understood more broadly as depictions of the ideal human (see “How Classical”). Historically, they have been interpreted by white Europeans as evidence of their biological and cultural superiority to non-Western people and civilizations (ibid.). Their aesthetics and the white
supremacist ideologies they birthed were imported to the Américas during European colonization and were used to set up a dehumanizing contrast between people of color and/or women, depicted as monstrous primitives, with the white masculine, or human, ideal. The U.S., rather than an exception to is the embodiment of such cultural imperialism, as is suggested by LDVT’s queer deployment of the football shoulder pads during his embodied transmutations, which connects the national sport to gender norms that uphold white masculinity as the human ideal.

LDVT’s irreverent appropriations of white masculine iconography embody what postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha terms “colonial mimicry.” Colonial mimicry, Bhabha argues, occurs when the colonized embody the cultural norms of the colonizers, presumably in order to assimilate (127). Bhabha argues that colonial mimicry is “at once resemblance and menace” because it reflects the colonizer through the body and behavior of the colonized subject that he is defined against, and thus might be interpreted as mockery (ibid.). Muñoz builds on Bhabha’s theory by showing us how queer artists of color deploy colonial mimicry as a disidentificatory performance tactic (Disidentifications 77-78). Similarly, LDVT’s alchemic aesthetics deploy colonial mimicry as a means of disidentifying with the white masculine ideal that effeminate queer men and/or men of color are simultaneously expected to and prohibited from living up to. His bloody, brown, and effeminate body, scantily clad with a gender dissonant blend of sports gear, provides a queer reflection of the projected images, transmuting their white aesthetic into kind of camp performance that borders on mockery and edges toward blasphemy in the tableaux vivant that follows.

When LDVT spreads his arms, pom-poms in hand, like the projection of Christ crucified, he suggests a connection between Christianity and white cultural imperialism. As discussed in the previous section, Western European colonizers used Christianity as a vehicle through which
to enforce gender and sexual norms and to suppress indigenous and Afro-diasporic cultural and religious traditions in the Américas. However, by cuing the audience to connect the suffering of Christ to *brujas* and gay men from the first act of the performance, LDVT highlights a different way of understanding the intersections of gender, sexuality, and race in Christian iconography. The funeral march soundtrack for the Ugandan man being burned to death and LDVT’s crown of needles point to parallels between the Stations of the Cross and scenarios of public mortification. Like *brujas* and gay men, Christ was publicly humiliated, spat on and jeered at, then crowned with thorns, stripped naked, and forced to endure the torture of being whipped and nailed to a cross until his death. When LDVT transmutes into a queer Christ-like *bruja*, he underscores these parallels between the Stations of the Cross and scenarios of public mortification, which are, at first, only suggested by his crown of needles. Yet, whereas Christ becomes a religious martyr via his suffering, *brujas* and gay men are made into monsters through theirs. Furthermore, Christ’s executioners are positioned as the embodiment of sin within the Bible, while the executioners of *brujas* and gay men were positioned by Christian authorities as manifestations of the right hand of God.

Framed by Reyes’ poem, this tableau vivant indicates that gay men of color, particularly those who speak softly, or are effeminate, are messianic despite, and possibly because of, their queerness. As LDVT’s arms begin to shake from fatigue, rustling the tufts of the pom-poms, Reyes continues, “centuries ago we were shamans and healers […] highly respected by villagers,” villagers later coerced by colonizers into “believing that boys like us are a manifestation of the devil.” LDVT’s and Reyes’s appropriation of Christ crucified thus alchemize as an act of decolonial queer resistance to violence against gay men of color. This appropriation is reminiscent of the syncretic tactics that shamans and healers from across the
Américas have deployed from the colonial period up until the present day, wherein Catholic saints are transmuted into covert representations of indigenous and Afro-diasporic deities, prayed to and used in healing rituals and other acts associated with popular magic. Religious syncretism is used to resist forced religious conversion and maintain pre-colonial spiritual and ethnic identities that European colonizers associated with brujas and brujería. Similarly, LDVT’s alchemic aesthetic transmutes Catholic iconography into a simultaneous representation of and resistance to queer purgatory.

Using Christ’s crucifixion as a metaphor for queer purgatory is a prominent theme in visual art by gay Mexicans, as sociologist Edward J. McCaughan’s essay “Art, Identity, and Mexico’s Gay Movement” shows us. McCaughan argues that gay Mexican artists appropriate images of Christ and other prominent Catholic figures and symbols to critique “the church’s hypocrisy and complicity in homophobic violence” and to create “visual worlds in which one might inhabit gay, Mexican, and Catholic identities simultaneously” (92). LDVT’s alchemic aesthetic performs a similar intervention. However, rather than a specifically Mexican context, LDVT’s queer transmutation of Christ iconography emphasizes a transnational context. Reyes’s poem, in addition to making the performance more accessible to an English-speaking audience, works to foreground similarities between the experiences of gay Mexicans and gay Chicanos. Both groups are stigmatized as cultural traitors for being gay and failing to live up to dominant ideals of masculinity, and both have been denied a place in official narratives of history, as Reyes’s claims later in the poem. The artists’ use of Christ iconography shows how their experiences of homophobia are linked in ways that breach the national borders meant to keep

31 During a Skype interview LDVT told me that he used Reyes’s poem in lieu of “Pensamiento Puñal” for this purpose (22 Feb).
them apart. The performative suffering re/enacted during *Inferno* works thusly to forge cross-border, cross-cultural connections.

The visual and textual references that constitute LDVT’s alchemic aesthetic suggests an affinity not only between gay Mexicans and gay Chicanos, but gay Mexicans and gay men of color more broadly. The title for Reyes’s poem, “For Colored Boys Who Speak Softly,” plays on the title of an anthology of short stories by and about black and Latino gay men living in the U.S. entitled, *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Still not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home* (2012), which is yet another play on the title of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* (1974). *For Colored Girls* tells the story of seven women of color struggling to negotiate the intersecting forces of racism and sexism. It was famously adapted for the Broadway stage in 1976 and for a film directed by Tyler Perry in 2010. Similarly, the stories in *For Colored Boys* address the intersecting forces of racism and homophobia. It was conceived and edited by political commentator and professor of African American studies Keith Boykin, who found it troubling that in the same year the *For Colored Girls* film released, the mainstream media and “larger community” paid little attention to the alarming number of “young black gay men [who] were literally committing suicide” (xiii). The anthology thus highlights another violent consequence of homophobic bullying that remains largely invisible when its victims are gay men of color – suicide. Boykin continues, “men of color – especially gay men of color – must speak out and share our stories of how we have faced obstacles in our own lives (xiv). Boykin argues that having access to such stories can inspire hope in young gay men of color and impart crucial knowledge and tactics for overcoming the obstacles they face as racial and sexual minorities living in the U.S. It is my argument here that LDVT’s alchemic aesthetic does something similar
by transmuting the effects of queer purgatory, made visible on and through his body, into a
critique of the social dynamics, histories, and symbols that work to ensure it is a continued
reality for gay and other queer men of color.

Furthermore, LDVT’s alchemic aesthetics work to transmute the white box gallery, a
space that has historically privileged white heterosexual male artists and Western aesthetic
practices in the U.S., into one that privileges the experiences and aesthetics of queers and/or
artists of color. This is in line with the mission of the queer performance artist and director of
Defibrillator, Joseph Ravens, who was inspired to open the gallery after having his nude self-
portraits pulled from an exhibition that he was invited to participate in at Outlet in downtown
Chicago because the building manager, Bruce Lord, felt they were “inappropriate” to display in a
public space (see Isaacs). Similar to the founders of WOW discussed in the previous chapter,
Ravens is interested in providing space for marginalized artists to make performance uncensored.
While Defibrillator does not explicitly privilege queer, lesbian, transgender, and/or women
artists, it regularly supports international artists from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern
Europe who make politically radical and experimental queer work, including that which traffics
in between the sacred and the profane, like *Inferno.*

As the performance proceeds, LDVT removes the shoulder pads, places them on the
stage, sits on them, then rests his chin on his pom-pommed fist to mimic a photo of Auguste
Rodin’s sculpture *The Thinker* while Reyes’s recorded voice recites the final words of his poem,
“For colored boys who speak softly, I will die in silence knowing that the beauty in our color
stands defiant to a racist, sexist, and homophobic GOVERNMENT!” *The Thinker,* an icon of
Western rationalist thought, was designed to be part of Rodin’s unfinished sculpture, *The Gates
of Hell,* at which he was to sit observing the circles of hell (Musée; Rodin). However, since it is
exhibited as a work of art in and of itself, this latter detail is often missing from popular interpretations of the sculpture. As LDVT sits, his body silhouetted by *The Thinker* and enshrouded in Reyes’s poetry, he reemphasizes the importance of observing hell and refocuses it as a meditation on the social conditions and systems that enable and encourage homophobic violence in the U.S. While at times painful, we must critically examine homophobic violence if we are to understand how we are each accountable to and affected by it differently, and so that we might transmute its traumatic residues into embodied knowledge and new tactics of decolonial queer resistance.

**A Choreography of Commotion: Debility and/as Embodied Epistemology**

“Faggot/Dagger does not unite, does not seek to make bonds, it seeks to break, it seeks to separate, like the knife that enters the skin and leaves a deep wound, it seeks to tear to open the way to something new, the new blood gushing red, because from the separation of the skin into two originates the scar, scar that unites both continents, new skin, darker, healthier, more resistant.”

- Lechedevirgen Trimegisto, “Pensamiento Puñal,” 2012

As the image of *The Thinker* fades to black, LDVT sets the shoulder pads and pom-poms to one side of the stage and picks up a bucket, some towels, and a spray can of black paint from the other. After placing the items by his side, he kneels and unfolds the towel to remove a small square stencil of the word “joto,” an epithet for gay men common in Mexican and Chicana culture. A black slide with white type that reads, “I want you to call me faggot,” an English translation of the title of Reyes’s poem “Quiero Que Me Llames Joto” fades on in the background. As Reyes speaks the first lines of the poem, an English translation projects in the background: “I want you to call me faggot, not with guts or hatred, but with love and

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32 “Puñal no une, no busca hacer lazos, busca romper, busca separar, como la navaja que entra en la piel y deja una herida profunda, busca desgarrar para abrir camino a algo nuevo, a la sangre nueva brotando a borbotones rojos, porque a partir de la separación de la piel en dos se origina la cicatriz, cicatriz que une ambos continentes, piel nueva, más oscura, más sana, más resistente.”
LDVT uses the black spray paint to stencil “joto” onto his chest, belly, and legs, then sets it to the side. He removes another stencil of the word “faggot” from the folds of the towel and sprays the word onto his arms, neck, and face. Covered in epithets, he then sprays the black paint all over his body until his skin becomes a splotchy, murky grey. IC3PEAK’s ethereal electronic ballad “Take My Hand” fades on as LDVT dips one of the white rags into the bucket, which is filled with water, then gently washes his face. He begins crying and his gentle washing becomes scrubbing. His crying turns into wailing and then into screaming as he keeps scrubbing his body, the towel now yellow and dripping with water.

In this section, I analyze the culmination of LDVT’s embodied transmutation during la limpia (the cleansing) described above, which invokes ritual healing practices associated with Mexican popular magic, in particular curanderismo. I argue that LDVT’s ecstatic emotional meltdown during la limpia functions to highlight the intersections amongst homophobia, hegemonic masculinity, and ableism. I draw from disability performance theory and dance theory to interrogate these intersections further during my analysis of the final act of Inferno, an anti-virtuosic performance of the Can-Can dance that evokes medieval representations of the Witches’ Sabbath. I then suggest that LDVT’s in/ability to perform the steps of the dance raises critical questions about the political economy of healing bodies debilitated by homophobic violence.

As discussed in the section outlining the history and representation of la bruja, indigenous and Afro-diasporic spiritual and healing practices were disavowed and, in some cases, outlawed during the colonization of Mexico and the U.S. I. Lara claims that, in order to “validate the benefits and wisdom of the healing knowledge of curanderismo” in particular,

33 “Quiero que me llames joto. Pero no con coraje y odio sino con amor y compassion.”
“binary split between “bad” brujas and “good” curanderas” was fabricated (16). Curanderismo, broadly understood, is a syncretic and holistic healing system that varies from region to region in Latin America and parts of the U.S. (Maduro 868-869; see also Alvarez-Sesma; Trotter). It includes “a mixture of beliefs” and practices derived from “Aztec, Spanish, spiritistic, spiritualistic, homeopathic, and modern, “scientific” medicine,” and in the context of Mexican and Mexican American communities, “early Judeo-Christian healing traditions […] Old World medicinal plants and magical healing from Medieval witchcraft” and Native American and African medicinal traditions, amongst others (Maduro 869; Trotter 130; Alvarez-Sesma “Curanderismo, the Healing Art”). Curanderismo is used to treat disease caused by “strong emotional states,” “lack of balance or harmony inside and outside a person,” dislocation of body parts, and “diseases of magical or supernatural causation” (Maduro 870). Citing Chicana novelist and scholar Ana Castillo, Lara argues that brujas are constructed as practitioners of “black magic” and “sexual witchcraft” in ways that reinforce racist stereotypes of indigenous and black women, while curanderas, or female healers, “are de-sexualized” and constructed in accordance with the gender norms of marianismo (ibid.). Subero describes marianismo, or marianism, as a feminine code of conduct in Latin America that draws from conservative Catholic interpretations of the story of the Virgin Mary to promote “sexual purity, selflessness and blind devotion to husbands and sons” (23; 112). Through his analysis of Mexican horror films, Subero shows us how marianismo is often contrasted with its traitorous counterpart, malinchismo. Brujas and other female monsters who embody traits associated with malinchismo are positioned as evil threats to female protagonists who conform with the gender and sexual norms of marianismo, who are positioned as good (Subero 23-24). This is similar to how lesbian monsters are positioned as threats to good, or heterosexual, women in classic Hollywood cinema, discussed in
the previous chapter. As Lara points out, both *la bruja* and *la curandera* draw from similar practices and belief systems that “view the body, mind, and spirit as integrated” (16). Lara suggests that Latinas reconcile the false split between *brujería* and *curanderismo* by taking on a “bruja positionality” that asserts feminine sexual knowledge and power as important aspects of spirituality and healing. I extend this concept to position LDVT’s performance of *la limpia* as an embodiment of a queer *bruja* positionality that initiates a symbolic healing of the psychic wounds caused by homophobic violence.

*Limpias* are cleansing rituals performed by practitioners of *curanderismo* to treat trauma resulting from physical and sexual abuse or death in the family, addiction, and ailments caused by energetic imbalances and disharmony (Alvarez Sesma “Healing the Heart”; “Curanderismo Healing”). Eggs in the shell are placed on the body, sage and other consecrated plants are swept across the body, and herb infused water is used to wash the body in order to heal it from and cleanse it of negative energies and spirits (Alvarez Sesma “Healing the Heart”; see also Ortíz Moreno). *Limpias* are often performed in conjunction with prayer and song and are part of ancient Mexican ritual practices that are as diverse as the cultures of Mexico (Alvarez Sesma “Healing the Heart”; Ortíz Moreno). As mentioned earlier, LDVT applies knowledge and practices derived from Mexican traditions of popular magic like *curanderismo* to the medium of performance art. LDVT claims that, while he “can’t cure anybody,” he can “function like a guide for those who decide to undertake the journey to learn to cure themselves” (Trimegisto, “Brujería D.I.Y.”).34 When LDVT paints his body with the words “joto” and “faggot,” words meant to

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34 The full sentence reads, “My field is art, I have magical powers, I cannot cure anyone, however I can function as a guide, so that those who decide to can take the road to heal themselves, like I am in the process of doing” (“Mi campo es el arte, yo tengo poderes mágicos, no puedo curar a nadie, sin embargo puedo funcionar como un guía, para que quienes decidan emprender el camino aprendan a curarse a sí mismos, como yo estoy en proceso”).
humiliate gay and other queer men and shame them for their sexual desire and perceived effeminacy, his body is rendered even more abject and monstrous. In this way, LDVT makes visible the trauma caused by homophobic language, often used prior to and during homophobic assault. When he blots the words out with additional paint, his skin appears bruised, or like it has been exposed to the smoke of a fire, which conjures the beatings and immolation gay and other queer men are subject to during homophobic assaults. Reyes’ poem, a kind of queer prayer that recuperates “joto” as an endearing term used amongst gay Mexicans and Chicanxs, works to counteract the violence of the word, enacting the verbal component of la limpia as LDVT cleanses his body of the effects of homophobia with water.

As a member of the audience, I was moved by LDVT’s bold reappropriation and transmutation of homophobic language. However, when he began crying, I found myself skeptical of what I initially interpreted as an over-the-top, theatrical performance of emotional pain. Here rather than generating communal intimacy, LDVT’s embodiment of pain worked to create a momentary distance, at least between he and I. Interestingly, the visual indicators that LDVT was in physical pain or discomfort, such as his bleeding forehead, reddened face, sweat, and shaking body, did not incite such friction in me. In fact, I admired the valor with which he endured his trials by ordeal; it suggested to me a virtuosic mastery of the body. The crying, and then the wailing and screaming, however, was disturbing to me. While I could appreciate the messiness of his physical breakdown, the messiness of his emotions, genuine or not, struck an unpleasant chord.

In retrospect, I wonder if my aversion to what I understood then as an excessive, public display of emotion could be the result of my cultural upbringing in a white patriarchal environment. In such a context, one is expected to constrain, or appear to be constraining,
negative emotions when they surface, particularly those that communicate weakness and vulnerability. This is especially so for men in this context, who are expected to have complete control of their bodies. The masculinity, or manliness, of those who cannot control their bodies and emotions is called into question. Not only does white masculine hegemony promote homophobia, but it also promotes a not so subtle form of ableism, or the privileging of able-bodied people, in its devaluation of physical weakness and/or lack of control over the body and emotions. LDVT’s ecstatic emotional meltdown thus generated a productive friction that invites critical examination of connections amongst homophobia, hegemonic masculinity, and ableism.

LDVT’s staged emotional breakdown reflects symptoms of mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that result from experiencing or witnessing an extremely traumatic, tragic, or terrifying event. For those who suffer from PTSD, reminders of a traumatic event can trigger an emotionally painful, and in some cases even a debilitating, state of mind in which one relives it. Limpias, which are sometimes conducted to treat mental and physical trauma, including that which results in PTSD, sometimes evoke painful emotions so that the patient can release them (Alvarez Sesmsa “Healing the Heart”). In the case of LDVT’s performance, la limpia works to highlight how homophobic violence not only affects the physical body negatively, but one’s mental health as well, signaled by his emotional breakdown, and offers a possible antidote to these painful conditions. However, LDVT’s limpia does not ultimately cleanse him of the pathology resulting from homophobic violence, but rather works to inflame it as the performance continues.

With his skin cleansed of the words and blood, LDVT turns, shaking, to the audience and glares at us. He then stands up and folds the towel over his arm like a matador, pauses, wraps it around his head like a turban and sticks out his buttocks, pauses, folds and ties it around his face
like the bandanas worn by Zapatista revolutionary soldiers, pauses, wraps it around his head like a veil and spreads his arms out, palms facing forward, like the Virgin Mary. Moments later, two topless women wearing ghoul masks and leopard print pants walk up to either side of LDVT from behind the stage. They each wear pageant sashes, one that reads “Miss Ogyny” and another that reads “Miss Anthropy.” While LDVT stands facing the audience, Miss Anthropy places the mask of a demon-clown on his head. The Swans song fades out and Jacques Offenbach’s high energy composition for the Can-Can dance, “Infernal Gallop” (1858), blasts from the house speakers. LDVT and the ghouls, arms locked, begin kicking their legs sloppily and out of time. The ghouls’ breasts and bellies and LDVT’s penis flop around grotesquely. LDVT stumbles and teeters sideways, breaking away from the trio. He sits down on the floor abruptly, chest heaving, and spins around on his buttocks as the ghouls dance off to other parts of the gallery. He rises onto his knees and falls to the side and slides around the slippery floor, rises onto his knees again, and then sits back down as the music continues to play (see. fig. 13).

During the tableaux vivants following la limpia, LDVT appears even more agitated than before. His excessive emotionality signifies the opposite of the white masculine ideal he mimics and queers in the tableaux vivants from earlier in the performance. By repurposing the towel used in la limpia to transmute into various ethnic stereotypes, LDVT seems to confirm the pathology projected onto queer people of color such as himself, which is used to justify and/or dismiss the trauma caused by homophobic and other forms of systemic violence in the U.S. For example, men of
color are stereotyped as over emotional and predisposed toward violent rages, which police and immigration officers frequently cite as rationale for detaining them and using excessive and even deadly force to do so. In the scene described above, LDVT transmutes into a hypermacho Latino, signified by the matador persona, an emasculated Muslim man, signified by the turbaned persona in a sexually suggestive pose, an indigenous insurgent, signified by the Zapatista-like persona, and a sacrilegious queer, signified by the nude, genderbent Virgin Mary persona. These personae represent stereotypes of queer people of color that position them as pathological subjects—sexually, violently—that are and/or can be broken with impunity—psychologically, physically—in the U.S., particularly by white men with authority backed by the state and dominant society. In his critical essay, “Pornoválidos y Minusgráficos,” LDVT claims that body-based art is a prime site to “decentralize the idea of the “healthy and complete body” as the hegemonic body,” the latter which he characterizes as white, rational, heterosexual, and able, a human ideal that invalidates the knowledge and experience of all other bodies (138). When LDVT transmutes into these various personae, he expands the feminist collusion between brujas and gay men set up at the beginning of the performance to encompass a host of other queer subjects pathologized by the white colonial gaze. In the process, he decentralizes the “hegemonic body” and reclams the subversive potential of stereotypes meant to police brown queer bodies like his.

As LDVT and the volunteer ghouls begin dancing, they recall paintings and textual descriptions of the Witches’ Sabbath during the medieval period. Brian P. Levack, a scholar in U.S. and European history, notes in his essay, “The Horrors of Witchcraft and Demonic

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35 “Perhaps body art is the most appropriate space for inserting new possibilities of corporal modification that decentralize the idea of the “healthy and complete body” as the hegemonic body” (“Quizá el arte del cuerpo es el espacio más acertado para insertar nuevas posibilidades de modificación corporal que descentralicen la idea del “cuerpo sano y complete” como el cuerpo hegemónico”).
Possession,” that the Witches’ Sabbath was described as a large gathering in which witches, or *brujas*, “worship the Devil as their god” and “engage in activities that reversed all of the moral norms of society” (923). These activities included but were not limited to “promiscuous and sometimes incestuous sexual intercourse (both heterosexual and homosexual) with other witches and demons, dancing naked in an indecent manner,” as well as infanticide and cannibalism (924). The sensationalist imagery conjured by such descriptions were captured by European painters like Francisco Goya and Cornelius Saftleven, among others, which are reflected and refigured in this final scene of *Inferno.* While LDVT and the ghouls do not engage in promiscuous or sexually abusive behavior, prior to their dance there are plenty of references to queer sexualities, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, are historically conflated with promiscuous behavior and incest in the U.S. Furthermore, LDVT’s and the volunteers’ monstrous appearances and partial to full nude dancing could be framed as indecent, like the dances of the Witches’ Sabbath. However, the campy names on the ghoul’s pageant sashes suggest that this diabolic fantasy is the product of a misogynistic and misanthropic mindset. When the two female ghouls join LDVT onstage and claim him as one of their own by putting the demon clown mask on him, the audience is reminded, once again, of the extreme loathing of feminine and feminized bodies in patriarchal societies, which position them as incomplete and vulnerable to penetration, or domination.

When the first notes of “Infernal Gallop” sound and the trio begin dancing the Can-Can, their grotesque movements, accentuated by the fanged, unflinching smiles of their masks, seem to emphasize the diabolical sexuality associated with the activities of the Witches’ Sabbath. Indeed, the title of the song literally conjures hell and the diabolical. Interestingly, the Can-Can,

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36 See for example, Goya’s *Witches’ Sabbath* (1798) and Saftleven’s *A Witches’ Sabbath* (1650).
which first “emerged in working-class dance venues […] on the outskirts of Paris in the late 1820s” was considered indecent by the bourgeoisie because when female dancers kicked their legs up it revealed their undergarments (Parfitt-Brown 10; Rearick 33). However, its sexually suggestive choreography and working-class origins ensured its continued popularity in France following the Revolution and later around the world (Parfitt-Brown 13-14; Rearick 33). As LDVT and the ghouls kick their legs up, they reveal more than undergarments; their partial and full nudity and jiggling sexed parts accentuate the pleasurable indecency associated with the dance. However, the imprecision of their movements combined with their garish faces generates a jarring effect, and not necessarily a pleasurable one, which is exacerbated when LDVT fails to keep up with the ghouls and nearly crashes to the floor.

As LDVT spins, sits up, and falls down, remaining momentarily on the floor, he defies the precision with which dancers of the Can-Can are expected to perform the dance. In a sense, he enacts what dance theorist André Lepecki describes as “the betrayal of the bind between dance and movement” (1). In his monograph, Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement, Lepecki argues that the binding of dance to movement is “aligned with the production and display of a body and a subjectivity fit to perform […] unstoppable motility,” an alignment that is bound up in ideals of progress, citizenship, and masculinity in white Western cultures (3). When LDVT breaks with the Can-Can choreography, slowing down to perform movements not altogether recognizable as dance and even stopping movement altogether in some moments, a possible result of the physical weakness and discomfort caused during the preceding trials by ordeal, he suggests modes of “rethinking action and mobility” that do not rely on “continuous movement” (15). Slowing down the Can-Can, the traditional choreography of which is high energy and requires the dancer to be physically fit according to normative
standards, centers it around what appears to be his debilitated body, sunk to the floor, exhausted after its continuous mortification. This exhaustion was possibly compounded by the emotional weight of *Inferno* and LDVT’s then status as someone living with end-stage renal disease. As LDVT noted of a previous iteration of *Inferno* staged that same year in Tijuana, that the added physiological stress of having changed medication for his kidneys the day prior left him nearly incapacitated toward the middle of the performance (Trimegisto, “Inferno en Tijuana”). His slowing down and lack of movement thus raises questions about the relationship between the compulsion to action and mobility associated with dance and physical ability. Meanwhile, as LDVT remains on the floor, his dance partners kick across the space, seemingly unaffected by his debilitated state.

While performing such a strenuous dance following live bloodletting, or even after changing one’s medication, might seem irresponsible, it could also be viewed as a refusal to relinquish public performance as a platform fit only for so-called healthy and able bodies. I thus interpret LDVT’s anti-virtuosic performance of the Can-Can as a gesture toward a “choreography of commotion” that centers bodies unable to and/or uninterested in maintaining the movement protocols and aesthetic standards associated with the able body. I take the concept of “commotion” from Carrie Sandahl’s and Philip Auslander’s introduction to the anthology *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, in which they claim that, “despite the fact that disability is a ubiquitous, even mundane, human experience, people with visible impairments almost always seem to “cause a commotion” in public spaces” (2). While LDVT

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37 LDVT writes, “me han cambiado el medicamento para los riñones, razón por la cual llegué a Tijuana con la presión” (“I had changed medication for the kidneys, which is the reason why I arrived in Tijuana with low blood pressure” (Trimegisto, “Inferno en Tijuana”).
might not be categorized as disabled, per se, his bloody, debilitated state, which disrupts the
traditional choreography of the Can-Can by placing the injured, exhausted body front and center,
definitely has a commotive function. I therefore see LDVT’s anti-virtuosic performance of the
Can-Can as an extension of Sandahl’s and Auslander’s theory that foregrounds the commotion
caused by bodies that have been debilitated, psychologically and/or physically, by socio-political
violence.

In her second monograph, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*, Jasbir Puar
distinguishes debility from disability, defining the former as “injury and bodily exclusion that
[is] endemic” and the latter as that which is broadly understood as “epidemic or exceptional”
(xvii). This distinction provides her with a conceptual framework through which to critically
examine the political economy of debility. For example, in the State of Israel, Israeli citizens
with disabilities are granted civil rights while the soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces are
literally directed to maim and incapacitate Palestinians viewed as imminent threats to the state,
including Palestinian women and children (129-131). The State of Israel is thus able to claim that
it supports the rights of disabled citizens while actively debilitating ethnic minorities. This
mirrors U.S. practices of ignoring the connection between homophobic violence in ICE detention
centers on its national borders while holding up homonormative subjects as valuable citizens
deserving of basic civil rights. When we are forced to examine the bodies of those debilitated by
socio-political violence, when we are confronted with their pain, it creates a commotion. Their
embodied difference not only disrupts spaces that accommodate able bodies but serves as a
reminder of the high costs of the rights and privileges reserved for proper citizens, including
those who are sexual minorities and/or are disabled. LDVT’s choreography of commotion enacts
this double-threat by centering the non-normativity of the debilitated body after highlighting our
complicity in the violence through which it is produced. It asks us, how does outsourcing homophobia work to cover up the long-term effects of systemic violence against gay and other queer men, particularly gay and queer men of color, who have little recourse to a state that presumes their criminality? Furthermore, what might the restaging of homophobic violence teach us about its debilitating afterlives? Sandahl and Auslander note that, in addition to “disturbance” and “unruliness,” commotion means “moving together” (10). Could it be that LDVT’s choreography of commotion is an incitement to move together with him through and beyond the horrors of queer purgatory? If so, what then?

The garish, fanged maw of LDVT’s demon-clown mask grins unflinchingly at the audience as the lights black out. Applause and hoots erupt in the darkness. As the lights are turned back on so that he and his fellow ghouls can take a bow, I cannot help but wonder what exactly it is we are celebrating. LDVT appears to be worse for the wear. The promise of healing suggested by la limpia has been forestalled. Or perhaps LDVT is suggesting a different way of understanding healing, one that does not seek to erase pain or its debilitating effects on the body but points to it as a potential source of knowledge and empowerment. In the process of becoming la bruja, LDVT resists the outsourcing of homophobia by bringing the pain of queer purgatory home. In so doing, he connects the struggles of gay and other queer men of color to others who are pathologized for their embodied difference and practices, further expanding the feminist collusions fostered in previous acts to foster a transnational critique of white patriarchal social norms and systems of governance. However, LDVT’s embodiment of the pain caused by queer purgatory simultaneously warns against romanticizing its epistemological and empowering potential to the point of forgetting the terrible reality that it reflects, in which the lives of gay and other queer men of color end violently and too soon. In refusing the audience closure by
remaining in his debilitated state, LDVT points to the embodied knowledge produced by and through physical and psychological injury, knowledge we are denied when homophobic violence is ignored, covered up, and outsourced.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have described how LDVT deploys tropes of *la bruja* to conjure queer purgatory as a site of critical reflection on and resistance to the outsourcing of homophobia, particularly in so-called developed nations like Mexico and the U.S., which works to avert attention from and accountability for the violence homophobia incites within their own borders. I show how LDVT thus uses performance as a platform for sharpening the fangs of LGBTQ politics and representation by using his body to make visible the social and systemic violence that queer people, particularly gay and other queer men of color and/or immigrants, must negotiate as part of their survival. I argue that LDVT illuminates homophobic violence as a transnational phenomenon rooted in a misogynist loathing of feminine and feminized cultural others. In order to make my case, I provide a close analysis of *Inferno*, paying special attention to the intercultural dynamics that are produced by staging it before a U.S. based audience. Combined together, my analyses of LDVT’s monstrous embodiments, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography emphasizes the importance of continuing to question the terms by which gays and lesbians are granted civil rights, indeed humanity, in the twenty-first century. While these terms vary from nation to nation, some of them remain consistent across borders; gays (and lesbians) who are viewed as especially threatening to the patriarchal order of society are made into monsters that can be stripped of their basic human rights and even their lives. Over the course of the performance, LDVT demonstrates how we are each implicated in and accountable
to social and systemic forms of homophobic violence. While painful, we must critically examine its root causes if we ever hope to stop it. As Carlson proposes, “pain is unique among sensations, not because it is inexpressible or radically unshareable, but because it creates an urgent need to communicate things to which no one is eager to listen” (2). During Inferno, LDVT offers monstrous performative tactics for mining the embodied knowledge produced by the debilitating pain caused by homophobic violence and refigures it as mode of communicating across lines of gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and ability. Although the pain LDVT reflects and reproduces is not resolved by the end of Inferno, the breaching of cultural and national borders throughout embody its utopian potentiality.

Following Inferno, LDVT produced a series of performances that documented and theorized his experience living with end stage renal disease. While the figure of la bruja was not directly present in these works, symbols and practices of popular magic remained central in the composition of each performance. While perusing my Facebook feed over coffee one morning, I was struck by a photo of LDVT pictured in a review for his performance El Árbol de Sangre by Juan Rojas in AM Querétaro, a periodical based in Querétaro that reports on local, national, and international news. LDVT is on his knees on a raised stage surrounded by red toxic waste garbage bags that are filled with an undisclosed substance and sealed shut. He is wearing a white hazmat suit unzipped to his waist and revealing part of his torso, which is smeared with a red liquid. His arms are spread horizontally, bent at the elbow, one hand facing up, as if in supplication, the other limp at the wrist and facing downward. Performed December 17, 2017 at Museo de la Ciudad de Querétaro,38 El Árbol de Sangre explores the “altered physical and

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38 Museum of the City of Querétaro.
psychic states”\textsuperscript{39} that the artist experienced while receiving hemodialysis, a treatment that drains the blood, purifies it of toxins, and reintroduces it intravenously to the body when the kidneys can no longer perform this function (Trimegisto, “El Árbol”). LDVT wrote the text for the performance during hemodialysis, video images of which are projected in the background throughout the performance. The image pictured in the review was taken after a performative simulation of the hemodialysis, in which LDVT drains large tubes filled with stage blood into a clear container. He then uses the stage blood to perform \textit{una limpia}, the aftermath of which is pictured in the photo. The staging of \textit{la limpia}, the entirety of which is documented in a video posted on LDVT’s website, is uncannily similar to that performed just before the final scene of \textit{Inferno}. However, while the latter was staged to address homophobic violence against gay and other queer men, the former addresses the artist’s personal experiences and transformations directly in relation to living with end stage renal disease. As I watched LDVT wash himself in stage blood after performing a poetic text he wrote during hemodialysis, I could not help but think of the effect of homophobic fearmongering during the initial HIV/AIDS outbreaks in both Mexico and the U.S. Their blood already presumed to be contaminated with HIV/AIDS, gay and other queer men were refused treatment due to medical officials’ fears of contracting the disease, or they were treated inhumanely due to medical officials’ prejudices against same sex sexuality. During \textit{la limpia} LDVT washes his body with stage blood that is symbolic of the toxified blood removed from his body during hemodialysis. Yet, if the hemodialysis already functions to cleanse the body of toxins built up in the bloodstream, what then is being cleansed during \textit{la limpia}?

\textsuperscript{39} “estados físicos y psíquicos alterados.”
In the text recited during *El Árbol*, LDVT explains that, during hemodialysis, his story is deleted along with all of his memories of the stories of others, leading him to describe the experience as not only the death of his own person, but as one of living the end of the world inside his body (“El Árbol”). In an interview with Ana Noriega, LDVT likens the pain, fear, and uncertainty of such an experience to “the chaos of the current world” which he claims is “reflected in the sick body.” Knowledge of this interconnectedness is embodied and accessed while LDVT is having his lifeblood, a base substance of his physical being, drained out of and pumped back into him by a machine. Again, LDVT turns to the debilitated body as a site for interrogating the social and material conditions under which we live. What might we learn about the current state of the world by listening to the knowledge gained from the bodies of those who tread the edges between life and death on a regular basis? Diseased bodies? Debilitated bodies? Queer bodies? Perhaps the answer to this question is contained in another posed by LDVT, “We live while we die, like a bonfire that burns while it is consumed, and the only thing left to ask ourselves is what we are going to do here NOW” (García). For LDVT, the answer to this question seems to lie in continuing to make art and performance that interrogates how we understand the limits of the human body, particularly in relation to the categories of gender, sexuality, death, and debility. For academic scholarship, I suggest that the answer, or answers, lie in continuing to develop research that uses a transnational queer lens to critically examine the

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40 “Y en su torrente se disolvió me conciencia […] en su torrente se borró mi historia […] Yo viví el fin del mundo, en mí” (“And in its torrent my conscience dissolved […] in its torrent my history was erased […] I lived the end of the world, in me”).

41 LDVT explains that “el caos del mundo actual también se ve reflejado en el cuerpo enfermo” (“you can also see reflected in the sick body the chaos of the current world”).

42 “Vivimos mientras morimos, como una hoguera que arde mientras se consume, y lo único que queda es preguntarse que es lo que vas a hacer aquí AHORA” (García).
historical and contemporary relationships that reinforce the borders that demarcate these categories, or that bind them together.
CHAPTER THREE

On Being a Siren of the Undertow:
Trashing Transgender Stereotypes, Respectability, and Desire in
Sofia Moreno’s Divas

Monsters are real and sometimes they wear vintage Chanel.
-Sofia Moreno, Facebook post, Oct. 31, 2014

I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster.
-Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,”
1994

Yo, reinvindo mi derecho a ser un monstruo
ni varón ni mujer […]
que otros sean lo Normal
(I reinvoke my right to be a monster
neither man nor woman […]
let others be Normal)

It is approximately 10:30pm, on April 11, 2014. Sofia Moreno, a Chicago-based,
Mexican-born transfeminine visual and performance artist, pauses and stares quietly at us, her
audience for the evening. Tonight, we gather in the living room of her second story apartment
around a make-shift stage built for Divas from the Underground, a multi-media, cabaret-style
event inspired by Moreno’s experiences working as an exotic dancer at a transgender club in San
Francisco named Divas Nightclub and Bar. Her dark brown eyes peer out from behind a skintight
mask made from black plastic garbage bags (see fig. 14). Twisted black tentacles hang from her
chin. Wisps of her black hair, most of which is piled on top of her head in a haphazard bun,
frame her creaturely face as she plucks, stuffs into her mouth, and slowly chews red rose petals
from a plastic wrapped bouquet cradled in her arms. The black and white kimono she was
wearing just moments ago is strewn across the stage and covered in petals that have oozed from
her mouth. As she feeds messily on the bouquet, petals accumulate in clumps around her feet,
which are tightly bound in black electrical tape, making them pointy, like fins. Black electrical
tape also covers her breasts in scaly zig zags. The only article of clothing she has on is a black, lacey g-string.

In this opening performance of *Divas*, Moreno embodies one of her many iterations of the siren, a monstrous sea creature that symbolizes the danger of female seduction. Structured as a striptease, Moreno’s performance adapts elements of the Classic Greek Myth of the Sirens to challenge popular media representations that position transwomen as hypersexual monsters, pointing to how they stem from and reinforce the transphobia and racism endemic to U.S. culture. Moreno’s performance explores what it means, culturally and personally, when one’s body and identity is understood as monstrous. Throughout this chapter, I show how Moreno’s embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography refigure this negative stereotype to produce queer affect and relations that communicate the pleasures and possibilities of being a transgender monster. I argue that Moreno’s performance of the siren embodies a transfeminist ethos that critically reflects and resists the quotidian violence that transwomen of color, in particular, are subject to, despite recent changes in public attitudes toward transgender people. In an era when gender and sexual minorities are encouraged to assimilate into dominant society, to defang our politics, practices, and presentations of self, performances of transgender monstrosity like Moreno’s offer blueprints for building queer worlds beyond its purview. This chapter, therefore, not only contributes to the fields of performance and transgender studies, but to the growing sub-

Figure 14: Moreno as the siren during *Divas*. 
field of queer nightlife studies, which explores how LGBTQ subjects engage in practices of worldmaking in gay bars, queer dance and sex clubs, and house parties (see Buckland; Green; Johnson “Feeling”; Manalansan; Rivera-Servera; Stryker “Dungeon”; J. Wilson). My approach centralizes the cultural contributions of transwomen of color to queer nightlife scenes, which frequently go unrecognized and/or are credited to white cisgender gays and lesbians.

Historically, scenarios of encounter between transwomen and heteronormative subjects position them as dangerous threats that must be eradicated in order to preserve society. From the character Buffalo Bill in the blockbuster horror movie Silence of the Lambs (1991), who kills women and skins them to make a bodysuit, to news reports of men who use the “trans panic defense” to justify their murderous behavior, transwomen have been represented again and again as sexually perverse monsters that can be killed with impunity, indicating a high threshold of tolerance for violence against transgender people in the U.S. I argue that Moreno’s adaptation of the siren’s mythology calls attention to and refigures the symbolic and physical violence that marks the bodies and identities of transwomen of color. Rather than follow recent trends that focus on generating normative representations of transwomen to mitigate and gain the sympathies of a largely hostile public sphere, Moreno rearticulates the siren to accentuate her bodily difference as monstrous in ways that resist such pressures to conform.

Beyond critiquing transphobic culture, Moreno’s performance offers a critical, sex positive imaginary that centers transwomen of color in their difference. Her trashy aesthetics signify not only transgender monstrosity, but her affinity with a specific demographic of transwomen of color; sex workers, who are deemed trashy given dominant cultural attitudes which regard their profession as immoral and in bad taste. Throughout her performance, Moreno recuperates trashiness as glamourous, as a D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) aesthetic practice fit for a diva.
Transwomen who do sex work often accentuate, rather than hide, their bodily difference, which affirms their purported trashiness and sometimes evokes dominant cultural discourses that emphasize their bodily difference as evidence of an inauthentic gender, or the failure to pass. Moreno accentuates her bodily difference and history as a sex worker through her trashy embodiment of the siren. As the striptease unfolds, her sloppy, grotesque movements and flat affect, critical elements of what I describe as her anti-virtuosic choreography, resist the cultural mandate to conform with gender and sexual norms. The expectation of revelation generated by Moreno’s striptease as she lurks before the audience is augmented by her visual and sonic design of the space to directly engage and lure us into the performance as active participants. We are invited to cast a desiring gaze at the siren as she strips, which risks reinscribing the very objectification the performance resists, but also opens a space to entertain and embody queer desires, relations, and pleasures.

Moreno’s performance of the siren reveals how painful and pleasurable aspects of being a transgender monster are entwined. She challenges the sexually conservative and humanizing trends of what she calls the “transwave,” or, the swell in positive representations of transwomen and transgender issues in the U.S. mainstream media in the 2010s. While the transwave does important work in that it debunks stereotypes of transwomen as hypersexual, unnatural, and dangerous to society, in order to do so, it often relies on a politics of respectability that elides, minimalizes, or otherwise polices the sexuality of transwomen. Moreno reclaims the transfeminine body as sexualized and sexy in *Divas*. Her siren prefers to lurk in the undertow of the transwave; cultivated as a site of queer pleasure and refuge from the mainstream during the performance. She highlights the stakes of eliding or exposing “girls like her,” girls that don’t
(always) pass, girls who are brown, who are sex workers and/or (undocumented) immigrants, in contemporary representations of transgender identity and experience.

Moreno describes herself as a mixed-media artist, whose work includes “expressions of the divine and profane” and explores “the body, sensuality, religion, and culture,” often via the lens of her experience as a transwoman of color and Latina (Garbage). She was born in Coahuila, Mexico in 1980 and lived there with her biological family until they immigrated to Dallas, Texas in 1994 (10 Aug.). Moreno moved from Dallas to Chicago in 2006 to attend the undergraduate painting program at the School of the Art Institute Chicago (ibid.). At that time, she began transitioning gender and entered into the sex industry, working as an escort and occasionally making trips to San Francisco and other large cities to perform as an exotic dancer in transgender clubs like Divas Nightclub and Bar (ibid.). Moreno dropped out of the painting program at SAIC prior to obtaining a degree because some of the faculty there refused to honor her preferred pronoun and made disparaging comments during her gender transition, and also because, in her words, the curricula was “too white” (4 Apr.). She started producing independent, interdisciplinary art and social dance events in collaboration with local electronic musician and house deejay Natalie Mercedes (aka La Spacer) in Bridgeport, a neighborhood in Chicago’s South Side, and Pilsen, a working-class Mexican neighborhood north of Bridgeport (9 Nov.). Moreno’s solo practice consisted of painting, making experimental video, and sculptures until 2013, the year I met her, when she started making performance art.

Moreno’s performances, whether solo or collaborative, rely on the manual and creative labor of a host of queer of color and gender nonconforming artists from Chicago, many of whom are Latinx, and provide regular platforms for critically engaging debates around transgender experience and identity. In this chapter, I examine personal archives, artist websites, and event
pages published on social media by Moreno and her artistic collaborators to chart her deployment of the siren as a motif in her performance and visual art practice from 2013-2015. These documents are supplemented by my own notes, photographs, and videos taken over the course of my attendance at dozens of Moreno’s performances. Extensive interviews that I conducted with Moreno and her collaborators, as well as transcriptions of public talks about her work, provide additional contextual information for the performances examined in this chapter. Through a close analysis of these archival materials, interviews, and field notes grounded in critical performance, transgender, and queer theories, I argue that Moreno’s performances challenge how transgender experience and identity are codified as normative in the transwave.

In what follows, I introduce the cultural context out of which Divas emerged and analyze Moreno’s performances as bodily practices that deploy monstrosity to resist the interpelling force of the transwave and illuminate its complicity with normative constructions of gender and sexuality. I turn to one of her first large-scale performance productions, Divas, to show how it reflects the aesthetics, politics, and experiences of transwomen of color working in the sex industry. After situating Moreno’s practice within the context of the transwave, I analyze her performance of the siren during Divas, arguing that it exposes transphobic practices that persist in the wake of the transwave.

Each section of analysis is centered around an element of the Myth of the Sirens that is altered in the performance to articulate the identities and lived experiences of transwomen of color who do sex work. In the first section, I focus on how Moreno’s embodiment of the siren refigures her into a sex-positive, transfeminist beacon. My analysis of Moreno’s costuming and use of queer vernacular shows how her emphasis on the chimeric physique and seductive behavior of the siren works to connect the political economy of medicalized gender transition to
sex work. I argue that Moreno’s embodiment of the siren resists trends in the transwave that seek to elide this connection in order to present a more sexually respectable narrative of transgender identity to the public, which further marginalizes transwomen who do sex work. In the second section, I focus on how the trashy materials Moreno uses to construct the performance environment (e.g. garbage bags, pornography magazines, condoms) operate as a set-up for what I describe as the trans panic scenario. My analysis demonstrates how the aesthetic composition of the performance environment reframes the site of encounter between Odysseus and the siren to critically reflect the racialized gender dynamics that enable the trans panic scenario. I argue that Moreno’s trashy aesthetics performatively constitute the undertow as a queer refuge from transphobic violence and the whitewashed politics of the transwave. The third and final section focuses on Moreno’s dance choreography. My analysis demonstrates how Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease replaces the Song of the Siren, which lures sailors near her isle with the promise of knowledge, to resist cultural trends that compel transwomen to translate their embodied experiences and knowledge as education and entertainment for a cisgender public. I argue that Moreno’s silent, anti-virtuosic choreography enacts this type of resistance, and in the process reclaims striptease as a means of exercising (sexual) autonomy and agency in the wake of the transwave.

Throughout my analyses, I problematize Moreno’s incendiary performative tactics, demonstrating how their sexualized and racialized references risk reinscribing the normative discourses and social realities they intend to resist. In conclusion, I claim that Moreno’s performances of the siren produce queer worlds that center the life experiences, practices, and embodied knowledge of transwomen of color. This is important because in the current socio-political landscape, the voices transwomen of color continue to be marginalized, even in
discussions that purport to address issues that concern them. Performance is a site to rehearse and materialize queer worlds in which their voices and lived experiences are put front and center. The siren’s hybrid body and seductive power, which threaten patriarchy and the binary gender system on which it relies, render her a salient figure through which to do so. To conclude, I track the movement of Moreno’s monsters across the U.S. border to Mexico City to further corroborate my claims, and to raise questions about the political implications of this transnational current of the undertow. I now turn to a brief contextualization of the transwave that critically examines its relationship to the undertow produced via Moreno’s performance practice.

The Transwave and Its Undertow: (In)Visibility and the Changing Tides of Gender and Sexual Politics in the U.S.

Moreno’s performance of the siren is significant in that it was staged at a moment when positive representations of transwomen and transmen were on the rise in popular media, a phenomenon she calls “the transwave.” Moreno first used this term during an interview I conducted at her apartment about a week prior to *Divas* (4 Apr.). She uses it to refer to the explosion of glamourous images and op-eds about transgender icons like Carmen Carrera, Laverne Cox, and Kaitlin Jenners in the 2010s following the publication of Janet Mock’s “coming out story” in 2011 (see Mayo), otherwise popularized by *Time* magazine as “the transgender tipping point” (see Steinmetz). While *Time* magazine focuses on the positive effects of these representations, Moreno claims that they open the door for the cultural exploitation of transwomen (4 Apr.). Other transfeminine artists like Gogo Graham worry the transwave elides “the narratives of trans individuals whose lives aren’t as easy as a catwalk, enveloped by cameras—a glossy photoshoot spread across social media” (Moran). It is my argument
throughout this chapter that the creative community spaces generated in the undertow foster aesthetic innovation and cultural critique that present transfemininity in a more complex manner than is currently favored within the transwave. Indeed, Moreno argues that the cultural capital associated with transwomen and transfemininity, in particular, is often exploited in the transwave (4 Apr.). She claims, “We are being abused. We are the next commodity for the corporate world” (ibid.). Take, for example, Vh-1’s coverage of transgender model Carmen Carrera’s marriage to cisgender hunk Adrian Torres in 2015. The network’s website pictures the gorgeous couple lip-locked blissfully in their first marital kiss. The photo caption quotes Carrera, “My dream was always to walk down the aisle in a white dress” (Michel). Stories like this sell. They sell dreams of love and happiness predicated on marriage and monogamy, affirming heteronormative institutions, values, and identities historically used to demonize gender, sexual, and racial minorities. The corporations that sell these dreams appear altruistic, rather than opportunistic. As Moreno insisted during a public artist talk, “My image will not be used to save this dying culture” (“Porn Again”). In other words, she opposes how images of transwomen are used to depict heteronormative culture as diverse and inclusive, especially as its social hierarchies are increasingly called into question.

Lurking in the undertow, away from the flashing cameras, Moreno’s abject, scantily clad siren provides a stark contrast to media coverage of Carrera’s marriage. Rather than being embraced by a handsome lover, she stands alone, with a bouquet of red roses. As the petals fall from her gaping mouth, Moreno seems to reject the promises of love and happiness they symbolize, emphasizing instead the cultural alienation that many transwomen suffer for their difference. She is not a blushing bride waiting for her groom, but a lone gender and sexual
monster. Carrera’s white bridal bouquet, on the other hand, symbolizes the cultural belonging promised by the institution of marriage, and her power to extend this belonging to others.

The transwave fosters acceptance for transwomen who embody or strive to approximate heteronormative ideals of gender, beauty, and (sexual) respectability. It rarely features transwomen who rock the boat, who are prostitutes and/or visibly gender nonconforming, who are not interested in marriage and/or are lesbians, who are undocumented. Viewed in this light, its representational strategies echo the “homonormative turn” in gay and lesbian media productions and politics. Furthermore, as the transwave emphasizes sameness to appeal to a tentatively sympathetic cisgender public, it increases the visibility of, and therefore potential backlash against, those whose difference is irreconcilable with normative culture.\(^1\) While the transwave does important work—it circulates positive representations of transgender people and issues—the terms under which it accomplishes this work are often limited and can foster adverse effects for transgender individuals who exceed and/or overtly challenge them.

Beyond mainstream entertainment and politics, the transwave has incited new trends in the fine arts world. During a panel discussion about *Pearly Foam*, a multi-media exhibition that was part of *Transfluent*, a series of events featuring transgender culture makers co-produced by The Center on Halsted, an LGBTQ community center in Chicago’s gayborhood in Wrigleyville, and David Weinberg Photography, a fine arts gallery downtown, issues regarding the curation of

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\(^1\) While the transwave works to attract new allies, it has also renewed the fervor with which conservative politicians and cultural institutions attack legislation and policies in favor of transgender rights and equality. Senate Bill 1045, introduced in Arizona by Republican Representative John Kavanagh in 2013, exemplifies the type of juridical backlash characteristic of these groups in its mission to restrict bathroom and locker room access for transgender people. However, there has also been backlash from groups that, on the surface, are committed to gender equality and justice; namely, feminist scholars and activists. As Stryker and Talia M. Bettcher note in their introduction to a special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly* on trans/feminisms, there has been “a wave of antitransgender rhetoric” in response to “recent gains for transgender human and civil rights,” and a significant volume of it has been produced by so-called feminists who view transwomen as “tools or victims of a patriarchal conspiracy to destroy feminism and harm girls and women” (5, 7).
transgender themed exhibitions were raised. One of the artists of *Pearly Foam*, Wolfie E. Rawk, described how they were often approached to be a part of transgender themed exhibits by curators who knew nothing about their artwork besides the fact that it was made by a transgender person. Rawk critiqued this approach to curation as tokenism; rather than recruiting transgender artists based on the merits of their work, curators recruit transgender artists because they are transgender in order to give the appearance that their curatorial practices are inclusive. This does little to solve the structural issues that prevent transgender artists from gaining access to institutional resources and professional recognition. The other artists on the panel, Moreno and Olivero Rodriguez, affirmed Rawk’s assessment and shared stories of being approached by curators in a similar manner. One thing they all noted was different about *Pearly Foam* is that its curation was guided by the aesthetic, formal, and thematic relationships amongst their artworks. In other words, the quality and content of their artwork is what took precedence in curating the exhibit, not the identity of the artists. Such curatorial practices continue to be exceptional when transgender artists are involved. Frequently, transgender-themed exhibits favor white artists with fine arts degrees who work in traditional Western mediums and do not overtly challenge or question the politics of the institutions in which they are presented. This is why Moreno prefers to produce work in what I describe as the undertow; there is less risk of censorship and more freedom to experiment with artistic form.

In Moreno’s performance and visual art, transwomen are represented as monstrous and hypersexual, as unassimilable into dominant society. Their excessive, racialized bodies challenge Western notions of beauty and art. The incendiary politics of Moreno’s work are complimentsed

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2 The pronouns “they,” “them,” and “theirs,” are used by transgender and nonbinary individuals like Rawk who do not identify as male or female, but as somewhere in between these opposing poles of the gender spectrum. Some use these pronouns to assert their gender nonconformity in cisnormative spaces.
by her reputation as a public figure; she is notorious for taking curators to task regarding their motives for showcasing transgender artists. During the talkback for *Pearly Foam*, Moreno asked representatives from The Center on Halsted whether or not the exhibit merely served to put a “tick” on their “multi-cultural” checklist. Rather than “toning down” her politics and the themes of her performance and visual art to gain sustained access to institutional resources, as some curators have suggested, Moreno instead turns to less conventional venues to showcase her work.

On December 14, 2013, Moreno and a few genderqueer artists of color from Chicago, including Rosé Hernandez and Kiam Marcelo Junio, produced TransEverything at Harbee’s Liquor and Tavern, an LGBTQ-friendly bar in Pilsen. TransEverything was the fourth installment of a monthly art and social dance event called ArtSluts. Each ArtSluts is organized around a theme meant to satirize social attitudes and trends within the art world that objectify minorities, such as fatphobia or machismo. Invited deejays and dancers develop personae specific to each event that playfully embody its theme through ironic and sexy costuming and choreographies. Their performances are complimented by the simultaneous screening of video montages curated to reflect the theme. The title of this particular ArtSluts, TransEverything, indicates that everything is “trans” these days, and constitutes the thematic frame of the event. The title also deploys trans as a verb by suggesting that we can or should *trans* everything. This begs the question of how one would accomplish such a task and what it might look like. Within the context of the event, it looked like home videos of transsexual women dancing in tiny bikinis and androgynous models posing in rubber doll fetish suits projected on televisions around a bar that more often screens professional sports for a presumably heterosexual, albeit LGBTQ-friendly, cisgender crowd. As Moreno frequently suggests, videos like the ones described above are aesthetically rich archives of sexual subcultures. Furthermore, they highlight aspects of
transgender bodies, lives, and identities generally hidden beneath the surface of dominant culture. At TransEverything, Moreno elevates these trashy videos, more likely to be associated with pornography, to the level of art by displaying them within the frame of the event. She hosted TransEverything in black, lacy lingerie. Moreno’s sartorial choice emphasizes her body as sexed and sexual. Additionally, an advertisement for the event circulating on Facebook days in advance featured a photo of the lingerie, which Moreno described as a subtle reference to Carrera going public with her aspiration to become the first transgender model for Victoria’s Secret in 2013 (26 Apr.). In photos posted on Facebook during the event, Moreno lounges languidly on a bar bench in the lingerie and black stiletto pumps. Moreno thus refigures and pulls the image of the transfeminine lingerie model, widely associated with Carrera’s classy repertoire, down into the undertow to emphasize the sexual capital associated with transwomen, which is often censored from the transwave.

Sexualized imagery of transwomen circulating in the undertow is occasionally hijacked by the mainstream media for its sensational value. However, during TransEverything, Moreno juxtaposed her body against this imagery within sweaty proximity to a demographic more likely to consume it in private and at a distance. This tactic reflects Moreno’s claim that her performances are “more aggressive” than her visual art because they “force” people to “deal” with her body (19 Nov.). When I first arrived at TransEverything around ten that night, two large bearded white men in Blackhawks hockey jerseys who I later found out were bar regulars were complaining to the bartender about the videos and the “freakish” crowd, clearly threatened by the presence of queer bodies in “their” space. Moreno responded by arguing, “They need to know that the world doesn’t revolve around them—this is why I make performance.” While it is unclear whether or not the men singled out Moreno as part of the “freakish” crowd invading
“their” space, her performance, framed by the video montage and her fabulous entourage, rendered her embodied difference hypervisible in the space. Read this way, it would not be a far stretch to assume that Moreno, as well as her entourage, were implicated in their complaints. Moreno’s response to the complaints suggest that the intersubjective, body-based nature of performance grant it power to reconfigure social norms and relations in real time; by forcing the regular patrons to “deal” with her body, she disrupts cisgender privilege and entitlement in that space. Transgender and queer people do not simply live, safely contained, inside of mainstream media. They live around the corner from you, in your neighborhood, and sometimes even drink and play at your favorite bar. However, irreverence toward the disciplining gaze of dominant culture, here represented by two white, conventionally masculine men, has consequences, even in a purportedly LGBTQ-friendly space in Pilsen. Soon thereafter, ArtSluts was permanently cancelled.3

Following the cancellation of ArtSluts, Moreno began utilizing her home, along with the homes of other artists and community members, as a performance venue. In the year 2014 alone, Moreno staged and participated in over half a dozen performance events inside of apartments and houses in the Pilsen and La Villita neighborhoods of Chicago, as well as one in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, CA, all of which are predominantly working class and Mexican. Choosing to produce these events in these particular neighborhoods debunks stereotypes that working-class communities of color and non-European immigrants are particularly hostile toward LGBTQ people.4 It challenges predominantly white and upwardly mobile gayborhoods

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3 While I did not have the opportunity to interview the bartender or manager of Harbee’s, both Moreno and Hernandez claimed during an interview I conducted with them that ArtSluts was cancelled due to the controversial nature of the videos and performances (29 July).
4 While the cancellation of ArtSluts indicates hostility toward LGBTQ communities and culture in Pilsen, the neighborhood hosts a thriving queer nightlife and arts scene. That Moreno’s independently produced events draw
like Wrigleyville in Chicago and the Castro in S.F. as the centers of production for LGBTQ culture. Save for one, these independently produced events were fundraisers for the art grant organization s+s project, of which Moreno is the founder and director. As described on its website, s+s project raises funds for the “work of non-conventional, often marginalized communities in select alternative spaces” (s+s). Divas was produced to raise funds for s+s project to bring artists based in California and New York City to Chicago for a subsequent house show that Moreno co-produced with Pete Brooks and David Nasca entitled Currency EXXXchange (2015), which featured work themed around the “body as currency” by queers, sex workers, and drag queens. As suggested by the triple X in the event title, the body as currency is sexualized. This is different from the transwave, which relies on the currency of desexualized, and therefore nonthreatening, transgender bodies. Divas was the first largescale performance Moreno produced after TransEverything. The trajectory of these events attests to the fluidity of Moreno’s practice; like the currents of an undertow, it adjusts its flow to the flux in parameters around creating public performance. When faced with rejection and censorship, her performance practice seeps even deeper into the undertow, but in the process, it pulls elements from above the surface back down with it to be trashed, recycled, and refigured. Moreno’s performance of the significant crowds – anywhere from 50-100 people, many of whom are local – and are connected to a larger network of queer performance and social dance groups and events in the area such as Antibody Corporation, B!TCH3Z Drinking Project, Burning Orchid, and TRQPiTECA, supports my claim that there is a thriving LGBTQ scene in Pilsen. For performance studies scholarship that provides a rich archive of contemporary queer spaces and cultures that LGBTQ people of color cultivate outside of well-established white gayborhoods and metropolitan centers, see Bailey; Johnson, Sweet Tea; Rivera-Servera; Tongston.

5 While one of these events was a part of the Rainbow in the Dark Tour, the mission of which is “to illuminate the power of queer identity and build national community by embarking on a fantastical journey showcasing and documenting underground queer talent and vision,” the rest were produced by Moreno via s+s project (Wam).

6 Currency EXXXchange was held at Brook’s and Nasca’s home, Show Boat, which doubles as a gallery space that hosts interdisciplinary art and dance parties featuring bartenders and deejays from s+s project, B!TCH3Z Drinking Project, and TRQPiTECA, among other groups and individuals who are regular participants in the queer nightlife scene of Pilsen.
siren in *Divas* is a clear product of this process. As the first act of the evening, it set the tone and political context for the queerly festive and disorienting undertow engendered by the event.

**The Siren: Monstrous Being, Transfeminist Beacon**

Whoever draws too close, off guard, and catches the Sirens’ voices in the air—no sailing home for him, no happy children beaming up at their father’s face. The high, thrilling song of the Sirens will transfix him, lolling there in their meadow, round them heaps of corpses, rotting away, rags of skin shriveling on their bones.

- Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated by Robert Fagles

Just before the performance begins, I pass through an awning separating the brightly decorated living room-turned-theater from the dimly lit, dining room-turned-bar adjacent to it. Moreno has painted the walls Pepto-Bismol pink and covered them in golden tinsel streamers. The stage fills the back-left corner. It is bordered with gold ribbons atop pastel pink fabric. To the right, mounted vertically on the wall, are three white masks. Their eyes, vacant holes, stare into the crowd (see fig. 15). All of a sudden, the music fades and the clamor of voices quiets. “Excuse me! Excuse me! Comin’ through!!” It is Rosé Hernandez, the emcee for *Divas*, demanding space as they push through the tightly packed room. In front of the stage, Hernandez faces the audience and screams, “Fuckers and sluts!! Are you ready to see Ass Pussy?!” Ass Pussy is Moreno’s stage name, and she is about to kick off the event with her performance of the siren. Hernandez’s six-foot tall, voluptuously corpulent frame towers over many of us as they await our response.
They wear nothing but a jockstrap with a blonde wig extension hanging from the crotch that matches their shortly cropped and bleached hair, which is topped with a backwards baseball cap. Large, circular earrings with the word “sexy” cut into the center dangle from Hernandez’s earlobes. Several people respond enthusiastically to Hernandez’s call. “Ass Pussy! Ass Pussy! ASS PUSSY!” Huge smiles erupt from the faces of those who utter these raunchy, taboo words. I smile too and let out a hearty “whoop!” “Ass pussy” is queer vernacular for the rectum of transwomen and gay men. For Moreno, it recalls male customers who literally requested to see her “ass pussy” when she was an exotic dancer (4 Apr.). Again, Hernandez yells, “Aaasssssss Puuuuusssssssyyy!!” All eyes look expectantly toward the backstage. The pink curtain jostles, and from behind it Moreno softly exclaims, “Technical! … problems!” A gay couple hoot and whistle at her. Moreno jokingly tells one, “You shut up, bitch!” Bitch, rather than a sexist insult, is a queer femme term of endearment here. A few people chuckle, then silence.

Music fades on quietly and stays at a low “indoor” decibel. It is Chris Isaak’s hit song, “Wicked Game” (1989). The pitch has been lowered several times, giving it an eerie, inhuman quality. Hernandez recedes back into the small pool of bodies as Moreno’s petite five-foot frame slinks through the curtain in rhythm with Isaak’s watery slide guitar. Wrapped in her kimono, the only visible traces of the siren are her garish plastic mask and pointy fins. Moreno saunters up and onto the stage, leaving a trail of rose petals behind her, pauses in the center, turns, and faces us. “What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way…” Isaak croons. She watches us watch her as she unceremoniously removes her kimono, letting it fall on the floor in a twisted mess around her ankles to reveal her scantily clad, scaly body. She lowers herself into a kneeling position and points her fins toward the ceiling, bouquet still cradled in one arm. She presses her
thighs, knees, and heels together, transforming the lower half of her body into a fish tail. She bends her tail back toward her buttocks, points, then bends, points, then bends again.

In this section, I argue that Moreno’s embodiment of the siren, a sea monster historically deployed in Western art and literature as a misogynist symbol of female cunning and predation, refigures her into a transfeminist beacon that intervenes in normative discourses of gender and sexuality. Through my analysis of Moreno’s embodiment and the queer vernacular through which it is framed, I show how her performance resists trends in media representation that attempt to decouple transgender history from sex work. While not all transwomen are sex workers, it is crucial to acknowledge and understand the role of sex work within transgender histories and presents. Moreno’s embodiment of the siren reflects her experiences as a transwoman and former sex worker to raise questions about the costs of seeking inclusion within the ranks of cisnormative society. I argue that Moreno connects the political economy of medicalized gender transition to sex work by emphasizing the chimeric physique and seductive behavior of the siren. In the process, Moreno’s performance of the siren suggests that the state of being a monster embodies liberating possibilities for transwomen. To conclude, I consider how Moreno’s performance risks social alienation from the very same group for which it advocates by highlighting aspects of transgender experience that are associated with monstrosity in dominant culture.

In Classic Greek lore, sirens, or sirenas as they are called in Spain and Latin America, are pictured as chimeric creatures with the head of a woman and the body of a raptorial bird. In Homer’s epic poem, The Odyssey, sirens are described as dangerous monsters. They lure sailors out to their isle in the middle of the ocean with their “honeyed voices,” promising to impart the knowledge of wise men past and fulfill the sexual fantasies of men long at sea (Fagles 277).
Once in thrall to the sirens’ hypnotic song, the sailors are doomed never to return home to their wives or children. Stripped of their will, they leave their former lives behind and waste away at sea, or even worse, they are cannibalized by the monsters. Either way, they eventually join the pile of the rotting sailor corpses that litter the borders of the isle. Images of this mass grave, articulated in *The Odyssey* and later in paintings and novels, warn of the dangers of female seduction by positioning it with the power to destroy men. They support normative social scripts that privilege women who are chaste and subservient to men and stay home to preserve the family unit by suggesting (sexually) assertive women are monsters.

The myth of the siren is quite different in nature from modern representations of the mermaid. Since the publication of *The Little Mermaid* in 1836, the mermaid is most often figured as a beautiful maiden with the body of a fish, rather than a bird, from the waist down. She lives in the ocean, has a gentle temperament, and aids sailors in need. If one examines mermaid lore circulating in Europe prior to *The Little Mermaid*, one will find that for centuries, not only was she viewed as dangerously seductive, like the siren, but she was often conflated with the siren (Goodman 36, 43; Rodríguez 56). Mermaids are featured in several paintings of the Isle of the Sirens from the Enlightenment Era (Dijkstra 258). Like the siren, they were considered portents of death, destruction, and misfortune (Goodman 36; Rodríguez 52). They also used their hauntingly beautiful singing voices to lure sailors near so that they could grab ahold of them and drag them down into the depths of the ocean to an early grave (Dijkstra; Goodman). Like the Enlightenment painters, Moreno blurs the boundaries between the two sea creatures. Her embodiment of the siren departs from the classic myth in that she has fins and a fishtail, and thus more closely approximates the physique of the mermaid. However, she is treacherous, like the siren. She lures the audience to participate in the performance with playful banter. Yet, as
Moreno once told me, even though her siren is “cute,” it “has sharp teeth and will cut you” if you venture too close (4 Apr.).

Unlike the sailors, who are unaware of the true nature of the monsters they encounter until it is too late, at *Divas* the audience knowingly and willingly put their bodies within the siren’s reach. However ironic or queerly playful the performance is intended to be, this encounter is still risky. We are goaded to hail Moreno in a way that directly references her history as a sex worker (“Ass Pussy!”), which could easily be interpreted as objectifying her. Interestingly, the female prostitute, or sex worker, is evoked by the word siren. Female sexuality, in general, is depicted as monstrous within the Western imaginary, but female sex workers are often figured as the epitome of female sexual monstrosity. The siren’s unabashed licentiousness and bottomless appetite for the bodies of men signifies sexual excess. The life of the siren, as depicted from the myths of Ancient Greece to contemporary cultural productions, revolves around soliciting attention from men, and failing to do so results in her demise. The siren sinks below the surface of the sea and perishes when Odysseus resists her serenade. The Little Mermaid even turns into sea foam and dissolves into the atmosphere when her love interest courts and marries another. One could compare the songs of sirens and mermaids, their principle mode of soliciting attention from men, to popular representations of sex workers catcalling male passersby from the street corners of red light districts. The connection between the siren or mermaid and the sex worker is further solidified when men are figured as their victims. Helpless against the feminine wiles of sex workers, men are lured into moral, financial, and possibly even physical ruination.\(^7\) Not only

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\(^7\) In different cultures and historical periods, female prostitutes, stereotyped as unsanitary proponents of unsafe and deviant sex, have been blamed for the spread of venereal disease (see Levine). It is both interesting and disturbing to note that during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, the sexual practices of gay men were demonized using a similar rhetoric (see Bersani 211).
does this reinforce the idea that men should not be held responsible for the repercussions of their sexual pursuits, it ignores the reality that sex workers are an incredibly vulnerable population. Sex workers, regardless of gender, are often victims of violence at the hands of those upon whom they supposedly prey, and the illegality of their line of work makes it difficult to access state and other protections against such violence.⁸

The termination of the lower half of the mermaid’s body in a fish tail, in addition to visually signaling her monstrosity, symbolizes “sexual deprivation” in European lore (Goodman 32). In other words, compounding the cruel intentions of her seduction is the fact that she is physically incapable of fulfilling the sexual fantasies of the hapless men under her spell. The mermaid has no genitalia, no vaginal opening to be penetrated. While this indicates a severely limited and heteronormative sexual imaginary, wherein erotic relations between a man and a woman ultimately climax in penetrative genital sex, and it exacerbates stereotypes of women who cannot (or do not want to) have sex with men as “teases” or sexually “frigid,” such associations with the mermaid tail persist. During Moreno’s performance, her tail opens up when she kicks her legs to emphasize a different sexual orifice of the body, her “ass pussy.” As she rocks back and forth, she pushes it up against an imaginary lover, suggesting sexual desire, rather than deprivation. Moreno undermines the heteronormative de/sexualization of the mermaid by emphasizing her potential to engage in queer sex acts. Both the mermaid and the siren reflect Western culture’s understanding of female sexuality as opportunistic, deceptive, and evil, even as it erases female sexual agency (Dijkstra 266). It is no wonder then that in the English language “siren,” in addition to naming a monster, also means alarm. The sailor who heeds her song should be forewarned, as it portends not only death and destruction, but sexual disappointment,

⁸ See Spade; Stanley and Smith.
and even humiliation. As the sound of her voice reaches and passes into his ears, the sailor is rendered both impotent and penetrable. The siren, like the sex worker, is thus positioned to emasculate men.

Moreno’s performance plays on patriarchal fears of female sexuality and femininity by emphasizing her embodied difference and history of sex work, thus refiguring the siren into a transfemininst beacon. According to Stryker and Bettcher, transfeminism is committed to intersectionality and advocates for “the personal empowerment of women and girls” in a manner that centers the needs and life experiences of transwomen and transgirls (11). Furthermore, it “promotes sex positivity,” including sex worker rights, and “often analyzes and interprets pop cultural texts and artifacts and critiques consumption practices, particularly as they relate to feminine beauty culture” (ibid.). As I demonstrate in the previous section, Moreno frequently launches her critique of the transwave through appropriations of popular culture to expose how transfeminine bodies are marketed and consumed in ways that are exploitative and seek to elide or contain their sexuality. Moreno’s siren functions as a transfeminist beacon by transmitting embodied knowledge stemming from her experiences as a sex worker. By asserting sexual agency and knowledge, she thus challenges patriarchal control over women’s bodies.

Throughout Western art history, women’s bodies are used as symbols of masculine desire, authority, and privilege, foreclosing female subjectivity and agency, sexual or otherwise. Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider describes this phenomenon as an example of “the explicit body in representation” (2). The explicit body, she writes, “is foremost a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures of gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning” (2). Schneider argues that feminist performance artists critically reflect and challenge the social hierarchies reinforced by the ghosts of historical
meaning materialized through the explicit body (ibid.). For example, Carolee Schneemann’s performance *Site* (1964) stages Manet’s classic painting *L’Olympia* (1863) as a tableaux vivant. Schneemann embodies the female prostitute pictured at the center of the painting, widely interpreted as a symbol of “low” culture, and which distinguished Manet as an art rebel (24-25). Schneider explains that, by collapsing art object and artist across her body in *Site*, Schneemann “not only directly challenges the terms of demarcation between high and low, but unearths the gendered dynamics in that relation” (29). Schneider continues, “the sexually active woman as both (low) object and (high) artist straddles and challenges a deeply ingrained gender divide in which active, or overt, or “virile” female sexuality is conceived as inherently animalistic, primitive, and perverse” (ibid.). Moreno also deploys the explicit body in performance through her embodiment of the siren. However, there is one key difference; historically, transwomen, and men, have been omitted from Western art. Their bodies are not objectified as cultural symbols, but instead are represented as mythological monsters or not at all. This is why many transgender artists turn to myth and monster tales in order to make their objectification explicit. The explicit *transgender* body is always, already monstrous. This differs from bodies that become monsters as a result of external factors, like Leche’s *bruja* in Chapter Two, or that are monsters by birthright, like Tiger Lily and The Husband in Chapter One.

Transgender theorists and performers from North and South America to Europe turn to the figure of the monster as a means through which to articulate transgender embodiment and experience. Stryker’s 1994 essay, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” has spawned a number of publications and
performances that explore the relationship between being transgender and being a monster. Indeed, the monster is so central to understandings of transgender embodiment and experience that it is included as a key term in the first issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*. As Anson Koch-Rein writes, “when trans* people are cast as less than human, the monster (and the creature of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in particular) is often the metaphor of choice” (134).

Like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, “the transsexual body is an unnatural body […] flesh torn apart and sewn back together again” (Stryker, “My Words” 245). The cyborg is another metaphor of choice for transgender embodiment, as it too comes into being through scientific technology (Cárdenas; Rudakoff 5; Wagner “On Elves”). The assembled nature of these monsters, as well as the ways in which they are treated, is what makes them rich sites for exploring the material and social realities of being transgender (Stryker, “My Words” 245-246; Wagner, “On Elves” 48).

Following Stryker, feminist anthropologist Mary J. Weismantel suggests that we view the assembled nature of transgender monsters as positive, rather than negative. Not only do they destabilize the gender binary, they demonstrate how “bodies and selves […] are multiple and composite in their very essence” (“Towards” 230). This approach to understanding embodiment and identity opens up new possibilities for being that are empowering (“Towards” 327). For example, Weismantel writes, “rulers and gods of the Maya world appropriated every form of gendering—masculine, feminine, androgynous, even vegetative—as signs of their own multiplicitous power” (ibid.). Similarly, Moreno’s siren appropriates various forms of gendering. She has both male and female anatomy, as evidenced by her scaly breasts and beard-like

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9 See Wagner, “On Elves” 47-48; Sullivan; Weaver; Weismantel “Towards.”
tentacles. However, what sets Moreno’s siren apart from other transgender monsters is the emphasis on her sexuality as a source of power.

Despite the modern mermaid’s monstrous genealogy, many transwomen and girls turn to her mythology to articulate their experience of living in and desiring to change a body that does not fully reflect one’s gender identity. The story of Ariel, the mermaid at the center of Disney’s adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (1989), is an apt analogy for gender transition. Ariel desires nothing more than to become a “normal” human girl, and in order to do so she is willing to trade her tail for human legs. In addition to the tail’s association with genitalia, or lack thereof, the desire for and enactment of such a transformation—from abnormal to normal, nonhuman creature to human girl—parallels narrative accounts of male-to-female gender transition. Online magazines and blogs, academic scholarship, and performance art further detail this relationship between narratives of male-to-female gender transition and mermaid lore. Feminist and religious studies scholar Leland G. Spencer writes, “in both transgender identity development and mermaid stories, themes of mind-body dissonance […] are evident” (112). Jazz Jennings, perhaps one of the most famous transgender teenagers in the United States, further corroborates this relationship between transgirls and mermaids. Jennings, who goes by the nickname Jazz Mergirl, claims, “a lot of transgender individuals are attracted to mermaids and I think it’s because they don’t have any genitals, just a beautiful tail. I definitely secretly dream of being a mermaid” (Ruiz). One might read Jenning’s desire to have a beautiful tail in place of genitals as an indication of the mind-body dissonance Spencer claims attracts transgirls and women to the mermaid in the first place. The “mind-body dissonance,” or gender dysphoria, that many transgender people experience makes the mermaid an ideal fantasy figure through which to refigure their identity, at least for transgirls and transwomen. Yet, Spencer points out that Ariel’s
“transition […] is magical, but no less surgical than a transition performed with a scalpel. Indeed, transitioning from mermaid to human requires violence on the mer body” (117). While this characterization is dangerously close to reinforcing transphobic discourses that understand medicalized gender transition as violence against the body (see Stryker, “My Words” 245-246), it points to how the mermaid symbolically embodies the risks involved in this process.

Most of the narratives available to the general public that posit a link between mermaids and transgender experience are humanizing and emphasize sameness. Just like cisgirls, transgirls simply want to grow up to be normal, and have fantasies of becoming the princess of a handsome young prince (see Hurley; Slicklion). Such narratives center around the desire to have a body that fits one’s gender identity. Moreno’s embodiment of Ariel’s monstrous antecedent dredges up transphobic images and rhetoric that aim to dehumanize transwomen. She is not interested in being a normal girl or woman. She is anything but virginal. She does not want to be a part of dominant society, and instead prefers to lurk in its cultural undertows, beyond its surveilling gaze. She revels in her difference and the threat it presents to the status quo. Moreno, rather than foregrounding her desire for a cisnormative body, foregrounds her gender nonconformity by emphasizing her “ass pussy” in the performance, the fleshy commodity that many transwomen capitalize on in order to pay for medicalized gender transition, including, but not limited to, vaginoplasty and hormone therapy. The link between sex work and medicalized gender transition reflects an economic reality that many transwomen of color in the U.S. face. Their position as both gender and racial minorities leads to increased job discrimination, at times leaving sex work as their only option for making a living.¹⁰ The likelihood of resorting to sex work because of job discrimination is increased for transwomen of color who are also immigrants, especially if they

¹⁰ See Fitzgerald, et al. 14; Saffin 150-151; Wilson, et al. 903.
lack work permits. Indeed, as Moreno has often mentioned, a majority of her coworkers at Divas were brown immigrant women from Latin America and Asia. As Moreno kicks open her fins and grinds into the floor in an erratic and erotic display, she plays on the fact that her body is both fetishized as a sexual object, a titillating curiosity that may be commodified and consumed for pleasure, and loathed as an abject monster, an affront to the binary gender system.

Using performance as an analytic allows us to attend to Moreno’s embodiment of the siren as a tactic of resistance that challenges prevailing discourses that elide, foreclose, and/or monsterize the sexual agency of transwomen. The queer vernacular that frames the performance cues the audience to interpret her body as sexual and sexualized. We are not lured to the stage, the isle of the siren, by Moreno’s honeyed voice. Instead, we are hailed as “fuckers” and “sluts” by a genderqueer person in a jockstrap and initiated into a call and response performance. “Are you ready to see Ass Pussy?!?” Hernandez asks us. While one might argue that those of us who chant “ass pussy” are simply following Hernandez’s lead, one might also read the enthusiasm undergirding the chant as a collective affirmation of Moreno’s history as a sex worker, which is well known to those familiar with her art. However, in doing so, we echo the requests of Moreno’s former clients, thus communicating, whether intentionally or not, a desire to sexually commodify and consume her body. Furthermore, we respond to the call from a position of desire as fuckers and sluts, which works to amplify the crude eroticism of this exchange and point its objectifying reach back toward us. We fuckers and sluts want “ass pussy,” and chant it repeatedly to lure the siren out of her backstage lair to perform, rather than the other way around. Moreno thus reverses the dynamic of seduction that structures the Myth of the Sirens, and by extension the social dynamics that would position her, as a transwoman, as sexually predatory. She highlights the potentially predatory desires and roles of those drawn to the siren, represented
in the myth by the ultimate heteropatriarch, Odysseus, whose sexuality and masculine authority is framed as natural and right, and therefore not something to question. While the classic siren sings of the knowledge of wise men past, in this performance, Moreno’s voice is replaced with Isaak’s, who sings of the wickedness of female seduction. Yet, the audience, unlike the sailors, have the agency to stay or go, which further debunks the notion that female seduction, or wickedness, is essentially manipulative and dangerous, and therefore must be controlled.

While the focus of this chapter is on Moreno’s siren in _Divas_, it is important to note that this monster is a popular motif in both her broader performance repertoire and in her visual art. In fact, Moreno performed what could be described as a prototype of the siren from _Divas_ during _ASSMutations_, a multi-media art collaboration with Jacqueline Guerrero (aka CQQCHiFRUIT) at Mana Contemporary Gallery, Chicago (2013). At the beginning of _ASSMutations_, Moreno emerges from a black plastic abyss bordering a beach made from sequins, sand, and votives, among other materials. She is costumed in black plastic from head to toe, her legs are bound with black garbage bags and black electrical tape to form a mermaid tail, which she cuts away over the course of the performance (see fig. 16). In the summer of 2015, Moreno, along with transgender and queer collaborators Ariel Zetina (aka Witch Hazel), Alice Cunt (aka Mystress Inculcate), and Darren Barrere (aka Imp Queen), posed seductively as sirens in costumes made
from plastic, shreds of fabric, and body paint for a photo shoot at Hollywood Beach, a historically gay cruising site in Chicago (see fig. 17). The photos, shot by Armando Lozano (aka HoleBoss), a photographer who has documented a considerable amount of Moreno’s art and performance events, were used as promotional images for Moreno’s solo exhibition, *Porn Again Vol. 2* (2015), which, not coincidentally, features a painting of a siren with the upper body of a busty woman and the lower body of a fish (see fig. 18). This siren, part of a triptic entitled “Feline Reptilian” (2015), is encircled by serpents, a possible reference to Mami-Wata, an Afro-diasporic deity associated with female sexual pleasure, who is often depicted as a mermaid with a serpent wrapped around her torso (see Drewal). The serpents may also reference the snake skirt of the Aztec goddess of creation and destruction, Coatlicue, who is often depicted by Chicana artists as a queer and feminist icon (see L. Pérez). Similar to the siren in *Divas*, these additional works by Moreno and her collaborators visually or discursively connect the siren to transfeminine embodiment, sexuality, and sex work.

Throughout this section, I have argued that Moreno’s performance of the siren reflects a sex positive transfemininst ethos. Furthermore, the siren’s association with both sex work and
medicalized gender transition point out the former’s crucial role in making the latter possible for many transwomen. However, it is also possible to argue that her performance tactics alienate transwomen. In response to a solo performance by Moreno at Defibrillator Performance Art Gallery in March 2014, a black transwoman said to me, “I think her work is gratuitous. I don’t see why she has to expose herself like that.” Indeed, transgender activists have spent much effort combatting the conflation of their gender identity with sexual licentiousness. Therefore, it is risky for Moreno to reveal her body as she does, and not only for her, but for the other transwomen present at her performances. As performance theorist and practitioner E. Patrick Johnson observes, sexual minorities can be threatened when confronted with images or narratives that “put [their] business on the street” in front of heterosexuals, as it has the potential to interpolate them as queer (“Strange” 89). Here Johnson is writing specifically about the response of black gay men to his play *Strange Fruit*, which narrates his experiences as a black gay man from the South. The dynamic Johnson describes, however, resonates with my exchange with the transwoman at Defibrillator; her critique of Moreno’s performance may not have only been about the content in and of itself, but about the ways in which it could have “implicated [her] in its discursive meanings” (ibid.). This is one of the dilemmas of the transwave; it makes some transgender people more visible than before and threatens to lump transgender people into a homogenous group. Moreno’s performances potentially implicate and heighten the scrutiny with which transwomen in her audiences are viewed. Yet, to minimize the presentation of a nude or nearly nude transgender body framed in relation to sex work as simply gratuitous supports a politics of respectability that suppresses public representations and discussions of sexuality as it relates to transgender experience. It erases trans-sexuality, including that which is linked to sex
work, from transgender history. The undertow, then, is a crucial site for investigating transgender sexual politics, yet we should be mindful of the risks implied in navigating its currents.

**Trashing the Scene: Refuse as Queer Refuge in the Undertow**

Come check out our Divas. They are noisy creatures that live in the underworld. They hang out in corners and dark alleys [and] use their hyper-real female bodies to pick [out] chasers and eat their flesh and souls.  
- Sofia Moreno, excerpt from flier for *Divas from the Underground*, 2014

Just beneath the surface, a haven. Found in the dank and stale air, in the cobwebs, and in the shadows of a lost and forgotten place. A mirage. Trans Separatist Island. A sovereign land created by castaways and camouflaged. A trap door. Here is a paradise.  

It is approximately 10pm and I am standing next to a bar in the black light of a neon sign above my head that reads “B!TCH3Z.” Moreno has transformed her dining room into a subterranean club environment for *Divas*, the doors of which opened moments ago. I order a Tecate beer with lime from Chicago-based performance artist and bartender for the evening “Cosmic” Jen Cardona, whose long, dark hair is styled and wrapped in a bandana like Rosie the Riveter’s. I begin wandering through the space. The walls are completely covered in black plastic and decorated with collages by Moreno made with pictures clipped from fashion and porn magazines, condoms, and paint. One, entitled “Self-Portrait,” features a topless, Frankensteinian transsexual woman patchworked together from a brown, hourglass torso with large breasts sprouting from thin, long legs in skintight pants unbuttoned at the top to reveal a large, dark brown penis nearly half the size of one of her thin arms (see fig. 19). A shiny black beehive

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11 The sign is for B!TCH3Z Drinking Project, “a conceptual post-bar drinking project for tomorrow's neosexual,” started by Hernandez and another queer Chicago-based artist named Jonny Sommers (Hernandez and Sommers). Hernandez and Sommers regularly set up B!TCH3Z at exhibits and performance events both at home and abroad. Proceeds from B!TCH3Z drink sales go toward stipends for artists featured in the events they work or are used for art initiatives like s+s project, of which Hernandez and Sommers are both board members.
frames her pale face and compliments her solid black eyes, which stare outward. The B!TCH3Z
sign illuminates everything that is not black in a fluorescent glow, making it seem as though bits
of collage are floating like detritus in a dark abyss or at sea, perhaps along the currents of an
undertow. The ceiling, layered with foil, sparkles
like sunlit ripples of a toxic ocean. Melted snow
and city grit pools on the wooden floor. The
humidity of the sludge mixes with the scent of
perfume, body odor, and marijuana smoke. House
music booms backstage, where several
performers, including Moreno, prepare for their
acts. The space is flooded with dozens of people.
Brown and white high-femme ladies, both cis and
trans, decked out in dresses and heels, black
hipster queers in vintage shirts and slacks, white boys in fetish gear, androgynous and butch
Chicanx in postmodern blends of sportswear and floral print shirts. As Hernandez walks through
the tightly packed space, their bare buttocks brushes against several people in the audience.
When they pass between two middle-aged effeminate white gay men, one playfully slaps them
on the ass. Hernandez pauses and smiles flirtatiously at them. The whiteface masks mounted on
the wall above the pink stage in the other room peek through the doorway into the darkened bar.

In this section, I demonstrate how Moreno’s *trashy aesthetics* constitute the environment
in which *Divas* is staged. I argue that they operate as a set-up for the trans panic scenario, which
positions transfeminine sex workers of color as monsters vulnerable to and deserving of violence
during their encounters with cisgender people, namely cisgender men. As I will demonstrate, the
violence normalized as part of their daily lives, as well as its social justification, is eerily reflected in the Myth of the Sirens. The trashy materials Moreno uses (e.g. garbage bags, pornography magazines, condoms) shape the space and the performances within it. The images and relations they produce rage against the racist stereotypes undergirding the trans panic scenario in ways that queerly implicate the audience. Using performance as an analytic that illuminates how images, materials, and bodies interact to produce space, I show how Moreno’s aesthetics refigure cultural refuse – disposable materials, toxic representations of minorities, cheap kitsch – into a queer refuge of the undertow.

The opening scene of Divas described above pictures a cavernous nightclub that is simultaneously foreboding and festive. While the black plastic bags used as the backdrop of this trashy scene suggest an endless, oceanic environment under the black light, they also suggest a sense of containment, of being bagged up like garbage. Viewed from this perspective, Moreno’s aesthetics are not only trashy, but they trash the audience. Moreno designed the space to invoke a “claustrophobic feel” (4 Apr.). The black plastic wrapped walls of the club trap heat and moisture, intensifying the smells and sounds that pass into and out of our bodies, blurring our physical boundaries and underscoring potentially uncomfortable proximities. The humidity of the densely populated space is oppressive and makes me uncomfortable. When sweat trickles down my forehead and dampens my shirt, I feel dirty and grimy. As others greet me with hugs or kisses, our sweat mingles, increasing my germophobic anxiety and diminishing my sense of physical autonomy. I feel crowded and consider stepping outside for a breath of fresh air, but I stay because I do not want to miss any performances.

Beyond producing claustrophobic physical effects, Moreno’s trashy aesthetics highlight the ugliness with which patriarchal societies treat minority women. Prior to the event, Moreno
shared with me that she used the black plastic bags specifically to generate a symbolic link between violence against transwomen of color in the U.S. with femicide in Juárez, Chihuahua (6 Dec.). Like the maquiladoras murdered and then dumped in ditches and dumpsters, sometimes after being dismembered and bagged up like human garbage, transwomen of color are also mutilated, killed, and trashed with impunity. While authorities are often hesitant to describe such cases as hate crimes, their excessive violence suggests otherwise. Similar to the maquiladoras, the sexual practices of murdered transwomen of color are often scrutinized by the media and courts of justice to determine whether or not they were to blame for the violence, further obfuscating the hateful motives of their assailants (see Footnote 17 in Chapter Two). Furthermore, if they happen to be a transwoman of color and an undocumented immigrant, discussions of violence against their bodies might be filtered through a xenophobic lens to rationalize increased border surveillance and stricter immigration policy. Although the socio-cultural contexts that make it dangerous to be a maquiladora worker in Juárez or a transwoman of color in the U.S. are different, Moreno’s aesthetic choices highlight disturbing similarities that suggest race, on top of misogyny, is a potential motivating factor in violence against either group. The aesthetic environment thus provides a complex symbolic framework for entering into

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12 Articles about femicides report how the bodies of the victims, which often show evidence of sexual assault and other forms of torture, are frequently “tossed in garbage bags” and disposed of in ditches and dumpsters (Diebel; Thompson). Feminist scholars and activists speculate that maquiladoras were killed with impunity because they were poor migrant workers from indigenous communities (see Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán). In other words, their class and race rendered them expendable. As a result, the murders went on for years without any official investigations or concerted efforts to combat them from either the Mexican government or the U.S. based corporations that own most of the maquilas in which they worked. Similarly, gruesome attacks are carried out against transwomen of color. In November 2013, the body of a transwoman of color who had been shot to death was discovered bagged up in a garbage can in Detroit, Michigan. In June 2014, Yaz'min Shancez, another transwoman of color, was burnt alive and her remains were tossed behind a dumpster in Fort Myers, Florida (Malloy).
and thinking about socio-cultural dynamics that affect transwomen of color, particularly those working in the sex industry, who are at increased risk for assault and murder.\(^\text{13}\)

In an ironic twist, Moreno stages a cabaret to celebrate transwomen of color in the sex industry within a setting haunted by the violent scenarios they must be prepared to negotiate on a daily basis. The aesthetic environment of *Divas* operates as the setup for a common scenario wherein the encounter between transwomen of color and members of dominant society, generally figured as cisgender men, is framed in a way that positions transwomen of color as predatory sexual monsters that must be viciously killed in order to maintain the hetero-status quo. This scenario plays out repeatedly not only in horror films and crime television dramas, but in everyday interactions between transwomen of color and cisgender men. In either context, the murder of transwomen of color is often rationalized via the trans panic defense, which suggests that the shock from learning a woman is transgender, especially if one is a cisgender, heterosexual-identified male, is so great that it causes an uncontrollable and violent response. The trans panic defense also supports the mandate that transwomen, and transmen, disclose the gender they were assigned at birth, instead of “tricking” innocent people, which not only dishonors their gender identity, but exposes them to more potential violence. Therefore, I term the scenario described above the “trans panic scenario” in order to call attention to the heterosexist logic and social dynamics through which it is structured. As my analysis of the performance environment for *Divas* will show, the trajectory of the trans panic scenario closely parallels the plotline of the Myth of the Sirens; the siren, a predatory sexual monster, must be

\(^{13}\) While transwomen, regardless of race, must negotiate a public sphere that is hostile toward their existence, statistically, poor transwomen of color and immigrants are at higher risk for transphobic assault and/or murder than their white and/or more economically privileged counterparts (see Lambel; Saffin). Furthermore, if they are sex workers, dominant society views them as criminals undeserving of civil rights and protection in the eyes of heteronormative society (see Fitzgerald, et al. 14; Saffin 150-151; Wilson, et al. 903).
destroyed by Odysseus upon first encounter to preserve and expand the reach of his status as heteropatriarch, a mythic reflection of scenarios of colonial encounter centered around dominating monstrous cultural others and the territories in which they live.

The stage in the next room is the domain, or rather the isle, of Moreno’s trashy siren and the other monstrous femmes included in the lineup.14 Viewed this way, the design of the black plastic environment positions the audience as the sailors in the myth who perish at sea, unable to resist the siren’s song. The configuration of the space thus suggests that those who heed Moreno’s invitation to “check out […] hyper-real female bodies” featured in Divas risk being cannibalized like the sailors from the Myth of the Siren. The invitation for Divas, which circulated on various online platforms as early as a month prior to the event, thus posits a link between heteronormative constructions of sexual desire and the monsterization of transwomen, which together produce the trans panic scenario.

The trans panic scenario, while structured to reinforce particular social dynamics, is rearranged and refigured by those set into motion within its frame during Divas. It is thus important to attend not only to the body and actions of Moreno in this performance, but the

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14 Among them are Keijaun Thomas, a black transfeminine performance artist based in New York City, and Kiam Marcelo Junio, a Chicago-based, Filipinx multi-media artist mentioned earlier in this chapter. Video footage of their performances is available for viewing in the trailer for Porn Again - Vol. 2 (2014), linked in Moreno’s website: http://www.sofiamoreno.com/video.html. For more information on Thomas, see http://pica.org/event/keijaun-thomas/ and the concluding chapter of this dissertation. For more information on Junio, see http://www.kiam-marcelo-junio.com. Additionally, Efrén Arcoiris, a genderqueer Mexican-American installation artist and sculptor collected donations at the door for s+s project in a fabulous fedora-style hat accented with the red plume of a macaw. Other local artists who were not in the line-up to perform, such as Amelia de Rudder of the infamous Casa de las Satanas, a Chicago theater company, and painter Amanda Joy Calobrisi, showed up decked out in teased out wigs and high femme fashion. The participation of these latter artists reflects the community-based production style of Moreno’s events—even the audience shows up ready to contribute to the queer aesthetic constitutive of these performance worlds. For more information on Arcoiris, see http://highconceptlaboratories.org/burning-orchid/. For more information on de Rudder, see https://horrorbuzz.com/2018/02/07/la-casa-de-satanas-just-wants-share-love-valentines-day/. For more information on Calobrisi, see https://amandajoycalobrisi.com/home.html. All websites listed in this footnote were accessed 23 Mar. 2019.
bodies and actions of the audience as well. We are all co-performers in this critical, aesthetic, and mythical reconstruction of the trans panic scenario and our embodied differences and actions in the space alter the meaning and results of the social dynamics it sets into play. The setup of the trans panic scenario suggests we are here to trash or be trashed by the transgender monster, yet when activated by the various queer and transgender bodies in the space, another outcome becomes possible.

The performative trashing invoked through Moreno’s aesthetic composition of the space, which constitutes the setup of the trans panic scenario, evokes Roach’s discussion of performances of waste, similar to the scenarios analyzed in the previous chapters. However, unlike the scenarios featured in previous chapters, popular culture representations and everyday performances of the trans panic scenario literally waste, or trash, transwomen of color in order to ensure the cultural dominance of white heteronormative subjects. However, Moreno’s tactical trashing disrupts the uneven power dynamics instantiated by and reflected in the performances of waste that take place within the trans panic scenario. Transwomen of color are not trashed to restore a heteronormative balance, even though the garbage bags haunt the space with the ghosts produced by such violence. Furthermore, the material and aesthetic constitution of the space situates the audience as complicit with, or possibly even vulnerable to, the violence it invokes. As we move through the space, we are confronted with some of the violent consequences of the sexual objectification of transwomen of color, which may also reflect the life experiences and expectations of some people in the audience. Moreno thus seems to ask us, what is your role in

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15 It is not my intention here to suggest that white transwomen are not affected by the trans panic scenario, for they too suffer from discrimination and physical assault as a result of their gender difference. Rather, it is my goal in this section to highlight how the heteronormative policing and punishment of transwomen is rooted in racist ideologies that seek to control nonwhite, feminized bodies.
the cultural myths and contexts that allow, even encourage, treating minority women this way?

How are you (dis)affected by transphobic violence? Moreno’s trashy aesthetics refigure the context and roles of the trans panic scenario in order to produce the critical space of the undertow, where violence against transwomen of color is positioned as horrific, unacceptable, and part of a larger and more complex history of racialized gender violence.

As the audience moves through and mingles in this haunted club of the undertow, awaiting Moreno’s performance, we are confronted with her disturbing self-portrait; a collage of a topless transsexual monster. Erect dark brown penis displayed, she stares at the viewer in a manner that might be read as menacing, seductive, or both. The darkness of her penis emphasizes not only her racial otherness, but how the monsterization of transwomen is linked to the monsterization of men of color, who are also figured as dangerous threats to U.S. society. Social discourses around the mythic size of the black male penis, which contribute to the racist stereotyping of black men as hypersexual monsters that prey on innocent white women, have and continue to justify violent assaults against and even the murder of black men. More salient to my analysis, however, is the fact that this myth was/is constructed and upheld by white cisgender men, and thus functions as a violent projection of white male sexual jealousy, desire, and fear. It is used to police men of color and uphold the racial hierarchy instantiated during U.S. colonization via chattel slavery, which continues to structure many U.S. institutions and cultural practices. This obsession with the penis of cultural others as a site of violence against white U.S. society is reflected in popular discussions aimed at monsterizing transwomen that focus on their sexual anatomy as a potential sexual threat to both men and women. It is my argument here that it fuels and reinforces the social dynamics constitutive of the trans panic scenario.
That the monster in the collage has a dark brown penis, yet also has a white face and brown breasts, calls attention to how transwomen of color, in particular, are expected to embody conflicting cultural scripts regarding gender and sexuality. In addition to being hypersexual in ways that confirm racist stereotypes, they are expected to embody, or at least strive toward, white cultural ideals of feminine beauty, symbolized in the collage by the whiteness of the figure’s face and her extremely thin arms and legs. This expectation is further emphasized by the whiteface masks. However, their twisted expressions indicate that it is painful, even maddening, to try to live up to white expectations. Disembodied on the wall, they performatively highlight Moreno’s refusal of cultural mandates for racial conformity. That she wears the black plastic mask of the siren signals her choice to be a monster rather than conform.

Here we see how, in addition to using materials literally associated with trash, Moreno uses trashy materials like entertainment and pornography magazines to create the collages and suggest links between how transwomen of color are treated, sexual respectability politics, and popular culture. Pornography is trashy because it insinuates sexual looseness and immorality, and entertainment magazines are trashy because they are cheap kitsch associated with the unrefined tastes of the masses. Thus, the figure pictured in the collage is rendered doubly, even triply trashy. The masks, on the other hand, are topped by teased out and matted wigs that parody the “big” hairstyles popular in vintage pornography. Their faces are molded from plaster, a material that is used to set and initiate the healing of broken body parts, body parts that have been trashed in violent encounters with other people, accidents, or even cosmetic surgery. Moreno thus not only makes these symbols and figures of transgender monstrosity with trashy materials, but she *trashes* them. To *trash* something is physically destroy or otherwise condemn it to the status of garbage. Moreno rips, cuts, and tears trashy materials that affirm stereotypes of
cultural minorities as sexually loose, immoral, and unrefined, in effect *trashing* them to produce critical reflections of the gender and sexual norms that position transwomen of color as monsters. She uses materials associated with breaking and broken bodies to make the whiteface masks, *trashing* white feminine beauty ideals that all women, regardless of race or gender assigned at birth, are expected to embody. Moreno thus utilizes trashy materials, as well as symbolic and literal acts of trashing, to raise questions about the continued social relevance of transgender monstrosity, particularly as the transwave emphasizes discourses of transgender humanity.

The concept of trashing, as it manifests in *Divas*, echoes Stryker’s definition of transgender rage. Stryker defines transgender rage as an affect “bred by the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against [transgender] survival” (“My Words” 244). Rage, similar to trashing, is destructive. It is precisely this quality, Stryker argues, that imbues it with empowering potential; if one can harness its violent force, one can use it to destroy the linguistic, social, and institutional norms that position one as a monster (248-250). I understand Moreno’s acts of trashing in *Divas* as manifestations of transgender rage. Trashing, as a disidentificatory performative tactic, is a destructive force that challenges the social dynamics undergirding the trans panic scenario. However, since the trashing is set in motion through racially charged monster tropes and images, it could also be interpreted as an affirmation of dehumanizing stereotypes that work to justify violence against transwomen or color, and racial minorities more generally.

There is always a risk of replicating painful social realities by re-presenting them within an art context, as mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. Yet, the stereotypes and scenarios outlined above demand critical attention if we are to understand important connections amongst transphobia and racism. We cannot afford to bar them from discussions of transgender
politics because they are too painful, treating them like cultural refuse that should be swept under the rug and forgotten because of the friction they generate. Muñoz argues that it is productive to use performance to “deform and re-form” the “toxic” elements that saturate our daily lives in order to “establish alternate views of the world” (*Disidentifications* 196). In fact, this is a precondition for making queer, and by extension monstrous, worlds. Moreno’s transformation of cultural refuse into cultural critique is an act of monstrous worldmaking. Her trashy aesthetics engender an alternate worldview, one that takes into consideration the lived experiences and histories of transwomen of color, particularly those who do sex work. They impart knowledge about what it means and feels like to be a monster, and for negotiating heteronormative society as such.

Despite the macabre setting, an exuberant social mood permeates the space, no doubt heightened by alcohol and other mind-altering substances shared and consumed onsite. The mood is infectious, and my discomfort fades as the evening unfolds. Proximity and containment ultimately seem to foster a pleasant intimacy and familiarity amongst the crowd rather than claustrophobia. When Hernandez’s ass brushes against other queers in the space, they respond playfully. This blurring of bodily boundaries is done with care, as opposed to the violent blurring of bodily boundaries signaled by the aesthetic environment. Prior to the performance, people in the audience chat about the collages, the radical transformation of the space, and challenge one another to pop trivia when a hit song plays over the speakers. Although we outcasts of society—queers, transsexuals, fetish freaks, and those who dare to share the evening with us—are enveloped together in black plastic like garbage, in a collective body bag, a reminder that we too are implicated in the trans panic scenario for various different and intersecting reasons, we are alive and in a space that is largely welcoming to all in attendance. This is rare. There simply are
not enough spaces like this, spaces where gender and sexual deviants and allies from various racial and ethnic backgrounds gather together to socialize, and most of us seem willing to tolerate the warm, sticky closeness of other bodies in order to make it happen. Here, we gather around the stage, a “trans-separatist island,” a “haven” “just beneath the surface,” like the one Rawk describes in the second epigraph opening this section. We are hidden from the view of those who would gawk rudely or do harm when confronted with those whom they perceive to be monsters. Here one can see how the trans panic scenario set up by the aesthetic environment is altered by the bodies present; we activate the murky space of the undertow as a site of queer sociality and refuge from the violence of white heteropatriarchal culture.

The dark, claustrophobic ambience of the space is similar to that of a BDSM dungeon, its plasticity is reminiscent of rubber and latex fetish suits like those featured in TransEverything, which trap body moisture to effect new sensations on the skin. The aesthetics of sexual subcultures, which are signaled through stylized dress, affect, gesture, and the design of space, performatively evoke specific forms of beauty, pleasure, and belonging. Such aesthetics are often regarded as trashy, especially given their association with deviant sexuality, and in the case of some BDSM practices, body modification. By signaling BDSM aesthetic practices through her use of trashy materials, Moreno highlights the interplay between nonconsensual violence against the body and consensual body play/modification that might also be characterized as a form of violence outside of BDSM spaces. She thus alludes to the transformative potential of BDSM practices and aesthetics, which refashion objects, symbols, and acts used to violently subordinate bodies as generative of queer pleasures (see Bauer 235-236; Julien 122-123). The aesthetic practices of sexual subcultures are not generally defined as art. By utilizing them to build the world of Divas, however, Moreno highlights their critical potential when deployed within an art
frame. Moreno’s trashy aesthetics thus demonstrate not only how pain and pleasure, sexual oppression and liberation, are coextensive, but how the practices and ethos of BDSM provide a particularly useful lens through which to understand these relationships. Through her trashy aesthetics, Moreno transmits and transforms the political landscape of transgender rage into one of transgender desire.

There is a strong sense that all in attendance belong in the space in one way or another. We have chosen to be here, rather than out there, to celebrate the divas advertised in the event flier, transgender monsters who might turn toward us, step out of the collage or off the stage, and devour our “flesh and souls” at any moment. We are welcome here, but we are not necessarily safe. At any point “out there” can burst “in here” and shut the party down. Cops, phobic neighbors, neighbors that simply might want to get to sleep before three in the morning, are potential threats to the fragile ecology of the undertow, threats informed by and made reality in a society that does not value the lives and work of gender and sexual minorities, or our need for queer spaces. That is, unless we generate capital or aid in maintaining the status quo. Yet here, the emphasis is on queer collectivity and intimacy, rather than the commodification or normalization of deviant genders and sexualities. The artists, who have opened their home to us, risk trusting us to not take advantage of their generosity. As Hernandez told me at some point during the evening, “anything goes here,” a philosophy that can be both liberating and dangerous.¹⁶ Thus gathered, we await the song of the siren, vulnerable to the violence that her appearance portends, but willing to risk it for access to the trashy, monstrous world she promises.

¹⁶ Prior to the completion of this chapter, Moreno and Hernandez were forced to move after their apartment building was sold to corporate developers with plans to renovate it into upscale condominiums. While they continue to live in and produce events in Pilsen, their forced move reflects the impact of an ongoing wave of gentrification in the area, yet another element that endangers the production and maintenance queer and transgender spaces. For an in-depth analysis of the effects of gentrification on minoritarian performance scenes in Pilsen, see Jasmine Mahmoud’s
Refusing the Song: Anti-Virtuosic Striptease and/as Choreographing Transgender Desire

So I informed my shipmates point by point, all the while our trim ship was speeding toward the Sirens’ island, driven by a brisk wind. But then—the wind fell in an instant, all glazed to a dead calm…a mysterious power hushed the heaving swells.

- Homer, *The Odyssey*, Translated by Robert Fagles

Still on hands and knees, rocking back and forth, Moreno pauses, leans on her left hand and lifts the right to pull a few petals from a rose. She then rubs the petals on her face and drops them with seeming abandon on the floor. The plastic covering of the bouquet crinkles loudly compared to the volume at which Isaak’s song is playing, “Oh I, don’t wanna fall in love…” Some lean forward, ears turned toward the speakers, perhaps to better hear the music as it drifts across the room. An ice cube clinks loudly inside someone’s cocktail glass. A boot scrapes the wood floor. After ripping several flowers from the bouquet with her teeth, then munching and spewing them onto the stage, Moreno drops it and crawls on all fours back down the stairs, straddling each step awkwardly. She drags her kimono, caught in her fins like seaweed, until it snags on one of the stairs. Those of us in the back stand on tippy toes to get a better view of her. Once on the floor, she kneels, prostrate before the audience, then uses her arms to push herself back to sitting. Hips swaying and shoulders shimmying out of sync with the rhythm of the music, she raises her hands above her head and clasps them together, then trails the fingertips of her left hand down her right forearm and onto to her face. She caresses her cheek, then pushes a petal stuck to it into her mouth with her pointy and middle fingers. She leans backward toward the stage, grabs the bouquet, takes another bite directly from it, looking up at the ceiling listlessly as she chews. She then turns away from us, pulls clumps of petals off the bouquet and tosses them at us. Rather than a romantic shower, they sail awkwardly through the air and then plop on the

floor between Moreno and those in the front row of the audience. We continue to watch as she twirls upward to a standing position, raises the bouquet above her head, then lowers it and removes the plastic so she can gorge herself more freely. Her tongue darts in and out of her mouth and from side to side as she chews, mouth open. Leaning back onto the stage, Moreno sways, turns her head from side to side, then knocks both the wrapper and her kimono onto the floor.

In this section, I provide a choreographic analysis of Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease, which replaces the song of the siren in traditional lore. By emphasizing Moreno’s movements and affective posturing as anti-virtuosic, I argue that Moreno refuses the cultural mandate that compels transwomen to translate their embodied experience and knowledge as education and entertainment for a cisgender public. I show how Moreno’s anti-virtuosic choreography complicates Morris Meyer’s theory that transsexual striptease is simply “a quotation of the surgical theory and procedure of the sex-change operation,” which, like the song of the siren, privileges the knowledge of men (30). Instead, Moreno’s striptease resists the objectification of transfeminine bodies in the name of knowledge production. Even though striptease is heavily associated with the sexual objectification of women, my analysis demonstrates how Moreno’s performance functions as a site for exercising sexual subjectivity and generating what Rivera-Servera describes as “critical pleasures.”

Moreno includes several components of the traditional striptease choreography during her performance of the siren. In Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire, performance theorist Katherine Liepe-Levinson outlines the basic moves and gestures of traditional striptease choreography such as, “the gyrations of the “bump,” the “grind,” and the “shimmy” […] “body stroking” […] the minute details of “facial choreography” and “eye dancing”; and the signature
sexy walk of each performer known as the “strut” or “parade”’’ (111). These moves and gestures accentuate eroticized zones of the body as the exotic dancer skillfully removes articles of clothing to reveal them (109; 113). They simulate foreplay and sexual acts meant to arouse and reflect the erotic fantasies of club patrons (112-116). As Moreno grinds on the floor, she simulates penetrating an invisible partner, when she leans back into a prone position, exposing her ass to us, she invites fantasies of anal penetration. She shimmies her shoulders to accentuate her breasts and strokes her body, implying “autoerotic ecstasy” (111). Liepe-Levinson, as well as other prominent scholars of striptease performance, focus primarily on cisgender women working in heterosexual venues (see Brooks; Shteir). To date, there are not any significant studies on the movement choreographies of transwomen who strip for money or for pleasure. However, Moreno’s performance, as well as the online photo gallery for Divas Nightclub and Bar and David Steinberg’s book about the dancers who work there, *Divas of San Francisco: Portraits of Transsexual Women*, suggest that transwomen draw from the basic repertoire described above.

As a form of entertainment, striptease is generally understood and represented as a practice wherein cisgender women dance and reveal parts of their body to titillate club patrons and earn tips. However, in the case of the transfeminine exotic dancer, it is also expected that her choreography imparts information regarding transgender embodiment and identity. In “I Dream of Jeannie: Transsexual Striptease as Scientific Display,” performance studies scholar Morris Meyer argues that transsexual striptease “is the surgeon’s performance. Both the transsexual identity and physical body of the dancer are creations of medical science. The

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17 Liepe-Levinson’s study does include cismale exotic dancers, however, a majority of it focuses on cisfemale exotic dancers. For a study on cismale strip dancers working in gay clubs, see Richard Tewksbury’s, “A Dramaturgical Analysis of Male Strippers,” in *Journal of Men’s Studies* 2.4 (1994): 325-342.
striptease could not be presented without the surgeon’s prior labor” (37). Meyer’s argument is based on a striptease performance by a transsexual dancer named Jeannie, which he witnessed in the context of a drag show at a gay bar, where the underlying presumption is that performers are female impersonators who identify as men. Meyer uses the gendered assumptions of the drag context to link transsexual striptease to the process of medicalized gender transition. In order to receive hormones or surgery, a transwoman must first publicly perform her true gender identity without medical intervention, in a manner Meyer likens to female impersonation, in order to prove the sincerity of her desire to transition. Meyer suggests that the transsexual striptease begins by mirroring this first stage of transition, then step by step it reveals the “reward” granted her by medical authorities for convincingly performing her true gender, the surgically constructed vagina (28). The transsexual striptease, according to Meyer’s analysis, thus inverts the climax of traditional drag, wherein the true gender of the performer is revealed as opposite to that of his/her drag persona, rather than in alignment with it. I am suspicious of granting so much credence to medical narratives of gender transition in the theorization of transsexual striptease. They overlook the intent of the actual dancer and exclude transwomen who have not had sexual reassignment surgery from the realm of transsexual striptease. As Steinberg notes of the diverse range of exotic dancers at Divas Nightclub and Bar, while “almost all have taken steps to bring their bodies into physical alignment with the female gender they experience as their own,” only “a few have had sexual reassignment (genital) surgery” (3). What other interpretations might we make if we were to consider transsexual striptease beyond medicalized narratives of gender transition?

As the owner of Divas Nightclub and Bar claims, male customers “like their women to have a little something extra” (Koopman). In other words, for the transfeminine exotic dancer
who has not had sexual reassignment surgery, her penis renders her an even hotter commodity. According to Moreno’s observations working in the club, striptease choreography and costuming often emphasize the penis of the dancers, an emphasis mirrored in much of transsexual porn and erotica. Transsexual striptease could thus be said to function as a site for expressing nonnormative desires (eg. a cisman expressing desire for a woman with a penis) and showcasing bodies that do not conform with the trajectory of transition described in medical discourse, wherein transwomen go from “being unambiguous men […] to unambiguous women” (Stone 5). It does not necessarily function as a site for explaining or disseminating specific forms of knowledge about transgender embodiment or experience, like Meyer argues. As both Moreno and Liepe-Levinson note, the striptease choreography ultimately exploits erotic associations with the dancer’s body to communicate sexual and gender fantasies for the strip club patron that are based in and contradict culturally constructed sexual and gender norms (04 Apr.; 124-126).

There is an interesting similarity between Meyer’s theorization of transsexual striptease and Moreno’s characterization of the transwave. They both position (mostly) transwomen as purveyors of knowledge in service of a cisgender public.¹⁸ Throughout Moreno’s performance, she refuses the reveal—of knowledge, of her body—that we are conditioned to anticipate during a striptease performance and as consumers of cultural productions featuring transwomen. In this setting of her own design, Moreno has the power to withhold this information, to make us wait. She disrupts the smooth unfolding of the striptease choreography when she gets tangled in her kimono, shimmies out of time with the music, and knocks items off the stage. When her tongue

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¹⁸ While there are some transmen who have become prominent cultural figures in the wake of the transwave, such as Tiq Milan from GLAAD and Cher’s son Chaz Bono, for the most part, it is associated with the successes and increased visibility of transwomen. To date, I have not discovered any research on clubs that feature transmasculine erotic dancers on a regular basis other than those that occasionally feature drag king shows (see Halberstam, Female Masculinity).
darts in and out of her mouth, it does not demonstrate a prelude to oral sex or French kissing as it would in a traditional striptease (Liepe-Levinson 117), but invokes the serpentine, pre-colonial antecedents of the siren discussed earlier. The audience must rise up on their tippy toes to see the end of the performance, which culminates on the floor. As she lowers to her belly, Moreno performs half-hearted showgirl kicks, allowing her legs to fall out of vertical alignment and to the side. In my view, this does not exemplify her “extraordinary kinesthetic knowledge and mastery of the body,” as Liepe-Levinson argues the moves executed by skilled erotic dancers do (113). Nor does it suggest that she is overcome by the eroticism of her own performance (115). As Moreno kicks her legs, she nonchallantly stuffs more petals into her mouth and munches them slowly. She seems anything but overcome. Rather than revealing the transgender body, and the cultural knowledge it is purported to hold, she instead confronts us with a fantastic monster seemingly uninterested in the people surrounding her.

Moreno’s performance of the siren challenges what she and NYC-based transgender photographer Serena Jara describe as “the newly deceptive field of aesthetic appropriation and voyeurism that capitalizes on our physically vulnerable bodies and economically precarious artistic practices” that is enabled by transwave. It emphasizes that her “body is NOT for you to consume” (Moreno, Appearance). Ironically, Moreno resists these new cultural trends through a dance form that is heavily associated with the objectification and consumption of women – striptease – a form that rubs up against the defanging sexual respectability politics of the transwave, which are framed as liberating and progressive. Yet, Moreno’s performance, as I have shown, does not adhere to the traditional goals of the striptease. It disrupts the objectification of her body as an exotic sexual commodity by frustrating its normal trajectory through an anti-virtuosic choreography that is anything but smooth and sexy. Virtuosic striptease showcases the
dancer’s exceptional talent in manipulating the movement and revelation of her body to incite erotic desire and pleasure in her audience. During her striptease, Moreno gestures toward the erotic capital associated with transwomen, but her anti-virtuosic movements and monstrous appearance suggest a critique of the political economy of transgender representation, both in the sex industry and mainstream media.

Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease is thus a choreography of resistance. She moves awkwardly and out of time with the lethargic ballad playing in the background; she frequently displays more concern with satisfying her personal desires than those of the audience; she is trashy, but in a way that emphasizes her monstrousness, which usually repels rather than attracts erotic interest. Moreno’s siren is not sexy according to normative standards, and her choreography only emphasizes this fact. Her lopsided, sloppy choreography signals her disidentification with the roles she is expected to embody as a transwoman (e.g. sexual object, purveyor of cultural knowledge). Her lack of interest in the audience disrupts the trajectory of the trans panic scenario, which positions transwomen as deceptive sexual predators that actively pursue their victims. Since taking up space in this way is not feasible in Divas Nightclub and Bar, Moreno makes her own space in her own home to publicly resist her objectification.

As I discuss in the introduction to this dissertation, Muñoz argues that anti-virtuosity, or what he terms as “queer failure,” is a common tactic of resistance in queer performance art, and suggests it is a means of refusing participation “in a system of valuation that is predicated on exploitation and conformity” (Cruising 174). While Divas Nightclub and Bar provides space for (mostly) cismen to openly admire and desire transwomen, and for transwomen to openly admire and desire (mostly) cismen, it also provides yet another platform for sexually objectifying transfeminine subjects. It is a business, and transwomen are the product, particularly during
topless nights that feature transgender erotic dancers. As Alana Murtough, an erotic dancer who worked at the club, claims in an interview with a reporter from SF Gate, “a lot of the men at Divas tend to objectify the girls, or they simply have a fetish for T-girls [transwomen]” (Koopman). The combination of sex and commerce, striptease and gender nonconformity, challenges narratives of the space that only attend to its empowering potential. Moreno’s anti-virtuosic choreography invokes the contradictions and ambivalences produced when these two narratives bump up against one another.

Paolo Virno addresses the connections between virtuosity, politics, and the objectification of the laboring body. Beyond recognizing virtuosity as a quality attributed to highly skilled performers, Virno argues that it “requires the presence of others” and finds its fulfillment within itself without being objectified “into an end product” (32). However, within a post-Fordist political economy, virtuosity has become an essential quality of labor in that skillful communicative exchanges amongst laborers are “requested explicitly” in order to foster “social cooperation,” which essentially supplements corporate management free of charge, and helps to generate creative ideas for “the culture industry” (56-58; 63-64). Consequently, the borders between the laborer and the product of labor have been blurred, and the means of extracting surplus value from laborers has increased (65). Drawing from Karl Marx, Virno suggests that the blurring of the border between the laborer and the product of labor is dehumanizing in that it “calls into question the personhood of the one who performs the work” (68). In other words, if one’s virtuosic communication is that which is being sold, it becomes difficult to discern between the product and the laborer as they are of one and the same body.

It is useful to consider the connections between the corporate mandate for virtuosity, which renders the worker as one and the same with the product she produces, and the labor
involved in commercial striptease. One could argue that commercial striptease is a prime example of Virno’s theorization of virtuosic labor on several levels. First off, to be successful as an exotic dancer, one must embody the particular set of feminine beauty standards advertised by the club in which one is employed. Therefore, one must have knowledge of and practical experience in putting together outfits, applying make-up, styling one’s hair, maintaining the proper physique, etcetera, in addition to being able to perform the standard moves involved in striptease dance. The ability to successfully embody idealized forms of feminine beauty is virtuosic. The effect of this kind of virtuosity in the space of the strip club renders the erotic dancer one and the same with the product. When Moreno describes her time working at Divas Nightclub and Bar, she claims, “Those were my first performances. […] It was exhausting, and it was torture […] Put on the shoes, pounds of makeup. You wear a mask. I realized everything I was doing was a performance” (“Porn”). Here, rather than something that is natural, that is an essential aspect of womanhood, femininity is revealed as performative. Moreno’s eroticized, gendered embodiment is deployed to communicate a particular set of sexual fantasies and to incite active fantasizing on the part of the club patron. These immaterial phenomena are produced by the erotic dancer’s embodied labor and sold to the club patron. The distinction between the laborer and the product is blurred, and the erotic dancer is thus objectified.

According to Schneider, the bodies of women are deployed, in the sex industry and commodity culture more broadly, not simply to produce and/or sell a particular fantasy, but to ensure that the desires instantiated by that fantasy remain insatiable in order to keep customers coming back to buy more (5). Schneider argues, “the ways in which desire in late capitalism is instituted and circulated as insatiable, promoting infinite accumulation, has placed the emblematic female body in a particular relation to impossibility – always just beyond reach,
symbolizing that which can never quite be acquired, even for those possessing a body marked female” (ibid.). Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease culminates in her kneeling on all fours and crawling back behind the curtain without so much as a backwards glance to the audience, moving farther and farther away from our reach. She thus changes the terms by which erotic relations and fantasies are generated in striptease, which require maintaining a focus on the audience. Yet, her inattention opens a space for us to generate a different fantasy with regard to the feminine body, one that constantly reminds us of the stakes in doing so.

In a direct response to Schneider, Liepe-Levinson states, “patrons of pornographic and other types of fantasy entertainments usually get exactly what they pay for – the satisfaction of the fantasy experience itself” (124). In other words, the lure is not the promise of attaining the unreachable female figure, but the experience of the fantasy initiated through her performance. As her fins scrape across the floor away from us and toward the curtain, I watch Moreno’s nearly nude body swing from side to side with each step of her crawl. I wonder about the cultural meanings and prejudices projected onto the notion of someone like me, dyke-identified and masculine-of-center, fantasizing about a body like hers. A monstrous body. A transgender body. What would it mean for a cisgender woman who identifies as lesbian? A cisgender male who identifies as gay or straight? As Stryker notes, “transsexuality more than any other transgender practice or identity represents the prospect of destabilizing the foundational presupposition of fixed genders upon which a politics of identity depends,” and as such generates “sheer panic” in both hetero and homonormative spheres (“My Words” 245). Transsexual bodies destabilize gender and sexual identity categories, which is precisely what renders them monstrous in the eyes of dominant society, as has been explored through my analysis of Moreno’s siren. Yet, for some, it is precisely what makes them attractive. The monster, as J.J. Cohen contends, is “really
a kind of desire,” and its relationship to the forbidden is “appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (16-17). Yet, there is a danger in desiring the transsexual body in such a fetishistic manner; it runs the risk of continual objectification even as it opens up new possibilities for gender and sexual embodiments and relations. Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease choreography reminds us of this danger at every turn, as each section has illuminated in one way or another. She does not foreclose fantasizing about transwomen, but she does imply that these fantasies may simply be our own projections. Rather than imparting knowledge about transwomen, Moreno’s performance works to disorient our expectations and incite us to question their source.

Rivera-Servera posits that choreographies of resistance by queer Latinxs engender “critical pleasure” by rearticulating “the heterosexual nature of Latin music” to foreground queerness, and by dancing in the “Anglo gay club” in ways that foreground one’s Latinidad (163; 164). Like the virtuosic social dances that Rivera-Servera describes, Moreno’s anti-virtuosic striptease also generates critical pleasures that disrupt gender and sexual norms in both heteronormative and homonormative milieus. It deploys monstrosity not to dehumanize per se, but to question the terms by which one is granted humanity, as well as one’s desire to become human, or not. It rearticulates the striptease as a site of political empowerment and sexual agency, for both the performer and her audience. During an interview I conducted with Christopher Sonny Martinez, a NYC-based photographer and video artist who has documented several of Moreno’s events, including Divas, he told me that her work provided a space for “letting go or escaping, and being part of this other world,” where he could “become more open and comfortable” as a “queer gay” Mexican. Despite the painful and dangerous elements this undertow dredges in from the outside, the performances taking place along its currents encourage a more fluid and self-reflexive understanding of gender and sexuality. They also demonstrate
where these categories are complicated by racial subjectivity. This is the doing of utopian performatives, and the power of daring to share with an audience what it means to be a monster.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have described Sofia Moreno’s performance practice as a cultural undertow, a site of creative resistance and monstrous worldmaking that resists the sexually conservative, commercial pull of the transwave. I show how Moreno actively chooses to seek out and cultivate venues that break the rules and challenge the trends of the mainstream media and the fine arts world, which capitalize on the recent popularity of transgender issues and people, in order to avert censorship and maintain the integrity of and creative control over her work. In particular, I focus on the cabaret-style event *Divas from the Underground*, which was independently produced in her apartment. I show how it is an example of how performances of monstrosity can be used as platforms for sharpening the fangs of transgender politics in the U.S.

Rather than analyze all of the performances that took place during *Divas*, which could easily fill an entire book, I provide a close reading of Moreno’s solo performance of the siren. I show how her monstrous embodiment, aesthetics, and anti-virtuosic choreography emphasize the importance of continually questioning the terms by which transwomen are made visible or invisible in mainstream politics, entertainment, and our day-to-day interactions. I argue that her performance exposes how these terms vary according the ability or willingness of transwomen to approximate normative ideals of femininity and sexuality, which are complicated by one’s racial subjectivity and citizenship status. In this way, transgender issues are represented as not only relevant to transgender people, but to anyone who is affected by issues of gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship – in sum, all of us.
While I wrote this chapter, Moreno relocated temporarily to Mexico City because, as she told me just before she left in August 2016, not only was she exhausted from producing independent events that are both aesthetically and politically challenging in a U.S. setting, but she found it difficult to live in such an overtly transphobic culture as a transwoman of color, and in particular as a Mexican transwoman of color (10 Aug.). It is important to note that while Moreno does generate a small amount of revenue from her events, all profit from cover charges, and drink and art sales goes towards fees for participating artists or is saved toward the next event (ibid.). Furthermore, while Moreno does receive financial support from donations to s+s project, she often uses personal funds to front the costs of producing these large-scale events. The fact of the matter remains that, given the current political landscape, living life, let alone maintaining an independent art practice, can be difficult on many accounts for transwomen of color in the U.S. Throughout this chapter I have shown how Moreno has navigated these difficulties in ways that are not only artistically innovative, but generative of queerly monstrous worlds. However, the sustainability of such a practice remains an important issue. In the face of continued social discrimination and economic and institutional constraints, how does one maintain the energy to keep work like this going? Must the undertow inevitably acquiesce to the pull of the transwave? If so, will its transgender monsters be able to thrive in the light of day?

In the fall of 2016, just following the controversial election of Donald Trump to the presidential office, which raised immediate concerns not only about the future security of transgender people, racial minorities, and immigrants in the U.S., as was discussed in Chapter One, but of the arts and freedom of expression as well, Moreno teamed up with Antonio Zaragoza of the art collective Perras de Museo (Museum Bitches), Mexican transfeminine pop singer Zemmoa, and ArtSpace México in Condesa, Mexico City, to produce a multi-media art
and performance exhibit. Entitled *Mujeres al Borde de la Venta* (translated as *Women on the Edge of Agency* in the program), the exhibit featured the art and performance of transwomen from Mexico and the U.S.\(^1\) The purpose of the exhibit was to provide a platform for artists that are “trans feminine as well as racial minorities and sex workers” to “reclaim our self-images and our creative autonomy” from exploitative culture industries (Jara and Moreno). While there are no studies to date that provide a comparative analysis of the treatment of transgender people in the U.S. versus Mexico, the emergence of transfeminist movements in Mexico, and Latin America more broadly, along with the questions raised by *Mujeres al Borde*, points to the necessity of research in this area.

One evening, as I was perusing the image feed of my Instagram account, I came across photos of *Mujeres al Borde* that were strangely familiar. One pictures the corner of a gallery in ArtSpace México. Sheer pink fabric hangs from the ceiling to turn it into a small booth. In the center, tangled in golden streamers layered over the pink fabric, Moreno, nude save for the white paint pocked with red marks caking her face and red pumps wrapped in layers of masking and duct tape, leans into the corner, eyes closed. Her right arm is raised to rest on top of her head, the other is nestled in between her legs. In another photo, a white mask with tangled black hair and black eyes stares at the camera from the wall to the left of the booth. In yet another photo, a close-up of the booth shows one of the promotional images for *Divas* mounted on the wall. It

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\(^1\) The name of the exhibit evokes the title of Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar’s 1988 dramedy *Mujeres al Borde de un Ataque de Nervios*. Posts on the Facebook page for the exhibit include a clip from another of Almodóvar’s films, *Todo Sobre de Mi Madre* (1999), featuring the transsexual comedienne Agrado, played by actress Antonia San Juan. The reference to Almodóvar highlights his role as a filmmaker who featured transfeminine characters prior to the transwave. However, that the English version of the exhibit’s title focuses on agency rather than an attack of the nerves also points, perhaps, to the politics of cismen writing and directing transfeminine roles for mainstream film when transwomen largely did not, and still do not, have the economic and/or cultural agency to do so. This interpretation becomes more salient when read within the broader context of Moreno’s undertow, which she utilizes as a platform to feature transfeminine culture makers narrating and representing their own bodies, aesthetics, ideas, and experiences, with *Mujeres al Borde de la Venta* and *Divas* being just two examples.
features Moreno nude, save for the red pumps not yet covered in duct tape and silver tinsel sprouting from her chin and erogenous zones, holding the mask she wore for her cyborg performance during *Divas* (see fig. 20). She is standing next to a canine member her performance community named Lousha. It would seem as though the undertow has seeped across the border to merge with and generate the growth of a trashy scene featuring both old and new monster divas. When and if the undertow reverses its downward trajectory and rises to the surface is anyone’s guess. For the moment, it continues to flourish, just out of sight, flowing around and through the transnational tides of gender and sexual politics in the twenty-first century.

Figure 20: “Sofia and Lousha” by Christopher Sonny Martinez.
CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this dissertation, I cite J.J. Cohen’s definition of the monster as a figure that both polices and transgresses the “borders of the possible” (12). As I have demonstrated, queer and transgender monsters do just that. The scenarios in which they become legible as monsters are aimed at policing the borders of social and cultural norms. The violent treatment of queer and transgender monsters become examples of what happens to those who cross the borders demarcating gender, sexuality, race, and national belonging. However, the modes of birthing, becoming, and being a monster that are examined in this study, beyond reflecting the violent consequences of such crossings, embody and envision queer pleasures, communities, and resistance. During my research, I have not only bumped up against and crossed social and cultural borders but have followed the artists across national borders as they continue the utopian labor of making monstrous worlds.

While having dinner with Sofia Moreno in the spring of 2016, she told me about an interdisciplinary art festival that she was co-producing with another board member of s+s project, Jonny Sommers, Mexican performance artist, photographer, and member of the art collective Perras del Museo (Museum Bitches) Antonio Zaragoza, and Brussels-based filmmaker and curator Chris Miller in Mexico City with the support of ArtSpace México, Casa Gomorra, Fundación del Centro Cultural del México Contemporáneo, Museo de la Ciudad de México, and Pulquería Los Insurgentes.¹ The name of the festival, which was to take place in various locations over the course of two weeks in June, was Homoccult 2.0. & Other Esoterica, which, as I mention in the Introduction, brought together a transnational group of independent visual

¹ Gomorrah House, Foundation of the Center of Contemporary Culture of Mexico, Museum of Mexico City, and Pulquería of the Insurgents.
and performance artists whose work tarries at the intersections between queerness and the occult, including Lechedevirgen Trimegisto (LDVT), who is featured in Chapter Two. *Homoccult 2.0* was a new iteration of a program curated by Daniel McKernan and Richie Rennt in 2007 for MIX NYC Queer Experimental Film Festival entitled *Homoccult and Other Esoterica*, which presented experimental videos dealing in similar themes by artists such as Ron Athey and Bryer P-Orridge, some of which were rescreened at ArtSpace México during *Homoccult 2.0*. According to Moreno, after collaborating with McKernan for a subsequent production of *Homoccult and Other Esoterica* in Chicago in 2012, which included paintings and sculptures, as well as more women artists and artists of color, she proposed to develop the event into a festival in Mexico City and to expand the art disciplines and artist demographics featured even more. Moreno and her co-producers raised money through crowdsourcing online and fundraiser events, including one with TRQPiTECA at Juniors Sports Bar in Pilsen, Chicago entitled *Mala Noche*, which featured Zemmoa, among other special guest artists.² Hence the birth of *Homoccult 2.0.*, which brought together over twenty queer and transgender artists from the U.S., Europe, and Latin America in Mexico City to

² TRQPiTECA is a “Chicago-based artist duo and production company creating space for local and international artists working with queer and tropical aesthetics to experiment and thrive” (TRQPiTECA). It was co-founded by deejays Jacquelyn Guerrero (aka CQQCHiFRUIT) and Natalie Murillo (aka La Spacer), both of whom are mentioned briefly in Chapter Three (185; 208), as is Zemmoa (236). The title of the event, *Mala Noche* (Bad Night) refers to a film (dir. Gus Van Sant, 1986) that centers around an interracial queer sex affair.
showcase new and older work to the public gratis (see fig. 21). “You should come,” Moreno told me, “Felipe [LDVT] is also going to be a part of it.” Without hesitation, I bought an airplane ticket to follow the trail of queer and transgender monsters across the U.S.-Mexico border.

When I arrived in Mexico City, it was not long before I found myself in the company of queer and transgender monsters both familiar and new to me. On June 8, 2016, I made my way to Pulquería Los Insurgentes, a pulque bar in the neighborhood of Colonia Roma in Mexico City that doubles on some nights as a performance venue, for *Mala Noche de Homoccult 2.0.*, the first event of the festival. Once inside Los Insurgentes, which regularly hosts music and poetry events, I found Moreno at the deejay table next to the bar in an outfit made from clear plastic, her face painted with red clay, blue eye shadow, and blue lipstick (see fig. 22). Projected on the wall beside Moreno was a montage of video art by participants in the festival, including one that featured footage from *Divas of the Underground.* After striking up a conversation with Moreno while she was in between cuing videos, music, and managing the stage for the upcoming performances, she shares with me that her make-up was inspired by Mayan cultural history. The color of her lipstick and eye shadow, Moreno explained, references the ancient Mayan practice of painting the bodies of human sacrifices blue before casting them down a sacred well to their deaths. Moreno claimed that she used the blue make-up to suggest a connection between the brutality of human sacrifice
and the murder of transwomen in the present day. However, her use of clay references the creation of the first people in the Popul Vuh (see page 140), suggesting that although transwomen are violently murdered, or sacrificed, to reinforce the myth of a binary gender system that precludes their existence, they have ancient and sacred roots within human history and culture. As I continue to walk around the space, I encounter several black ink drawings by Mexico City-based visual artist Rurru Mipanocha (Rurru Mypussy), many of which, similar to Moreno’s make up, refigure indigenous Mexican iconography to highlight transgender identities and histories. One drawing features Xolotl, the Aztec god of death, monsters, and deformities, dressed in a halter-top, mini-skirt, and pumps. The ambiguously gendered Xolotl sits on what appears to be a hairy penis growing out of a park bench and stares off into the distance as if in deep contemplation. Soon thereafter, Adam Rose and April Lynn of the Chicago-based dance company Antibody Corporation kick off the performance portion of the evening with a cryptic blend of electronic noise poetry and sensuous movement in matching black bob wigs, skirts, and fetish gear. Following their performance, Isabelle Frances McGuire (Chicago) takes the stage and uses water, ice, and body graffiti to interrogate the roles of sexual puritanism and misogyny in normalizing sexual violence. While McGuire is lying on the floor in the center of the bar, the lights black out to end her performance. Moments later, Caleb Yono, a Chicago-based queer multi-media visual and performance artist featured in subsequent Homoccult 2.0 events, shines their cell phone flashlight toward the center of the bar to illuminate Keijaun Thomas, who now sits on the floor where McGuire laid previously. Very slowly Thomas, a NYC-based, black transfeminine performance artist, rises to standing from a sitting position. Butoh dancer and

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3 For a digital version of this drawing that is in color, which is part of a series entitled Caquita Mils, see Mipanocha’s artist website at https://rurru.jimdo.com/portafolio/. Accessed 21 Mar. 2019.
featured artist of *Homoccult 2.0* Sara Zalek (Chicago) stands next to Yono and clicks on her cell phone light, as do others in the audience, to shine it on Thomas. Thomas is wearing a black cloth tied around her waist like a skirt, a thin string of gold chains safety-pinned around her neck, and a gold mesh band wrapped around her shaved head (see fig. 23). Red eye shadow and lipstick accentuate her elegant facial features. With one hand, she holds a black plastic bag with two blond, braided wig extensions hanging from it.

One of Moreno’s longtime collaborators and a featured artist in *Divas*, Thomas creates performance and multimedia installations that investigate “the histories, symbols, and images that construct notions of Black identity within black personhood” (PICA). Throughout her extensive repertoire she “examines, deconstructs, and reconstructs notions of visibility, hyper-visibility, passing, trespassing [and] eroticized, marginalized representations of the body in relation to disposable labor, domestic service, and notions of thingness” (ibid.). The performance described above is an iteration of *Distance is Not Separation*, which “rethinks and rebalances […] how language constructs and transcribes symbols onto the black femme body” (Hemispheric). As the performance unfolds, Thomas becomes a monstrous *thing*, an ambiguous creature whose trashy and chimeric embodiment reflects how racism, sexism, and transphobia interact to shape the social and material realities of black transwomen. However, the context in which Thomas’s
performance takes place raises critical questions about the ways in which her monster might be mis/translated as it crosses national borders.

As the performance proceeds, Thomas, encircled by the audience, removes the black cloth and drops it on the floor. Now completely nude, she swings the black plastic bag back and forth before pulling it over her head and knotting it, the braids positioned on top like pigtails. As she breathes, she sucks the bag in, vacuum sealing it around her face and creating small indentations where her mouth and eyes are. The hiss-like sounds of her muffled breath quiet those in the audience who, up until then, were chatting amongst themselves. She begins to stomp her feet and slaps her thighs and back with both hands in a rhythm reminiscent of cheerleading chants. She pauses, tears a hole in the plastic over her mouth, then continues to stomp her feet and slap either side of her face, her buttocks, her back, and her chest in the same rhythm. I wince with every slap against her face, imagining the sting of it. The stomps and slaps slow down until Thomas is completely still. She then reaches a hand to her face to tear two more holes in the bag over each of her eyes. Squatting on the floor, she picks up the empty plastic wrappers for two flower bouquets from the floor, then pulls them over her hands and forearms like elbow length gloves as a voiceover fades on, “She’s punk. She’s been a fucking punk. […] She a black femme punk n—a bitch.” Thomas chants the last line in unison with the voiceover.

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4 It is important to note that in the voiceover and performance, as well as in Thomas’s transcription of the voiceover, that she says and spells out the N-word as it is commonly pronounced in Black Vernacular English. However, as a person who is not black, I have decided against spelling it out in these pages. My aim here is not to deemphasize it in my description of the performance, minimize its violent and dehumanizing effects on black people, or overlook the fact that it has been reappropriated by black people as a positive term of identification and black cultural belonging. Indeed, these usages of the word are invoked by Thomas’s utterances of it and are important to my overall understanding of her performance. Rather, by choosing not to spell it out in its entirety, I aim to resist the entitlement with which people who are not black use the word, including those who claim to be allies of black people and communities. In future writing on Thomas’s performance practice, I plan to engage the histories and uses of the N-word in more depth.
The aesthetic of Thomas’s abject visage evokes that of Moreno’s trashy siren from *Divas*. She is a monster made of cultural refuse. However, the ambiguous character of her monstrosity renders her more akin to a *thing* than a siren. A thing, besides referring to inanimate objects such as those Thomas uses to transform her body, can refer to an entity “that is not or cannot be specifically designated or precisely described” (“Thing”). In the beginning of the performance, we are confronted with Thomas’s androgynous, albeit feminine body; a body that cannot be specifically designated or precisely described within heteronormative terms. However, to exceed the terms of heteronormative gender within heteronormative societies positions one as a *thing*, a noun that is commonly used as an epithet to dehumanize gender nonconforming people like the punks and femmes Thomas aligns herself with in the beginning of the voiceover. However, to be *thingified*, demoted from the ranks of humanity to the status of object, is a form of dehumanization that reflects the violent subjugation of black and brown people during Western colonization, as poet and essayist Aimé Cesairé claims, and it is a form of racialized dehumanization that persists today (42). The voiceover that frames Thomas’s body describes a *black* femme *punk* *n---a* bitch. This blend of racist, homophobic, and misogynistic terminology emphasizes the queerness and blackness of Thomas’s femininity. Used to frame Thomas’s partially nude body as she slaps it loudly and repeatedly, it signals how heteronormativity and anti-blackness converge to render black transwomen things that can be used and abused with impunity.

As Thomas chants these words in time with the voiceover and foot stomps, her coquettish delivery refigures them as affirmations of black queer and transgender femininity, even as her monstrous visage and the slapping reminds us of how they are deployed in ways that are violent and dehumanizing. When she makes eye contact with the audience, she seems to ask us to
recognize her in her difference, her Otherness (see fig. 24). After lowering herself to the floor onto her hands and knees, Thomas begins to twerk slowly, in dead silence. I look around at the group of people encircling her; primarily brown Mexicans from across the gender and sexual spectrum, including local drag queens and punk rockers, and a sprinkling of white USAmericans, brown Chicanxs, and Latinxs from other regions in the Américas connected with *Homoccult 2.0*. I note only one other black person in the space. The image of Thomas twerking and swinging her blonde braids around while illuminated by the cell phone flashlights is beautiful and disturbing at the same time. I think about the stakes of displaying her body like this in Mexico, a nation whose black and transgender communities and histories are missing from most official records. How does the audience interpret and contextualize her body? Moreover, how do they understand the identities and social contexts referenced in the performance text in relation to their own? Thomas’s twerking slows down to complete stillness. She stands up and begins wrapping her torso, buttox, and legs in clear plastic to make a trashy mini dress. The voiceover continues:

Neo slaves, slaves. Slaves. Black femme n---a bitch. She a black femme n---a bitch.
Slave femmes with no visible chains, enslaved, invisible goddesses react. Visibility on deck. *We* re-act. They say acting comes natural but I’m real. Imma real fucking goddess gurl. What they say? Hash tag girls like us.
Thomas tears off her plastic mask, gloves, and mini dress, speaking the words of the voiceover in unison as she does so. No longer a monstrous thing, she returns to her previous look, nude and crowned in gold, a real fucking goddess girl.

Thomas’s performance during *Homoccult 2.0* raises important questions about the differences and similarities between the histories of racism and transphobia in the U.S. and Mexico, and the ways in which they continue to haunt us in the present. It asks, what are the terms by which black trans femmes are granted or denied humanity in the twenty-first century, and how do these terms mutate across different cultural contexts? Strikingly, Thomas’s performance, like Moreno’s performance and the visual art by Mipanocha featured that evening, evokes not only the abjection and horror associated with queer and transgender monsters but highlights their association with the divine. Queer and transgender artists not only turn to the figure of the monster to excavate the LGBTQ histories censored in popular culture and political discourse for tactics of survival and worldmaking in the present day, but to reclaim the sacred roles of nonheteronormative genders and sexualities within ancient spiritual practices and cosmologies, which were positioned as monstrous and therefore evil by the European colonizers who attempted to eradicate them. Future research in this area, therefore, would benefit from an in-depth examination of the intersections between queer and transgender monstrosity with the divine in performance, which would undoubtedly lead to new tactics for fanging LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices, as well as for building utopian worlds that transcend, if only temporarily, the toxic social and material realities that we must navigate in order to survive.

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Throughout this dissertation, I have shown how queer and transgender artists who identify with or as women deploy the figure of the monster to question the terms by which they
are granted or denied humanity in twenty-first century U.S., paying particular attention to how these terms are impacted by race and citizenship status, as well as economic class and ability. This dissertation began with a set of provisional questions about the relationship between monstrosity and LGBTQ lived experiences and desires. I asked: Why, in an era celebrated for its advances in LGBTQ civil rights, do the artists in this study turn toward the figure of the monster, a figure deployed in mainstream media and politics to dehumanize gender and sexual minorities, as a means of articulating their lived experiences and desires? How might turning to the monsters that are currently being relegated to the closets of LGBTQ history give us insight into LGBTQ social and material realities in the present? What kinds of relations, spaces, and communities do queer and transgender performances of monstrosity produce?

By way of responding to these questions, I immersed myself in queer performance scenes in Chicago and New York City to search for and observe their monsters in action. Collecting materials from both private and public archives of LGBTQ history during my field research enabled me to build a loose genealogy of queer and transgender performances of monstrosity for each individual chapter. What results from this work is a performance bestiary that tracks how butches, femme lesbians, queer men, and transwomen of color, many of whom are from Latin America, deploy the figure of the monster to reflect their lived experiences and desires. Grounded by scholarship in the fields of performance, gender, and sexualities studies, I theorize the monstrous embodiments, aesthetics, and choreographies of the artists central to this dissertation as performative tactics that resist the defanging of LGBTQ politics, representations, and practices. Chapter One focuses on Cook’s *Dykenstein: Sex Horror and the Tragedy of the Straight Brain*. I show how the aliens and creatures in the play envision an apocalyptic world centered around the lives and desires of butches, femme lesbians, and genderqueer dykes,
threatening an end to the straight mind, which I argue has managed to reproduce its normative gender and sexual logics within white lesbian feminist discourse and communities. Chapter two focuses on Osornio’s performance of *la bruja* during *Inferno Varieté*. I show how *Inferno* conjures queer purgatory to incite a critical examination of the cultural contexts and colonial histories that enable the outsourcing of homophobic violence in Mexico and the U.S. While the main content of *Inferno* is based on Leche’s experiences and observations of homophobic violence in Mexico, the modifications he made for its Chicago premiere expand this context to include the experiences of gay and other queer men of color living in the U.S. Chapter Three focuses on Moreno’s *Divas from the Underground*. I argue that her salacious performance of the siren resists the sexual respectability politics of the transwave by producing a cultural undertow that privileges the lived experiences and desires of transwomen of color who do sex work.

What I have learned is that, even though there have been remarkable changes in attitude and policy regarding LGBTQ people in early twenty-first century U.S., many of us continue to be treated as monsters, and this is especially so when our queer and transgender subjectivities are layered with racial and ethnic difference, disability and disease, and/or economic disadvantage. Indeed, the monster remains a salient metaphor for LGBTQ experience in the present. Despite representing the social and material vulnerability of many LGBTQ people in the U.S., which has been exacerbated in recent years by tumultuous changes in the political landscape, the artists in this study show us how the figure of the monster can be reclaimed and redeployed to cut through borders so that we might reach, touch, and connect with one another across lines of difference. Furthermore, their performances reveal the queerly subversive aesthetic and embodied pleasures of flaunting one’s monstrousness. These latter two deployments of monstrosity, which reflect the
utopian potential of performance, keep me hoping for a better future in an increasingly dismal political present.

The international practices of the artists in this study have led me to expand the purview of my research and take it beyond the confines of the U.S. to include performances of monstrosity produced in other regions of the Américas. In the process, new questions have arisen. How are queer and transgender performances of monstrosity mis/translated as they cross national borders? How might a transnational study of queer and transgender performances of monstrosity in the Américas provide new insights into the colonial foundations of defanged LGBTQ discourses, practices, and politics? What kinds of networks, alliances, and communities do transnational performances of queer and transgender monstrosity enable? My aim, as I move forward with this research, is to generate provisional answers to these questions, and my hope is that these monstrous performances will provide new tactics for sustaining, nourishing, and sharpening the fangs of LGBTQ artists, activists, academics, and allies, as well as their transnational communities, so that we can continue to cut through, cut across, and cut up the borders that separate us, and use the remains to build fantastic new worlds that question what it means to be, or not to be, human.


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