Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance

Dissertation

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Drama

by

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DEDICATION

To

All the magical queer and trans folx striving to heal themselves and the world

To the artist-activist-healers and teachers who inspired this work, some of whom are included here, many of whom are not. I love and appreciate you.

To Christien Rodriguez, I never had the privilege of meeting you, but I am grateful for the spirit of generosity and activism you brought to UCI. Rest in Power.

Tack så mycket till min bedårande, härliga, Roliga, och vackra fru som stöder och inspirerar mig oändligt.

To my mother, who taught me love is an action word.

And to my ancestors and loved ones in spirit who breathe healing work into me, including Evert and Audrey Pattison, who left this world before the completion of this project. My eternal gratitude.

Finally, this labor of love has only been possible because of all that I receive from my guru, Paramahansa Yogananda
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GLOSSARY – QUICK GUIDE (provided by Trans Student Educational Resources)

**Cisgender/cis:** term for someone who exclusively identifies as their sex assigned at birth. The term cisgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life.

**Femme:** An identity or presentation that leans towards femininity. Femme can be an adjective (he’s a femme boy), a verb (she feels better when she “femmes up”), or a noun (they’re a femme). Although commonly associated with feminine lesbian/queer women, it’s used by many to describe a distinct gender identity and/or expression, and does not necessarily imply that one also identifies as a woman or not.

**Gender Expression/Presentation:** The physical manifestation of one’s gender identity through clothing, hairstyle, voice, body shape, etc. (typically referred to as masculine or feminine). Many transgender people seek to make their gender expression (how they look) match their gender identity (who they are), rather than their sex assigned at birth. Someone with a gender nonconforming gender expression may or may not be transgender.

**Gender Identity:** One’s internal sense of being male, female, neither of these, both, or other gender(s). Everyone has a gender identity, including you. For transgender people, their sex assigned at birth and their gender identity are not necessarily the same.

**Heteronormative / Heteronormativity:** These terms refer to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm, which plays out in interpersonal interactions and society and furthers the marginalization of queer people.

**Intersex:** Describing a person with a less common combination of hormones, chromosomes, and anatomy that are used to assign sex at birth. There are many examples such as Klinefelter Syndrome, Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, and Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia. Parents and medical professionals usually coercively assign intersex infants a sex and have, in the past, been medically permitted to perform surgical operations to conform the infant’s genitalia to that assignment. This practice has become increasingly controversial as intersex adults speak out against the practice. The term intersex is not interchangeable with or a synonym for transgender (although some intersex people do identify as transgender).

**Nonbinary (also non-binary):** preferred umbrella term for all genders other than male/female or woman/man, as used in an adjective...Not all nonbinary people identify as trans and not all trans people identify as nonbinary. Sometimes (and increasingly), nonbinary can be used to describe the aesthetic/presentation/expression of a cisgender or transgender person.

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1 Because these definitions continuously change, it is more reliable to utilize frequently updated online sources, such as this educational resource found at www.transstudent.org/definitions. This partial glossary is reprinted here with permission from Trans Student Educational Resources.
**Passing/blending/assimilating:** Being perceived by others as a particular identity/gender or cisgender regardless how the individual in question identifies, e.g. passing as straight, passing as a cis woman, passing as a youth. This term has become controversial as “passing” can imply that one is not genuinely what they are passing as.

**Queer:** A term for people of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. This term has a complicated history as a reclaimed slur.

**Top Surgery:** Chest surgery such as double mastectomy, breast augmentation, or periareolar (keyhole) surgeries.

**Trans:** Prefix or adjective used as an abbreviation of transgender, derived from the Latin word meaning “across from” or “on the other side of.”

**Transgender/Trans:** Encompassing term of many gender identities of those who do not identify or exclusively identify with their sex assigned at birth. The term transgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life.

**Transmisogyny:** Originally coined by the author Julia Serano, this term designates the intersections of transphobia and misogyny and how they are often experienced as a form of oppression by trans women.

**Transphobia:** Systemic violence against trans people, associated with attitudes such as fear, discomfort, distrust, or disdain. This word is used similarly to homophobia, xenophobia, misogyny, etc.

**Trans Woman / Trans Man:** Trans woman generally describes someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman. This individual may or may not actively identify as trans. Many trans individuals prefer a space between trans and woman/man. Other do not. Often it is good just to use woman or man. Sometimes trans women identify as male-to-female (also MTF, M2F, or trans feminine) and sometimes trans men identify as female-to-male (also FTM, F2M, or trans masculine). Please ask before identifying someone. Use the term and pronouns preferred by the individual.
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The period of my doctoral studies saw my life’s most challenging moments—divorce, death of a close family member, my own physical health ailments, crippling anxiety and depression. There were times I doubted I could see this dissertation through. But my committee members showed patience, compassion, and support—not only toward my academic work, but toward my well-being. This example of integrating education and healing was also formative in my development of this work.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance

By

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Professor Emily Roxworthy, Chair

I argue that healing performances are an important site of activist practice and urge performance-based healing (including applied theatre, dramatherapy, and social justice theatre) to engage in decolonizing critiques and methods, integrating performances of healing and activism. By studying the work of transgender artists of color and analyzing their healing intentions and methods in activist performances, I theorize the possibilities of change incited by the performances—both utopic social change and individual healing for audience members and performers. As this project formulates it, trans-healing is a term I utilize to address the particular needs and experiences of people who self-identify as trans to heal themselves and their queer and trans communities. “Trans-healing” does not suggest that trans identity or trans people need healing, but rather, that society does. Three case studies are presented to examine the possibilities of trans-healing in performance. To open even the possibility of trans-healing, it is important to recognize all the artists in this dissertation as cultural and knowledge producers who perform a valuable labor.
I examine Sri Lankan-American queer trans solo performer, D’Lo, arguing that performing in a trans temporality, alchemizing tragedy into comedy, and “transing” tradition can yield trans-healing possibilities for the performer and audience members. In the case of the group, Living Mythologies, consisting of five multi-ethnic trans and intersex femmes of color, I argue that their performance opens an Anzaldúan borderland space where tensions between dis/ease and healing, death and life perform activism and healing possibilities. Through decolonial projects such as resisting colonial closures, reclaiming mythological figures, and rebuilding a community space through a “hermeneutics of love” (Sandoval) that centralizes (and thus reframes) the narratives of trans people of color, Living Mythologies performs a trans-healing. Finally, I argue that the South Asian American (former) spoken word duo, DarkMatter, performs possibilities of decolonizing the neoliberal university. I refer to their workshop/ performance as a “pedagogy of failure” (LeMaster), finding the theoretical site of “failure” in the context of the neoliberal university, useful for threading important connections among healing, performance, pedagogy, and decolonial activism.

Keywords: healing performance, trans, queer, decolonial, radical pedagogy, activism
INTRODUCTION

Trans-Healing: Colonial Closures and Queer Openings

For communities like mine we can heal from one incident and then another one happens right after it. There is no “break,” so the healing work has to be integrated, has to be about: How do I prepare myself to go outside not *if* I will be harassed, but when? How do I understand that I am worth more than this mistreatment, that I am not the problem, but them?

–Alok Vaid-Menon (of DarkMatter)

Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises. We build culture as we inscribe in these various forms. Inherent in the creative act is a spiritual, psychic component—one of spiritual excavation, of (ad)venturing into the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world. To do this kind of work requires the total person—body, soul, mind, and spirit.

–Gloria Anzaldúa

In a culture of death, where death by torture, poverty, or cynicism and despair, the task of keeping open the space for mistica—for life itself and the hope for life—belongs to those whose power derives from their spirit of resistance.

–Leela Fernandes

When oppressive politics are expanding globally, and there is a documented rise in hate-based violence that most heavily impacts queer and trans people of color, there has never been a more crucial time to study the possibilities of psychological healing and decolonizing practices for communities at these intersections. Individuals and groups at the intersections of these identity markers are at highest risk of violence and social isolation, from suicide and psychological trauma, to physical and emotional abuse.

According to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey in 2015, LGBTQ+ youth are twenty-five times more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth. Sixty-three percent of

2 Please see glossary preceding this introduction, provided by Trans Student Educational Resources.
trans people have experienced a serious act of discrimination. Reports show trans people are twenty times more likely to attempt suicide than cisgender\(^3\) people. Over half surveyed trans people report being harassed or bullied in school.\(^4\) As Alok Vaid-Menon of DarkMatter told me in an email interview on healing with QTIPoC (queer trans intersex people of color) communities, “For communities like mine we can heal from one incident and then another one happens right after it. There is no ‘break,’ so the healing work has to be integrated...”\(^5\) To describe healing work as “integrated” suggests that medical and psychology fields ought not be alone in responding to the imperative to improve trans lives. With traumatic experiences being a pervasive presence in the lives of so many trans people, I begin my dissertation with a line of inquiry: What is being done right now by trans artists to address this trauma (their own and their community)? How can we, as performance and gender studies scholars and practitioners (with institutional backing) address the urgent need for healing work in trans communities?

When positioned with words such as “queer” and “trans,” the term “healing” may signal traumatizing practices such as involuntary institutionalization, or conversion therapy. Disturbingly, language of “healing” and cure” has been notoriously abused in anti-LGBT rhetoric, particularly in conjunction with AIDS rhetoric, such as the hateful slogan “AIDS cures f*gs.” In other words, the term healing may intuitively signal a disorder, or a brokenness, a need for a cure. This project repositions “healing” from pathology to self-care and self-empowered practices, to be defined by the ones who are healed. It reclaims the subjugated healing knowledges toward empowering queer and trans communities and

\(^3\) Please see the provided glossary.
\(^4\) Currently the best statistical data on this is available at the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (http://www.ustranssurvey.org/)
\(^5\) Alok Vaid-Menon, interview by Anna Winget, 20 April 2018. Email.
individuals. The pathologizing practices of Western medical and psychological sciences, along with the practices of the health industries, mete out daily judgment and violence which result in lack of access to healthcare and healing. These stigmas are further echoed in queer and trans people’s kinship communities, with the result that those on the margins are more and more turning to their own decolonizing methods for self-care, psychological healing, and empowerment.

My dissertation, *Performing Possibilities: Trans-Healing in Activist Performance*, argues that healing performances are an important site of activist practice, and urges performance-based healing (including applied theatre, dramatherapy, and social justice theatre) to engage in decolonizing critiques and methods, integrating performances of healing and activism. By studying the work of transgender artists of color and analyzing their healing intentions and methods in activist performances, I theorize the possibilities of change incited by the performances—both utopic social change and individual healing for audience members and performers. Three case studies are presented to examine the possibilities of trans-healing in performance. To open even the possibility of trans-healing, it is important to recognize all the artists in this dissertation perform a valuable labor. I analyze queer trans South Asian American comic performer D’Lo; a queer and trans and intersex femmes of color performance collective, Living Mythologies; and the trans South Asian American spoken word duo, DarkMatter, all of whom have been adamant about the interconnectedness of their decolonizing, activist practice, and their healing practice. I chose these examples exactly because they all use performance methods to further their activism, to raise awareness of issues their communities face, and importantly, to heal their own trauma. Each defines that trauma as both personal as well as ancestral and
intergenerational trauma, while opening a healing space for their audience/participants to heal themselves.

Already, “on the ground” there is much work being done, particularly in QTPoC (queer and trans people of color) spaces, to utilize performance praxis for healing. Many of these artists and activist groups include trans femmes and non-binary people of color. Some queer and trans artists are drawing specifically upon forms of ritual protest, and for some, such as Living Mythologies, this includes a turn toward a queer ancestral past to uncover, redefine, and reclaim indigenous or pre-colonial healing modalities. For these artists, reaching into imagined and recovered queer pasts, to develop ritual forms of protest, has yielded productive healing possibilities. Furthermore, this reclaiming and recovering work has offered them ways of articulating visions and blueprints for a queerly utopic future that can be felt and experienced now. Such processes, for these artists, are decidedly and intentionally decolonizing.

Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to confront directly the contentious and convoluted significance of “healing” for queer and trans people, and particularly those of color, which includes: so-called healing and health as colonizing practice, reclaiming co-opted healing knowledge as decolonizing practice, pathologizing and disempowering practices associated with the medical industrial complex, as well as empowering practices of self-driven and community healing practices. The history of atrocious “medical” experimentation on black slaves, committed in the name of medical advancement and “healing” can also be signaled with a broad term like “healing.” These hateful abuses of white colonialism and heteronormativity must be acknowledged and fiercely resisted in a project on queer healing. Of course, successful examples of queer and trans people of color
receiving the help they need to heal from Western medical practices certainly exist and should continue to be analyzed (and cultivated), but because of the historical systematic violence involved in this industry, it is important to continuously remain open to critique.⁶

I emphasize that with a paradigmatic shift to recognizing healing as a subjugated knowledge and defining healing as a decolonizing practice, healing becomes not an act toward a cure, but a subject-driven process. Because of the oppressive, colonial, pathologizing ties that bind the notion of “healing” for many in the QTPOC community, the term “healing” itself is sometimes avoided. This is, in part, why I’ve developed a particular term (trans-healing) with which to articulate this work, and in the foregoing pages I will elucidate this further. Highlighting the healing work in the performance practices I’ve described, emphasizes the spiritual, emotional, and performative labor these artists engage in through these performance practices. Foregrounding the labor of their healing performances as both a site of cultural and knowledge production, and a site of decolonization, works to reclaim their subjugated knowledge and coopted practices, demanding acknowledgment of their valuable contributions (both to their audiences and to scholarship).⁷

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⁶ Such a continuous openness to critique is a tenant of whiteness studies, particularly as formulated by Sara Ahmed, “Phenomenology of Whiteness.”

⁷ I am inspired by Jeannie Scheper’s methodology in her article, “Baltimore as Epistemology.” She argues for the recognition of women in the arts “as cultural producers and critics, not merely as muses or objects on display. They used their bodies as sources of knowledge and resistance.” She further remarks that her interest is particularly “in how these figures have mobilized their critiques of the mandate to perform both on-stage and off.” Keeping the performers/healers in focus throughout the dissertation, I analyze their work and the healing possibilities of their performances, recognizing them as cultural and knowledge producers, critics, and healers in their own right.
**Toward a Trans-Healing in Performance Praxis**

As this project formulates it, trans-healing is a term I utilize to address the particular needs and experiences of people who self-identify as trans to heal themselves and their queer and trans communities. The trans with the hyphen gestures to the *process* and *movement* of healing, grounded in Susan Stryker’s work (building off of Lucas Crawford) on transing as a verb, “a process which takes place within, as well as across or between gendered spaces...a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly.”

Thus, while the focus is on *gender*, the movement signaled in the trans prefix is *across* and *through* structures of power which transgender people navigate in their efforts to heal. We know from a long line of black feminist scholars, notably law scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, that such structures of power are interwoven. Therefore, while the scope of this project is more heavily concerned with gender, I attempt to honor the experiences of the artists about whom I write by explicitly addressing their personal and communal navigation through the various matrices of power (and oppression) in their movements of healing, centering their own articulations of their intersectional identities.

The hyphen in “trans-healing” is also important, “because it marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit *relationality* of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix.” In my conversations with artists and research about their work and how they articulate their work as *healing*, or how they articulate their various healing processes, though they share commonalities that my work will address, it is crucial to resist any

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9 Ibid, 11.
foreclosure on a static definition. My whole dissertation work is, in a sense, a movement toward a definition of trans-healing, but is in no way an exhaustive account. This dissertation attempts to both define and document a specific and important movement happening in queer and trans communities today—a movement of healing, while serving as a call to action for organizations, institutions, and artists to challenge themselves to join the movement of trans-healing.

I don’t suggest that “trans-healing” as a term is confined to these principles. “Trans-healing” is much more a theorization about approaches, possibilities, and experiences of healing when trans people are centralized. Some important aspects of trans-healing are not addressed at length in this dissertation: for instance, hormone therapy, gender affirmation surgery, transgender health care clinics and specific statistics and details related to the medical health industry. “Trans-healing” does not suggest that trans identity or trans people need healing, but rather, that society does. It begins with the perspective that being trans in a cis-het-normative society means being consistently in a position of enacting labor and experiencing trauma that cis-het-normative people do not. Trans-healing can be conceived in two parts, though they are connected closely and certainly, can often overlap: social trans-healing and individual trans-healing. Trans-healing begins from an awareness that the disease does not originate in the trans subject, the trans subject is not responsible for their illness, but their oppression, and its subsequent trauma, is a “virus” of social constructs like colonialism. Trans-healing is to ask trans subjects, given that society is sick with transmisogyny and racism, what do you need to heal from this inescapable dis/ease? How can I help you in that healing process?

10 Please see glossary preceding this introduction.
Trans-healing is both a verb, coming out of Stryker’s use of “trans” as a verb—to be trans-healing, and a noun—to experience a trans-healing. Both self-identified trans people and cis people may engage in the labor of trans-healing. Since trans-healing refers to a dis/ease that is endemic to society’s limitations and systematic oppression, trans-healing may be experienced and incited by people, organizations, and institutions that are not made up solely of trans identifying individuals. Possibilities of trans-healing may be thought of as possibilities of lessening or ending violence against and suffering of trans people. The question of, engagement with, passion and utopic longing for this possibility, is the heart of this project.

The relationality of trans-healing is crucial—because it resists closures, opens new connections, and is central to decolonial practice, as formulated by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh. Opening rather than closing is the domain of healing (and relationality). Relationality resists the universalizing of modernity, the ideology of coloniality. Relationality highlights local and cross geopolitical conversations and understandings, remaining open to what Walsh and Mignolo call a decolonial pluriversality which undoes “Eurocentrism’s totalizing claim and frame...perpetuated in the Western geopolitics of knowledge.”¹¹ Relationality is part of the healing process in trans-healing. It is the hyphen in trans-healing. Relationality is building community in solidarity across various identity formations to struggle together, without neglecting the ways that oppression, too, is relational. Queer of color theorist José Muñoz writes from a relational perspective, claiming it is a privilege to neglect to do so. Relationality is central to the worldview of many of the artists about whom I write in this project. As Mignolo and Walsh formulate it:

¹¹ Mignolo and Walsh, On Decoloniality, Kindlebook location 154.
Its meaning references what some Andean Indigenous thinkers, including Nina Pacari, Fernando Huanacuni Mamani, and Félix Patzi Paco, refer to as vincularidad. Vincularidad is the awareness of the integral relation and interdependence amongst all living organisms (in which humans are only a part) with territory or land and the cosmos. It is a relation and interdependence in search of balance and harmony of life in the planet...[V]incularidad/relationality unsettles the singular authoritativeness and universal character typically assumed and portrayed in academic thought. Relationality/vincularidad seeks connections and correlations.

While not all the artists I write about identify as indigenous, they all share a spirituality of interconnectivity and interdependence, which to a lesser or greater degree informs their trans-healing praxis. Though it is marginalized, a relational spirituality is not a new phenomenon in gender and women’s studies or in performance practice. It can be seen in foundational queer women of color like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, in decolonization theories from indigenous scholars like Marie Battiste and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in postcolonial scholarship like M. Jacqui Alexander, Leela Fernandes, and Lata Mani, and we are seeing it now in the healing/ self-care movement spreading in communities of queer and trans people of color, in particular. Many are inviting their ancestors, their spirit guides into the healing space with them. Many practice witchcraft and read tarot cards and meditate as part of their self and communal care practices. Others are reclaiming their cultural practices and “transing” them for their own trans-healing purposes. For these artists, reclaiming is one of their decolonial and healing tools.

In a performance studies context, indigenous spiritualities have been appropriated by various illustrious white male theorist/ practitioners such as Antonin Artaud, Konstantin Stanislavski, Jerzy Grotowski, and Richard Schechner, all of whom are foundational to healing performance in EuroAmerican contexts. Writing and researching from a critique of whiteness with an attempt toward decolonial praxis, I aim to decenter

12 Ibid, 142.
these staunch voices of theatrical healing, and (re)center trans, queer, POC, indigenous, and otherwise marginalized voices. Rather than relying heavily on the healing performance “canon,” I look to subjugated knowledges\textsuperscript{13} in the form of embodied knowledges of artist-healers themselves. I orient a substantial portion of the dissertation toward socially-wrought dis/eases plaguing the communities about which I write, recognizing that confronting, negotiating, remembering, and (re)claiming are part of healing processes. Because of this positionality, this project finds decolonial praxis, activism, and healing to be in constant dialogue.

“Decolonial” which takes up the practical aspects of decolonizing work, has become in artistic/activist communities a buzzword utilized almost so ubiquitously that, like the term “healing,” its meaning has become muddled and unclear. Presumably, when we use a term like decolonizing we understand that it is the undoing of colonizing practices. But when nonbinary Latinx dancer Richard Aviles proclaims in their performance of La Malinche in Living Mythologies that “Learning to love me is dangerous, it’s decolonizing,” what exactly is being decolonized? And how does this decolonizing work? If colonizing is the control and erasure of indigenous peoples, then Aviles suggests, loving indigenous people is a decolonizing act. Loving is also inherently a relational act—even if the relationality describes the way one relates to oneself.

In her Methodology of the Oppressed, Chela Sandoval writes about love as a hermeneutics of social change, “a decolonizing movida.” She cites the following theorists and activists who affirm this use of “love”: Frantz Fanon who said, “Today I believe in the possibility of love, that is why I endeavor to trace its imperfections, its perversions;” Che

\textsuperscript{13} See Foucault, Power/Knowledge, 78-93.
Rivera, who said, “The true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love;” and bell hooks, who believes “[l]ove…is an important source of empowerment when we struggle to confront issues of sex, race, and class.” Love, for these decolonial thinkers, is actually part of the practice of decolonization. Love is also a ubiquitously used word, and Chela Sandoval spends nearly her entire book as a process of defining it as a tool for social change, but the most important aspect of her framing of love is that it shifts the consciousness of the lover to what she calls a differential consciousness, (evoking a long line of feminists of color). From this new purview, revolutionary theories and practices may be realized. She says, “It is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political ‘movidas’—revolutionary maneuvers toward a decolonized being.”14 The implication here is that love can shift one’s consciousness in such a way that it opens new ways of resistance against colonial closures, including guiding and accessing new connections of which colonialism could not conceive. Above all, love is relational, and this hermeneutics of love is analogous to Mignolo and Walsh’s use of vincularidad.

It is from this perspective of the decolonial as relational that this project engages with performing and trans-healing as a site of decoloniality. The artists about whom I write may have different ways of articulating their decolonial practice. For instance, the most important aspect of decolonization for self-identified black indigenous filapinx transwomxn Edxie Betts of Living Mythologies is putting an end to state violence, and for them this includes anarchy, since Edxie believes the state is inherently corrupt and colonial. However, rather than focusing my project on the outcomes or the goals of decolonizing practice, I rather examine the possibilities of how the decolonial performs healing and how

14 Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, 140.
healing might perform the decolonial. I ask what performance healing might offer decolonial praxis and what decolonial praxis might offer healing, and the limits of my query are the scope of trans artists engaging in a performance practice which they articulate and conceive of as engaging in healing—however they might understand healing for themselves. Each chapter will provide that particular artist or group’s articulation of healing for them.

An equally significant reason for my focus on the relational aspects of trans-healing is that my research revealed relationality may be integral to the way that trans people heal from their trauma. In both artist interviews and traumatology research specific to trans people such as studies conducted by Christopher Shelley, Burstow, Singh, and McKleroy, some commonalities in what was part of the trans-healing process were about community connection and cultivating a kind of spirituality. Often, for those questioned, the spirituality offered hope, but for others like Reyna the Ripper whose spirituality is interwoven with death, hope may not be offered, but a spiritual connection to something beyond the matrices of oppression is nevertheless important in their trans-healing praxis.

Trans-Healing Guideposts

While trans-healing is a movement I leave open and resistant to static definitions, there are some determining principles constitutive of trans-healing—not limitations, but guideposts that may be followed, altered, or dismissed in any particular experience of trans-healing, but which I have employed as a result of overlapping articulations, narratives, and expressions of healing from trans people of color studied in this dissertation. These “guideposts” (in no particular order) also consider the work of trauma therapists who work particularly with QTIPoC, and consist of the following: (1) community connection and support—offered and received, (2) creative expression, (3) facing and
embracing one’s trauma and its effects, and (4) negotiating and affirming aspects of one’s identity. Furthermore, these guideposts can overlap with Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s decolonial practices of connecting, creating, reframing, reclaiming, and remembering.  

Subcultural Community Healing and Performance

Perhaps queer and performance studies’ scholarship’s most notable engagement with disease and healing, is the extensive literature on HIV performances in the queer community. During a time of silence surrounding the death and disease of countless HIV+ queer and trans people, the primary focus of the performances was on centralizing death and disease. In his insightful book, In a Queer Time and Place, prominent trans studies scholar, Jack Halberstam, refers to the paradoxical positionality of queer subcultural communities which produced “alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death.” He explains how with the threat of AIDS in the queer community, many forged “community in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death. And yet queer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by...conventions.” The seeming paradox of finding possibility for life, healing, and community from an engagement with death, disease, and abjection is a recurring theme explored in this dissertation.

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15 See Christopher Shelley Transpeople: Trauma, Repudiation, Healing, Singh and McKleroy “Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act...” and interviews I conducted on identity, art, and healing with D’Lo and Alok Vaid-Menon.
16 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies 25 indigenous projects.
17 Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place, 2.
18 Ibid.
Useful questions and new understanding emerged for me through the special issue of *Theory & Event* on Black Feminism and Afro-Pessimism—particularly Tiffany Willoughby-Herard’s piece, “(Political) Anesthesia or (Political) Memory: The Combahee River Collective and the Death of Black Women in Custody.” She begins discussing deaths of black women (many alleged suicides) in custody (incarcerated) and how in many cases the families aren’t even notified. It doesn’t make the news, just like the 13 women murdered in Boston in the 70s didn’t make the news; they were only memorialized through the Combahee River Collective. As Willoughby-Herard suggests, it seems we only hear about the death of black women when it is sensationalized (reinscribing the violence/ scenes of subjection). Otherwise, we don’t hear about it, because the death of black women is not only normalized, it is a case of “good policing” or routine procedure, which Willoughby-Herard attributes to the maternal lineage of slavery, and to the inhumane experimentation on black women on medical plantations. Importantly, in their introduction to this special volume, M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard articulate the necessary seeming paradox I have just discussed, in relation to social death and healing, through the experience of being a black woman:

That Afro-pessimism is experienced as an ‘ugliness’—as contributor Selamawit D. Terrefe encourages us to think about it, as the pain of recognition, of seeing oneself reflected b(l)ack plainly—perhaps too, as an obstacle and/or a lie by those people who bear the weight of world-structuring antiblack violence most acutely—black women, who in spite of exhaustion and defeat agitate for different horizons of possibility for black life (for all of us)...\(^\text{19}\)

The Afro-Pessimism referred to in this quote is grounded in Orlando Patterson’s theory of social death. Patterson argues that the slave’s powerlessness is fundamentally

\(^{19}\) M. Shadee Malaklou and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, “Notes from the Kitchen, the Crossroads, and Everywhere Else, too: Ruptures of Thought, Word, and Deed from the ‘Arbiters of Blackness itself,’” 4.
rooted in three characteristics: that slavery originated as a substitute for death (literal); that the slave is natally alienated (cultural aspect); and that slaves were among those who had been dishonored by society (sociopsychological aspect).20 Because of the natal alienation, slaves were stripped from genealogical rights, cultural rituals, and other aspects of their heritage. Critical race scholar Saidiya Hartman grounds crucial theoretical work here, examining “the role of rights in facilitating relations of domination, the new forms of bondage enabled by proprietorial notions of the self.”21 The dishonorable status of slaves furthered the aim of social death during Restoration through socially equating obedience with honor and disobedience with dishonor—resulting in self-blaming in freed slaves and pity in the former slaveholders. As Hartman puts it, self-possession did not liberate the slave but rather “sought to replace the whip with the compulsory contract and the collar with a guilty conscience.”22 The legacy of such psychological wounds and the imperative to address them in healing performance contexts is an important concern for this dissertation.

The paradoxical nature of what “healing” means for many trans people emerged again and again as an important line of inquiry, for instance as an experience of both utopia and failure, or what feminist scholar Allison Reed refers to as “traumatic utopias.” The findings in psychological fields working with trans people have echoed black feminist and decolonial writers for whom decolonizing praxis and healing praxis are mutually constitutive. Perhaps this complex notion has been best described with theories of *decolonizing the imagination* from scholars such as Gloria Anzaldúa and her theory of *conocimiento* in which important insights and knowledges emerge through trauma from

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20 Patterson, introduction to *Slavery and Social Death.*
22 Ibid, 6.
oppression. This resonates with Audre Lorde’s notion of poetry as a matter of survival, Toni Morrison’s theory of imagining as *becoming*, and, foundational to all of these, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Decolonization of the Mind*, on the importance of freeing African societies with their own language and culture. For each of these writers, too, creativity such as writing and performance are crucial to the liberation of oppressed people, *and to the healing of trauma*, which can debilitate the imagination.

**Trans-Healing Methodology:**

**Whiteness Critique in Trans-Healing and “Ethical Listening”**

As a white cis-passing nonbinary person writing about performances, methods, and theories of trans artists of color, I began seeking out toolkits from the seminal work by indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* which, though she doesn’t use the term “decentering” or “critiquing whiteness,” is much of what is at the heart of her argument. And so, to better understand my positionality in this project I looked at critiques of whiteness and found Sara Ahmed’s “Phenomenology of Whiteness” to be particularly useful in providing methodological tools to disorient and reorient myself such that the artists about whom I write are ethically represented and truly at the center of the project.

In trans studies, the special issue of *Transgender Studies Quarterly on Decolonizing Trans* has been particularly useful, especially the roundtable discussion among the decolonial trans scholars, Tom Boellstorff, Mauro Cabral, Micha Cárdenas, Trystan Cotton, Eric A. Stanley, Kalaniopua Young, and Aren Z. Aizura.23 Some key arguments here include a call to focus scholarship on violence prevention (for trans and gender non-conforming

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23 *TSQ* 1 no. 3 (2014): 419-439.
people), the need for scholarship and activism to operate from the “ground up,” the need to localize “transgender” and allow for a multiplicity of understandings across cultures and geographies, and finally, that “working for justice for trans women of color is a decolonizing effort, as it works against shared histories of colonial violence...” In delineating my methodology, I’ll begin with the rationale behind selecting these particular artists for this dissertation, and will then describe ideological frameworks I have attempted to follow in my approach to these artists and the development of the theory of trans-healing.

Early in my doctoral studies, my aim was to write about queer South Asian (and especially Indian) performance, examining both the spirituality and the activism as components of these performances, and my methodology was a queering of performance pasts rooted in *The Natyasastra*. I studied Sanskrit to further ground my que(e)ry in the specified cultural context. Initially I was drawn to this because of a lifelong connection I’ve felt toward India, particularly when I found my guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of Self-Realization Fellowship (U.S.) and Yogoda Satsanga Society (India). As someone who has always been spiritual (and queer), was raised religious, and has been passionate about social change, I sought discourse that traversed these areas. Ultimately, the burning question in me was, *how do queer and trans people survive, hope, and thrive in a world that not only doesn’t want them to survive, but tells them they (or at least their desires) are evil, that their very existence is wrong?* As a white person, I didn’t experience firsthand the erasure of racism, but rather the repudiation of my sexual and gender identities. In this dissertation, I amplify the voices of those cartographers who live and move in these crossings. In particular, I am inspired and influenced by the work of M. Jacqui Alexander,

24 Ibid, 426.
Gloria Anzaldúa, Irene Lara, Cherrie Moraga, and Audre Lorde who have taught me more about loving my “evil,” and therefore myself, than any religion. Instead of denying or shying away from that which society rejects, each in their own way embraces it and learns to love it.

The more research I did with queer and trans South Asian artists in the diaspora, the more their narratives, activism, and passion pushed me toward a more intersectional approach, and the clearer it became that their “spirituality” was often more about an interconnectedness. Fundamental to their experience of interconnection was a supportive community of like-minded people. I began seeking out artists who were consciously engaging in performance work as part of a healing process and an activist process. My scope was Los Angeles-based artists so that I could forge relationships and better understand the processes, theories, and practices of the artists. The exception to this is DarkMatter, who are based in New York, though we met when they were on tour in California (and in fact performed at UC Irvine).

In her “Phenomenology of Whiteness,” Sara Ahmed theorizes whiteness as a reification of centering whiteness as “here” and “home.” As a white viewer of the performances written about in this dissertation, even with a conscious whiteness critique of my reception of the performances, my orientation is phenomenologically, albeit unconsciously and even unwillingly, participating in the production of whiteness. Decentering whiteness and (re)centering people of color does not stop with resituating my singular, personal analysis and experience of healing as a white person viewing the performances. If I am to situate my individual experience phenomenologically, I must turn to understanding whiteness much more broadly “as the very ‘what’ that coheres as a
world.” This is not to reify the importance of whiteness, but the reverse, to examine how it works to center itself and acts to contain/colonize the world. As Ahmed puts it, “Phenomenology helps us to show how whiteness is an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies ‘can do.’” I have attempted in my foregoing analyses, to continuously engage in the process of undoing and decentering so crucial to decolonizing praxis and whiteness critique, but recognize this process is necessarily ongoing and in some cases I will fall short.

Chapter Overviews:

The Defunct, Las Chingadas, The Failures and Trans-Healing Possibilities

Each chapter comprises a case study of trans performers of color who utilize performance for activism and healing. As an audience member/participant and through interviews with artists and audience members, I examine and theorize the possibilities for activism and healing. In Chapter 1, “Communing in Comedy, or ‘Tragedy Given Time: D’Lo Performs Trans-Healing in a Trans Temporality,” I argue that performing in a trans temporality, alchemizing tragedy into comedy, and “transing” tradition can yield trans-healing possibilities for the performer and audience members. His transing of time, comedy, tradition, and healing describes movements toward structural reassembling in ways that centralize and come directly out of trans experiences and trans narratives. I analyze the staging and scripted texts of D’FunqT and D’Faqto Life which, I argue, interrupt normative/straight time, comedy, and tradition. Temporality is a particularly important area to explore in a trans-healing project since trans people and particularly trans people of

26 Ibid.
color are at a disproportionately high risk\textsuperscript{27} of experiencing trauma, and trauma research unilaterally shows trauma survivors can experience time differently, as fragmented or as a void.\textsuperscript{28}

For instance, an experience of past trauma may be triggered in the present moment and feel as though it were happening now—and the traumatic experience is happening now for the trauma survivor. I draw from theories of queer utopia and decolonization which interrupt and interrogate normativity, showing how D’Lo’s performance engages this work and how performing in a trans temporality allows him to do it. Finally, I examine current trauma therapy theories and apply them to D’Lo’s performance to argue for the trans-healing potential in his performances. Integral to D’Lo’s trans-healing is that he transes gender and its formations in Hindu Sri Lankan and American contexts, engaging in the decolonizing projects of connecting, reclaiming and reframing\textsuperscript{29}—projects which must operate outside a normative temporality, as evidenced by the “re” prefix.

In Chapter 2, “Living Mythologies Performs Trans-Healing in Queer Borderlands” I argue that the group consisting of trans femmes of color, Living Mythologies, in their performance of the same name, opens an Anzaldúan “borderland” space where tensions between dis/ease and healing, death and life perform activism and healing possibilities. Through resisting colonial closures, reclaiming mythological figures, and rebuilding a

\textsuperscript{27} Currently the best statistical data on this is available at the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (\url{http://www.ustranssurvey.org/})


\textsuperscript{29} A reference to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s 25 indigenous projects in \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies}. 
community space through a “hermeneutics of love” (Sandoval) that centralizes (and thus reframes) the narratives of trans people of color, Living Mythologies performs a trans-healing. To open even the possibility of such a trans-healing, it is important to recognize the artists of Living Mythologies perform a valuable labor. I analyze the signs, gestures, symbols, logics, tools, words, movement, and music of Living Mythologies who each embodies a mythology located in their respective cultural tradition (including Lakota Indian, black, Chicanx, and South Asian American). The performers engage the audience directly with meditations, chanting, affirmations, and invocations, even as they implicate the audience as complicit in anti-black and transphobic violence.

I argue that Living Mythologies, through reclaiming and staging embodiments of composite mythological figures and autobiographical experiences with a demand for social change, works toward decolonizing not only the embodiments but the imaginary from whence the archetypes and mythologies emerge. Colonial renderings of heyoka and La Malinche, for instance, have worked toward colonization of the indigenous imagination. (Re)staging and (re)claiming such figures today at a neoliberal university institution, empowering themselves to interweave myth and the quotidian, Living Mythologies opens an Anzaldúan “borderland” space where healing can perform on an audience with possibilities of decolonizing imagination.

Chapter 3, “Decolonizing the University with DarkMatter’s Healing of/in Failure,” centers on the trans nonbinary South Asian American spoken word duo DarkMatter. In their #ItGetsBitter (a critical riff on #ItGetsBetter) tour in 2016, they returned to their interest in university-based activism and an interrogation of the institutional racism and elitist university policies and practices. To resist and make steps toward decolonizing
institutional and pedagogical practices at U.S. universities, DarkMatter performs a radical trans/gressive pedagogy—or what transgender communications scholar Benny LeMaster calls a “pedagogy of failure.” I examine DarkMatter’s radical trans/gressive pedagogy of failure and its relationship to healing in this chapter, particularly within the context of the neoliberal university. This chapter builds upon the rich theoretical site of failure to examine the connective tissue among decolonial practice, pedagogy, activism, and healing, which I argue are exemplified in DarkMatter’s university tour. With this case study, I suggest possibilities for trans-healing in the university and encourage educators and students to take up this challenge. This chapter shifts the focus of trans-healing to pedagogical praxis and examines the relationship among healing, performance, pedagogy, and decolonial activism.

Significantly, each of my performance case studies has been situated within California university institutions, though not solely (some performances I describe were also in LGBT centers and queer club settings). Nevertheless, with their activist performances, the artists also brought explicit critique on the neo-liberal/neo-colonial university institution as a key site of perpetuating the subjugation of healing knowledges. Through my examination of their performances and my own experiences in a California university institution, primarily and most directly in this dissertation conclusion, I consider the relationship between healing and decolonizing practices in institutions of higher education.

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30 LeMaster, “Pedagogies of Failure,” 81-96.
In their important article, “The Neo-Liberal University,” Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades lay out the tenements of public universities’ neo-liberal practices, arguing that public colleges and universities are “exemplars” of neoliberalism. They argue:

Public college and universities emphasize that they support corporate competitiveness through their major role in the global, knowledge-based economy...In the process, the fundamental social roles of public higher education, including providing increased upward mobility for underserved populations, have been displaced by the economic role of serving corporations’ global competitiveness.31

Rather than the university taking up its role in critical thinking, educational development, and what Marie Battiste refers to as “nurturing the learning spirit,” the public university conspires with corporations that “employ the institutions’ ‘products.’”32 Understanding the dehumanization of university students in this neoliberal system is important because it shows a need for cultural and knowledge producers to resist this movement through decolonizing, transing, and failing, all of which I address in this dissertation. Students as “products” leads to a host of dis/eases that can include burnout, anxiety, stress, depression, as well as physical illness resulting from overworking that the competitive market demands. Trans students who are already so socially marginalized are particularly at risk in such an environment. Thus, it is crucial to look at possibilities for trans-healing in the university setting.

Through an examination of the labor, intentions, and healing methods of various trans artists of color, this project makes decolonizing interventions in both practical theatre pedagogy and the connected fields of applied theatre/ drama therapy/ performance for social change by centralizing a critique of whiteness in these practices and

31 Slaughter and Rhoades, “The Neo-Liberal University,” 73.
32 Ibid.
cultivating ethical “listening.” Recent developments in drama therapy and applied theatre have been made to emphasize the healing aspect of performance, often citing Aristotle’s use of the medical term *catharsis* to signify that the very roots of drama are grounded in healing praxis. Gender and sexuality studies have found performance studies a fruitful venue for theorizing gender as a dynamic social production. Feminists of color such as Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde have argued for poetry, for instance, as an important act of resistance and praxis of self-care, which I consider carefully in my own framing.

However, very few scholars draw connections among the three areas I have chosen to examine together: queerness/ transness, performance, and healing, particularly with theoretical frames of decolonization, queer of color critique, trans scholarship, and queer of color feminism. My dissertation centralizes the intersection of all three areas and is a contribution to applied theatre, community-based performance, as well as queer and trans studies. For scholars and practitioners in the thick work of decolonizing theatre pedagogy, this project offers (a) a call to action for decolonizing trans/formation within the neoliberal university and (b) situates the decolonizing intervention in performance for healing contexts (including pedagogy), and (c) pushes to open further discourse on possibilities of healing in existing and forthcoming queer and trans performance scholarship.
CHAPTER 1
Communing in Comedy, or “Tragedy Given Time”: D’Lo Performs Trans-Healing in Trans Temporality

You cannot talk about healing in just ways without saying that a huge component of that is community for queer and trans people. –D’Lo

Queer magic is about regardless of what is happening out there in the world that is or the ways in which the system is set up against us, what are those beautiful magical ways that we transform people, their minds, community? –D’Lo

A critical focus on the temporal underpinnings of transgender...may open the way toward a more transformative politics of justice. –Kadji Amin

Figure 1.1 Photo credit Darren Rikio Mooko, courtesy of D’Lo

D’FunQT: A Performance of (Im)possibilities

D’Lo enters the stage at the Los Angeles LGBT Center with baggy blue jeans, a long t-shirt covered by an open short-sleeve, button-down plaid shirt, and an LA Dodgers baseball
cap hiding his shaved head. He bounces around near the audience, warming them up with jokes and a few questions, but he had the audience in the palm of his hand before he even showed his face. Los Angeles is his home and the audience seems full of friends and fans alike. He gets right into the introductions about who he is and where he comes from, and many of his jokes are meant to directly resonate with the local queer audience—he quips about breeders in West Hollywood or queer hipster crackers in East LA. The room is immediately electric, full of boisterous laughter and a clear mutual love between D’Lo and the audience.

This intimate, community environment is a powerful aspect of how D’Lo opens up potentials for trans-healing in his performance. The (albeit limited) research in traumatology on healing for trans people of color unilaterally show the importance of a shared community, and particularly so if that community reflects and mirrors back similar experiences or feelings. As traumatologist Owen Paul Karcher puts it, “Trauma almost invariably involves not being seen, not being mirrored, and not being taken into account. [Healing] needs to reactivate the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored...This mirroring needs to take into account the experiences and impact of societal oppression...”

Therefore, while seemingly effortlessly creating an environment based in humor, D’Lo’s labor extends beyond telling jokes and performing—he offers the emotional labor of mirroring and community-building which can have healing effects.

In this chapter, I argue that Sri Lankan-American queer trans solo performer D’Lo performs in a trans temporality, alchemizes tragedy into comedy, and “transes”

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34 Lucas Crawford first formulated “to trans” as a verb, and Susan Stryker has theorized transing as, “a process which takes place within, as well as across or between gendered spaces...a practice that
tradition, which can yield trans-healing possibilities for the performer and audience members. D’Lo’s transing of time, comedy, tradition, and healing describes movements toward structural reassembling in ways that centralize and come directly out of trans experiences and trans narratives. I analyze the staging and scripted texts of *D’FunQT* and *D’Faqto Life* which, I argue, interrupt normative / straight time, comedy, and tradition. 

Straight temporality, which is described by foundational trans studies scholar Jack Halberstam as heteronormative experiences of time which, for instance, develop around family, heteronormative relationships, and reproduction, differing from queer experiences of temporality which are in opposition to these. Furthermore, straight temporality operates in the logics of what Lauren Berlant calls the “violence of normativity,” and therefore is a particularly toxic demand for trans people of color. Temporality is a particularly important area to explore in a trans-healing project since trans people and particularly trans people of color are at a disproportionately high risk of experiencing trauma, and trauma research unilaterally shows trauma survivors can experience time differently, as fragmented or as a void.

For instance, an experience of past trauma may be triggered in the present moment and feel as though it were happening now—and the traumatic experience is happening now for the trauma survivor. D’Lo’s performances open up a space for trans-healing through a

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35 Currently the best statistical data on this is available at the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (http://www.ustranssurvey.org/)

felt experience of queer utopia in the trans temporality from which D’Lo’s comedic, intimate, and interactive storytelling emerges. I draw from theories of queer utopia and decolonization which interrupt and interrogate normativity, showing how D’Lo’s performance engages this work and how performing in a trans temporality allows him to do it. Finally, I examine current trauma therapy theories and apply them to D’Lo’s performance to argue for the trans-healing potential in his performances. Integral to D’Lo’s trans-healing is that he transes gender and its formations in Hindu Sri Lankan and American contexts, engaging in the decolonizing projects of connecting, reclaiming and reframing—projects which must operate outside a normative temporality, as evidenced by the “re” prefix. Because this chapter diverges from the others in its attention to trauma and focus on queer solo performance, I frame this chapter with additional details from traumatology and queer performance theory than were provided in the introduction. The further engagement with queer utopic literature in this chapter will contribute discourse relevant throughout this dissertation, which is fundamentally concerned with the possibilities of queer and trans performance.

According to Singh and McKleroy, from this decolonizing (re)framework of centering the survivors of trauma and their resilience, they discovered all their interview subjects had found resilience and healing through the following commonalities:

(a) pride in one’s gender and ethnic/racial identity, (b) recognizing and negotiating gender and racial/ethnic oppression, (c) navigating relationships with family, (d) accessing health care and financial resources, (e) connecting with an activist transgender community of color, and (f) cultivating spirituality and hope for the future.38

37 A reference to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s 25 indigenous projects in Decolonizing Methodologies. 38 Singh and McKleroy, “Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act,” 34.
I aim to build on this traumatology research in a performance context, specifically examining how an autobiographical comedic performance by a trans diasporic subject in a trans temporality might offer new interpretations and applications of trauma healing in trans people. I will show how D’Lo fosters community connections, takes pride in, as well as negotiates, his gender and racial identities, and cultivates possibilities for healing for both himself and his audience using primarily the tool of autobiographical comedy. I further examine the decolonizing aspects of D’Lo’s performance, particularly with regards to the trans-healing potential he is fostering.

On his website, D’Lo is described as “a queer/transgender Tamil-Sri Lankan-American actor/writer/comedian whose work ranges stand-up comedy, solo theater, plays, films and music production, poetry and spoken word. He is a co-producer for DisOriented Comedy (mostly female Asian-American nationally-touring stand-up comedy showcase).” In spring 2015, D’Lo performed to sold out crowds at the Los Angeles LGBT Center’s Lily Tomlin/Jane Wagner Cultural Arts Center for the LA premiere of his show, D’FunQT (pronounced defunct) at the Davidson/Valentini Theatre. The Broadway World announcement of the event that posted March 10, 2015 ascribed additional labels to D’Lo who performed and wrote the show: “acclaimed political theatre artist,” “director” and “music producer.” D’FunQT had already been performed on D’Lo’s international tour (SF, NY, Manchester, UK, and a seven-city tour in India and Sri Lanka). When questioned by Time Out Mumbai about the numerous labels D’Lo ascribes to himself, he explains, “I purposely say that I am all of those things, so that through my hyphenated experience, one

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39 D’Lo Kid, Official Website, https://www.dlocokid.com/
can understand that how I’ve lived, how I live, what I choose to create my work around, is not necessarily all that I talk about, but the lens through which I see it.”

Here, D’Lo describes his own intersectional identities and encourages a greater awareness and understanding of intersectional experience. Furthermore, this kind of pride in his braided identities is affirming to those audience members who share either some or all of these identity positions, and by this mirroring affirmation, opens a possibility for a healing experience. In the seminal work on queer autobiographical performance, *O Solo Homo* by Holly Hughes and David Román, David Román puts it in this way: “[Queer solo performances] provide their audiences both an affirmation of our own struggles around kinship and an expansive identificatory grid from which to consider our own realities and possibilities.” In fact, “connecting” has been defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith as a decolonizing project, decolonial scholars Mignolo and Walsh put relationality at the heart of decolonial practice, and traumatologists Singh and McKleroy have documented the importance for trans people of color to connect to a community of other trans people and people of color for their healing and resilience.

*D’FunQT, D’Faqto, and Im/possible Utopias*

I had already seen excerpts of the show when D’Lo came to UCLA for a performance of his show *D’Faqto Life* (de facto life), a combination of his earlier show, *Ramble-Ations* and *D’FunQT*, followed by a Q&A. Upon my first interaction, what most struck me about D’Lo’s performance was his embodiment of im/possibilities—he refused to be tied to or

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41 Phukan, *TimeOut Mumbai* interview with D’Lo
44 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality* introduction.
45 Singh and McKleroy, “When Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act.”
constrained by a particular category, and immediately signaled to the seemingly
paradoxical nature of how he understands and identifies himself. Significantly,
postcolonial scholar-artist Sandra Chatterjee also highlights forms of “impossibility” in
D’Lo’s performance in her 2008 article, “Impossible Hosting: D’Lo sets an Undomesticated
Stage for South Asian Youth Artists.” Both Chatterjee and myself draw our term
“impossible” from Gaytri Gopinath’s work in South Asian queer and diasporic studies, and
Gopinath, in turn, has borrowed the signifier more generally from José Rabasa who
referred to the impossible as “a utopian horizon of alternative rationalities to those
dominant in the West.”46 Significantly, David Halperin defines queerness in a similar way,
as “whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.”47 Here, Gopinath
and Rabasa are describing openings which resist the continual process of colonial closures.

In her dissertation, Decolonizing Latina Spiritualities, Irene Lara writes:

> The continual process of healing is in a dialectical relationship with “opening.” That
> is, opening and healing are both valuable decolonizing practices, both the means and
> the ends. In imagining the role of healing as enabling one to “open” be it sexually,
> spiritually, or any other way that moves beyond oppressive discourses and
> practices, the Latinas whose work I have studied ask us to consider where it is we
> need to “open,” and further, what it is we need to open to.48

The “impossible” is dismissive, but nevertheless in the evocation of the im-possible, one is
signaling the possible, or what José Muñoz might refer to as a horizon of possibility (which
he has also attributed to the term queerness itself). Thus, for D’Lo to embody the
impossible is to embody the possible, to embody an opening where there was and is a
colonial closure. It is to open (to) a possibility of trans-healing.

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46 Rabasa as quoted by Gayatri Gopinath, Impossible Desires, 4.
48 Lara, Decolonizing Latina Spiritualities, 248.
In various contexts such as Susan Stryker in trans studies, Jill Dolan in performance studies, and Jose Muñoz in queer of color and performance studies, theorists have woven a close-knit relationship between “queerness” and “utopia.” In his book, *Cruising Utopias: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Esteban Muñoz revisits German idealism and philosopher Ernst Bloch to argue for performance that draws upon the past to imagine a horizon of hope for queer futurity, or, put another way, a place where the impossible performs its openings. While utopia may indeed be “no place” in our present moment, Muñoz argues that it can be felt “as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”

Utopia, as a literal “no place” is unmappable. Like the im/possible, then, unmappable utopia is understood not as a closed door but as an expansive horizon.

The experience of this queer “space” of utopia is potentially healing as the audience experiences D’Lo’s gender and racial pride (and the negotiations therein)—which are not only verbalized but concretized in activist graffiti covering the stage—the community-building he fosters, and the cultivation of spirituality and hope for the future, articulated as necessary factors for trans of color resilience by traumatologists Singh and McKleroy. Further, the utopic experience is also potentially decolonizing in its empowerment of queer and trans audience members who have experienced trauma. D’Lo draws on the decolonizing practices of connecting, reclaiming, and reframing—seen for instance in his reclaiming and reframing of tradition in his (re)staging of his Sri Lankan Hindu parents and their oppressive views on gender and sexuality. Importantly, these findings of traumatologists studying resilience of trans people of color reveal imperatives somewhat analogous to decolonizing projects articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith. Gender and racial

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50 Singh and McKleroy.
pride as well as negotiations therein can overlap with “gendering” (and the connected
imperative I’ve called “trans-gendering” in relation to decolonizing projects); and their
negotiations may be those that reframe, reclaim, or transform in some way, which may also
be deemed decolonizing projects. There is clearly a mutually beneficial and perhaps even
constitutive relationship between decolonizing and trans-healing—a relationship I keep
coming back to throughout this dissertation.

**Trans Temporalities and the Alchemy of Comedy**

D’Lo defines comedy with the insightful axiom, “tragedy given time,”[^51] which
became the foundation from whence this chapter emerged. As D’Lo frames it, comedy, is in
fact, its own temporality; comedy becomes a possibility upon surviving tragedy, and can
therefore be appropriated for trans-healing purposes. Elsewhere, D’Lo refers to “the
medicine of comedy” as “something sacred” that is “able to penetrate in a way that really
dishevels. And this is for the choir and for those who are not in the choir.”[^52] It seems, for
D’Lo, the alchemy of time can yield comedy, which in turn can be medicinal for performer
and audience members. In this way, D’Lo can de/funct-ion as a kind of healer, penetrating
walls of seeming reality to offer truths outside the intelligibility of normativity and straight
time. For Muñoz, this is precisely what it means to operate in a queer temporality and
perform a queer utopia.

There is a long tradition in queer, trans, and PoC communities to use humor as a
survival tool, or for the alchemy of turning tragedy into comedy. In particular, camp
comedy, is a humorous aesthetic of “representation excess, heterogeneity, and

[^51]: The quotation “Comedy equals tragedy plus time” has been attributed to Mark Twain and in more
recent years to Carol Burnett. D’Lo shifted it somewhat to “Comedy is tragedy given time.”
gratuitousness of reference.” I provided a camp comedy example with D’Lo’s (quite literally) bathroom humor, and his utilization of the excessive space of his “random box,” which, like trans and queer subjectivities, operates outside of dominant society’s organizing principles and in a trans temporality. Fabio Cleto, in his introduction to his handbook on camp aesthetic, builds upon David Bergman’s definition of camp as a style that favors “exaggeration, artifice, and extremity...is in tension with popular culture...is outside cultural mainstream...and is affiliated with homosexual culture.” Cleto then examines camp affect and effect. Yes, humor builds and solidifies community, and is an entertaining way of challenging normativity, but importantly, Cleto refers to camp’s effect as activating a “horizon of possibility,” which is precisely how Muñoz describes both queerness and utopia. That alchemist experience of tragedy-turned-camp comedy, then, may be experienced as a queer utopia with trans-healing potential. Revealing an alternative (to oppressive colonial structures and norms) possibility through comedy is a way of decolonizing the imagination through performance. Comedy is an opening to a something else or something not yet here, and may therefore open a possibility of trans-healing.

Queer and trans scholars, for over a decade, have been captivated by utopic imaginings—queer futures (or lack thereof), and new possibilities. Most notably, Muñoz authored an entire book on queer utopia, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, and Jill Dolan wrote Utopia in Performance. Susan Stryker, in her article, “Transgender Studies: Queer Theory’s Evil Twin,” upon the emergence of trans studies which she helped pioneer, describes her “utopian reconfiguration of community,” as a

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53 Cleto, Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject, 3.
54 As quoted in Ibid, 4.
“space of possibility” toward a “radical social agenda.” Possibility itself is captivating and keeps us hoping, even when material conditions contradict it, or perhaps, especially when the possible and the actual are at odds with each other. For queer and trans people of color, the stakes of “possibility” can be life and death in a society whose markers of possibility (based upon normative, colonially-rooted categorization) cannot fit. “Possibility” is ascribed to futurity, conceived in the impossibilities of the present. Muñoz puts it this way:

The not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on and insisted in, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present. Thus, I wish to argue that queerness is not quite here; it is, in the language of Italian philosopher Georgio Agamben, a potentiality.56

The material here and now is where queer and trans people of color experience normativity’s violence and oppression. And yet, in the here and now, according to Muñoz, utopia may be felt “as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”57 While this utopic feeling may be experienced now, this now nevertheless refers to a divergence from heteronormative temporality, that is, an experience in a queer time and place. This utopic feeling is precisely what Singh and McKleroy were referring to when they wrote of the importance of “cultivating spirituality and hope for the future” for the resilience and healing of trans people of color. Such cultivation assists trauma survivors with meaning-making and well-being.58 For D’Lo, this experience happens both when he creates art from his (marginalized) lens, and when he witnesses art from people on the margins. I interviewed D’Lo on the phone on August 22, 2017 for the purpose of

56 Muñoz, 21.
57 Ibid, 1.
58 Singh and McKleroy, 40.
centralizing his voice in this chapter, and questioned him on his background, as well as his artistic and healing practices:

In a world where everything is socially constructed, it’s from the lenses that are outside of the construct that question the construct, question the way things are. It’s those lenses that are the queerest...The world isn’t set up for people on the margins...you’re constantly straddling a line...[A]rt is probably the most clear-cut way to understanding what you’re made of outside of the construct. That’s the one thing in this societally constructed world that can bring us to an understanding of the outside.\textsuperscript{59}

For D’Lo, marginalized people have access to truths that members of dominant social groups do not, a sentiment we see echoed in decolonial writers such as Frantz Fanon who writes about the “third person consciousness” a black man experiences in his body,\textsuperscript{60} as well as Gloria Anzaldúa whose theory of \textit{conocimiento} is based on the unique knowledges of the oppressed. For D’Lo, the primary vehicle with which to express these “outsider” truths is art. When I asked for elaboration, he described a setting of trans people utilizing dance, theatre, poetry, or comedy. “They’re basically taking their audience and they’re coming in at any different level and you bring them to a mutual spot. And then through the performance you are inadvertently making them answer your plea to be raised at a different vibration, a different frequency.”\textsuperscript{61} The power of the performance, according to D’Lo, is not only in the power of a marginalized person expressing truth from their unique vantage point, but is also in the journey of performance, which is itself outside of normative time and place. Thus, audience members may be receptive to the artistic expression and be “raised” to new levels of awareness. Though D’Lo is not explicitly describing his own performance, here, it is certainly apt to apply his work, too.

\textsuperscript{59} Transcript from my phone Interview with D’Lo, August 22, 2017.
\textsuperscript{60} Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks}.
\textsuperscript{61} D’Lo, phone interview with Anna Winget, August 22, 2017.
D’Lo’s understanding of the possibilities in queer performance echoes Muñoz’s theories of queer temporality and performativity. According to Muñoz, “[T]o live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer.”\(^6^2\) As both D’Lo and Muñoz seem to frame it, a queer lens is an experience of living on the “inside,” that is, in straight time’s heteronormativity, but witnessing, understanding, desiring, and performing on the “outside,” in queer time. Muñoz argues that “[q]ueerness’s time is a _stepping out_ of the linearity of straight time [my emphasis]...Straight time’s ‘presentness’ needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.”\(^6^3\) Queerness’s space is elsewhere, and queerness’s time is not-yet.

In Jack Halberstam’s introduction to _In a Queer Time and Place_, he describes queer temporality as emerging “most spectacularly during the AIDS epidemic.”\(^6^4\) He explains that the threat of no future, “expands the potential of the moment...squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand.” Perhaps this is one possible meaning behind Muñoz’s powerful, albeit vague statement that “queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world.” Furthermore, as we have seen, this “openness” to “new possibilities” is decolonizing since it directly challenges colonialism’s closures aimed at control and oppression of queer, trans, and PoC subjects. As Kadji Amin puts it in his keyword description of trans temporality, “[J. Halberstam’s] work suggests

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\(^6^2\) Muñoz, 26.  
\(^6^3\) Ibid, 25.  
\(^6^4\) Halberstam, 2.
that transgender lives may require mixed strategies—not only healing and an achieved coherence but also the ability to represent and to inhabit temporal, gendered, and conceptual discontinualities.”

It is precisely the disjunction or “split subjectivities,” the “being out of sync, a sense of rupture between past, present, and future” that both make trans people more susceptible to trauma, and more susceptible to resilience due to an ability to open up to ways of being and healing outside of normativity's time and place. We see further evidence in Shelley’s work on trans healing that, “In TG [transgender] subjectivities, with their emphasis on fluidity, crossing, and the impermanence of identity, the act of transiting (/m/f/) entails unstable identities and a refusal to belong in one category.”

The stakes of accessing an elsewhere that is not-yet are crucial. Both D’Lo and Muñoz gesture heavily to this. Muñoz explains, “The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations.” This is not an escapism, but a remapping of possibilities through trans-temporal reaching. D’Lo describes using comedy as a survival tool, praying every day when he was little, to be a “real boy,” and then the “liberating” experience, as he describes it, of finding Queen Latifah and hip-hop emcees who spoke out against racism and performed gender and race in ways D’Lo hadn’t seen in his white majority, homophobic, transphobic town. For D’Lo,

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65 Amin, TSQ special issue, 220.
66 Ibid.
67 Shelley, 191.
68 Here I am invoking trans both as a prefix and as a noun
69 D’Lo, phone interview with Anna Winget on August 22, 2017
finding these artists and their art who performed in a queer temporality was a matter of survival.

The importance of performing trans narratives and the ability to break out of linear narratives of straight time to emerge in a trans time is not only a theoretical argument, but an empirically-based social science argument as well, such as in traumatology and arts therapies research and Christopher Shelley’s *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*. However, toward a decolonizing project, it is important to note that while western psychologists are beginning to recognize and embrace this research on trans people of color and healing, as D’Lo pointed out to me in an interview, communities of color have been talking about healing and self-care for decades—notably Audre Lorde. He submits, “It’s almost like again, yet again, when queer, black, brown and queer people of color, have been saying something for years, it is only listened to when it’s the cis-straight person saying it right?”

**The Trans-Healing Potential in Trans Temporality**

In a phone interview with D’Lo about the relationship between healing, activism, and performance, he explained:

For me it starts with the writing and scripting of the piece…it carries a lot of energy and the possibilities for personal and…transformative justice. there’s some element of transformation that occurs from the process of--the minute that you say I want to explore what’s going on inside of me and I want to explore through performance. From that point to the actual performance…sharing of the work with other people, that process in and of itself, in stages, is transformative.

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70 D’Lo, phone interview with Anna Winget, 20 December 2018
71 Ibid.
Here D’Lo describes his alchemic healing process and the potential for transformation both for himself and his own growth as well as for his audience members when he shares the work.

D’Lo’s autobiographical narrative is driven not by a linear hero’s journey or by the logics of normative structures of development such as heteronormative marriage, children, buying a house, settling down, etc. Rather what drives these performances is the never-ending dance of trauma, healing, and the alchemic process of narrativizing it. Usually, for D’Lo, the alchemic process is the alchemy of comedy, but other times it takes a more didactic or self-reflective turn, particularly at the end of D’FunQT. He begins his show by describing himself as the majority of society sees him, “Is that a girl who looks like a man or a boy who looks better than my man? Do I bash it or fuck it?” The audience laughs a cathartic laugh. He is signaling violence against the trans community and the objectification and exoticization that he experiences, even in his own community. In these first moments with the audience he identifies himself in a host of ways including “I’m a vegetarian but I love to watch people eat meat.” Laughing at these painful experiences and contradictions can be a trans-healing experience, and in the comedic alchemy subsection, I will further articulate the ways such comedic alchemy can be classified a trans-healing experience.

We can see examples of this trans temporality not only in D’Lo’s articulation of his identity, but in the structure and flow of his performance of D’FunQT. First, there is no Aristotelian arc with a beginning, middle, and end, nor a chronological order, nor is there a smoothness of transition that allows the audience to be passive observers. For instance, he

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72 D’Lo, D’FunQT, unpublished script courtesy of D’Lo, 2.
73 D’Lo later in the show tells a story of meeting a white woman in a queer club for people of color in New York and how she referred to him as a “statue on a Hindu temple.” He admits to feeling objectified and exoticized but still ended up dating her.
transitions from a humorous story about getting his period to the story of his sister dying. At the top of the show, he interrupts himself to explain to the audience the trans temporal rules: “Ok, this is how this show is going to go...”74 The kind of jarring fragmentation of narratives is reflected in some of the staging as well. On stage, central and a bit to the right is what he calls his “random box,” which consists of a microphone dangling from above and a small step ladder.

When D'Lo has a “random” thought in the middle of his monologues, he climbs up the ladder and passionately addresses the audience on political topics such as white supremacy, representation, broccoli, underwear...One example toward the top of the show is a “random box” moment after a discussion on using public bathrooms as a trans person.

Speaking of bathrooms...When I was little I used to think that there was vanilla ice cream and chocolate ice cream, well, not that there was vanilla, but that vanilla - it was plain and it waited to become chocolate. And kinda in the same way, I used to think that brown people had brown kaka and white people had white kaka. Until I was in kindergarten and this little white girl exited the stall as I was about to enter and I saw in the toilet (gasp) "hey! Did you do that?"... She was all in a huff, “boys aren’t supposed to be in the girls bathroom, I’m telling”... what, she didn’t flush...75

In this comedic way, D'Lo is able to relate to his trans, butch, and/or nonbinary audience members who invariably have experienced the anxiety of venturing into a public restroom and being forced to choose “men” or “women,” which can be healing both as building community through humor and mirroring, and in recognizing the pain of exclusion as oppression. Furthermore, for cis gendered people of color, there is also a humorous community-building in this random box moment, and the recognition or affirmation of one’s pain as social oppression. The random box, then, creates a space for unique experience of shared intimacy, on topics such as this that are both ridiculous in its excess,

74 Ibid.
75 D'Lo, D'FunQT script, 3.
outside normative conversation subjects, and non-linear, thus doubly countering straight temporality.

In trauma studies, it is widely understood that narrative coherence is often fragmented, and that trauma therapy has the best results when engaging not with so-called objective truths, but with the patient’s imagination. Richard Kradin, Harvard Medical School physician and Jungian analyst explains his concern with “medicine’s failure to recognize both the complexity and non-linearity of human physiology, and, in particular, that of the nervous system. The complexity of neural activities is best described by methods of non-linear analyses...The fact is that much of what we currently hold to be true about medical practice is based on false assumptions.” D’Lo’s performance and autobiographical claims in D’FunQT affirm alternative identity formations existing outside of dominant cultural norms, opening possibilities for spectators who have felt stifled by such medical and social restrictions. Furthermore, the trans temporality experienced in these performances is consistent with the trans-healing possibilities that come with affirming and legitimizing the fragmentation and seeming contradictions of trans experience. D’Lo places trans subjectivity at the center and defines his healing and his identity from the inside out, in his own time and his own space.

Current “radical” traumatologists such as Burstow (2003) have argued for trauma work that emphasizes the voices of survivors and their resilience. The oft implemented “deficiency model” actually “sustain[s] the oppressive social systems and institutions that allow trauma to occur [and] remain unnamed.” If a deficiency model can sustain

76 Kradin, 193-195
77 Ibid, 190.
78 Singh and McKleroy, “Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act,” 36.
oppressive social systems that perpetuate trauma, then a model based on empowerment and resilience is not only healing for the individual who suffers trauma from systemic oppression, but is an act toward decolonizing the traumatizing institution itself. The implications of the work of Burstow, Singh, McKleroy, and other traumatologists who are specifically publishing research on the healing of trans people of color is its emphasis on a healing framework which, by naming the trauma and empowerment of trauma survivors, can potentially decolonize institutions—from whence, importantly, much of the trauma trans people of color endure originates.

In D'Lo’s performances, he repeatedly enacts stories of his institutionalized trauma—including from the Los Angeles Police Department, his elementary school, and from religion. In each (re)telling, there is comedy and ownership over his narrative—resilience over deficiency. In my phone interview with D'Lo, he told me that healing can be defined as transformative justice. Similarly, in her seminal text, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith links restorative justice with healing. She states, “Restorative programs are based on a model of healing rather than punishing.” To paraphrase D’Lo, there should be a process that continues beyond the reactive anger from social injustice, toward a process of healing and restoration. For him, such a shift has occurred through his art-making which has yielded new understanding.

According to Owen Karcher, writing on healing trauma of LGBT clients through social justice art therapy, trauma therapist Goodman (2015) “aimed to decolonize trauma-informed practices by locating the source of injustice in the sociopolitical context, rather

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80 D’Lo. phone interview with Anna Winget, 20 December 2018.
than in the individual or community.”\textsuperscript{81} While the term “violence of normativity”\textsuperscript{82} is coined by Lauren Berlant, a philosopher (and not a traumatologist), traumatologists do relate the experiences of sociopolitical oppression, whether experienced as microaggressions or more blatant threatening encounters, to the experience of violence. Microaggressions experienced on a regular basis, for instance, can have the same traumatizing effect on the brain as a single major traumatizing event, leading to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and other neurological struggles.\textsuperscript{83}

Thus, in my use of Berlant’s term “violence of normativity” I am signaling a sociopolitical condition from which queer, trans, and people of color (the communities I focus on in this dissertation) are typically in need of healing, as well as the potentially decolonizing act of healing from this dis/ease. Throughout the performance, the audience hears D’Lo’s negotiations with traumatic experiences such as getting mugged, losing a sibling, inadequate representation, being incessantly stared at, being gender policed, being a target of transphobia (even in the queer community), being exoticized, and being rejected in religion. Since the trauma is ongoing, so must the healing be.

\textbf{Disidentifying and Healing Through Trans Narratives}

Part of his healing process to cope with the incessant traumatization, is D’Lo’s insistence on the hyphenization of his identity, or what Muñoz refers to as disidentifying.

According to Muñoz, “Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies

\textsuperscript{81} Karcher, “Sociopolitical Oppression, Trauma, and Healing,” 126.
\textsuperscript{82} See Berlant, “Cruel Optimism” in \textit{Affect Theory Reader}.
the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”

Such a punishment can also be referred to, as mentioned earlier, as the violence of normativity, which can be traumatizing to the minority subject. Disidentification offers a nuanced way of examining performances like D’Lo’s, which implicitly and explicitly address the multiplicities in a matrix of oppression, which cannot separate, for instance, D’Lo’s transness from his Sri Lankanness. D’Lo’s insistence of an identity forged from a hyphenated experience, according to Muñoz, functions “as a threat to cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny.”

The cultural logics of a unified self or a hierarchical identity system belong in a straight temporality, whereas the cultural logics of a hyphenated experience such as D’Lo’s belong in a queer or trans temporality. Furthermore, since colonialism divides, constricts, controls, part of decolonial practice is deconstructing such regulatory arenas as identity formation, and disallowing its imposing limitations aimed at control.

Medical science and policy is grounded in similar rigidity of classification. For instance, in most cases a trans person cannot get hormone therapy and other medical care without a linear narrative which states they were born male, and are now female, or vice versa. However, trans studies shows for a vast number of trans people, this limitation can further traumatize with false impositions.

The healing potential of self-affirming identity formations for trans people in particular is demonstrated in Christopher Shelley’s groundbreaking book, *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*. Shelley recounts the

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84 Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 4.
85 Ibid, 5.
86 Many such accounts of trauma in medical care contexts are collected in Christopher Shelley’s book, *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*. 
argument of Jay Prosser, who analyzed common threads in transsexual autobiographies, that part of healing for transpeople is taking charge of their own stories, re/writing them, and performing them. Jack Halberstam, in *In a Queer Time and Place*, when writing on trans temporality, describes the importance of realness and narrative to trans people’s lives and responds to Prosser. “Prosser suggests that transsexuals become real literally through authorship, by writing themselves into transition. ‘Narrative,’ Prosser notes, ‘is not only the bridge to embodiment, but a way of making sense of tradition, the link between locations: the transition itself.’”87

Halberstam’s views differ somewhat from Prosser, but he affirms the importance of narrative, claiming “One way in which queers and transgenders have put themselves in the way of gender realness is to inhabit categories of their own making.”88 Another way of saying this might be that they disidentify with the dominant categorical options laid out of them, and therefore forge and affirm new pathways. Through D’Lo’s unique identity formations through, for example, hyphenization, and including hip-hop embodiment, and his comedic, unapologetic autobiographical performances, he stages possibilities of identifications and disidentifications that could influence his audience members who are still struggling to fit in preexisting or hegemonic categories. Staging such possibilities would be particularly healing for the many trans people who, like those interviewed by Shelley, have embraced a fragmented—as opposed to the classically “healthy” unified—sense of self as part of their healing practice.

In *O Solo Homo*, Holly Hughes and David Román also reiterate Prosser’s point on trans lives emerging and realizing themselves through narrative. However, they make no

87 As quoted in Halberstam, 52.
88 Halberstam, 52.
distinction of potential differences between staging queer narratives and trans narratives. There may be overlaps in many cases, but there are important differences around narrative expectations—“coming out” or “born in the wrong body” which are the dominant narrative discourses for queer and trans people respectively. Both Shelley and Halberstam diverge from Prosser’s point is on linearity and coherence in these trans narratives.

Prosser believes the linearity and cohesion of trans narratives is integral to the healing process toward an integrated whole identity. Shelley and Halberstam both retort that many trans people fail to fit the demands of these norms—norms which are not limited to Prosser’s argument, but which medical and psychiatric care for trans people are founded upon. Certain narrative criteria, for instance, must be met in order for trans people to receive hormone therapy and gender confirmation surgery. Shelley strongly advocates for the legitimacy of fragmentation in identity formation—that trans people should be free to choose a more fixed or a more fluid self-construct. Halberstam emphasizes the non-linearity and the non-normative movement of trans temporality. The suggestion from both here is that trans people must be in control of their own narratives,89 and for many these narratives counteract normative discourse (even normative from the perspective of trans subjectivity). Creating space for a trans temporality to perform outside of the logics and constraints of straight temporality directly combats the violence of normativity and thus has trans-healing potential.

89 According to Shelley, “The self intersects the interior and the social-exterior, where selves are read through role identification, institutional inscription, and attempts at social coherence. Transpeople may (un)consciously utilize the idea of selfhood as a means to guide healing of the mis-sexed or mis-gendered body. Whether transpeople need a ‘self’ or not, the right to selfhood includes, I contend, the right to retain or reject it. An appreciation of difference, regardless of debates surrounding the ‘self,’ requires acceptance with acknowledgment that other people, too, no matter how different they may seem, ought to be constituted as subjects in their own right” (p. 212).
Decolonizing Queer Autobiography and Narratives of Trans Healing

While the aforementioned texts, Shelley's *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing* and Hughes and Román's *O Solo Homo*, were important and much-needed interventions in trans and queer studies, both texts underestimate the impact of systemic power enacted upon the bodies, minds, and spirits of trans people with intersectional identities. As the other chapters in this dissertation will corroborate, for many trans artists of color including D'Lo, activism and healing are largely intertwined. Each artist I write about has a contentious relationship with their respective cultural traditions, and several, including D'Lo, have been raised by immigrant parents. For D'Lo, his Hindu Sri Lankan culture continues to actively and profoundly influence him, as does hip-hop culture, feminist comedians, and decolonial activism. His mother helped bring a Hindu temple to his home town of Lancaster, California, and he himself was married in a traditional Hindu ceremony, but implemented queer black feminism in readings, gestures, and speeches. These background points along with the descriptions of how D’Lo identifies himself addressed earlier in the chapter are all important information to best grasp the multidimensional significance of his work, where it has sprung from, and where he is now moving with it.

From one perspective, it may appear that D’Lo is primarily performing in the tradition of American autobiography which, Román asserts, “is perhaps the most immediately understood form of queer self-representation,” and, he continues, “it is also often part of a larger collective and ongoing process of revisionist history.”⁹⁰ This also seems to fit D’Lo’s performances which have restaged figures such as his Hindu mother and

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Mahatma Gandhi. Visibility and representation are key concerns for D’Lo who raises this subject in D’FunQT when he sarcastically refers to the impressive strides in television representation as “these great shows like Orange is the New Black and Orange is the New Black, and Orange is the New Black,”91 (comically unable to think of another example of good representation) one of the few shows with a trans person of color in a starring role. Like most queer autobiography performance work, D’FunQT “comes out of a sense of community and thus helps inform and shape our understanding of identity and community.”92 This forging of community and a shared identity that is felt as a *communitas* which Jill Dolan and critical race and performance studies scholar Harry J. Elam Jr.93 write compellingly about, is certainly, for performers and audiences alike, a significant factor in the potential opening for healing that happens in the performance space.

But D’Lo takes this further, and his work must also be seen as partially derivative of certain aesthetic principles that are decidedly un-American, sometimes anti-American, and pre-American. Certainly, we see influences in D’Lo’s work from what Holly Hughes refers to as the “particularly American tradition of testifying, of witnessing history in the first person.”94 Furthermore, Hughes argues, that this tradition is “entwined with this country’s social change movements. Two prime examples: the testifying in African American churches, where the modern civil rights movement was born, and the consciousness raising that was central to second-wave feminism in the sixties and seventies.”95 While these

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91 D’Lo, D’FunQT, 2.
92 Hughes and Román, 5.
93 A more thorough description of the importance of communal experience in social protest theatre as outlined by Elam may be found in Chapter 2: “Living Mythologies Performs Trans-Healing in Queer Borderlands.”
94 Hughes and Román, 2-3.
95 Ibid.
historical links are important, toward a decolonizing intervention of reclaiming and remembering, it would be important to excavate deeper into a history of slavery, for a fuller understanding of the legacy of social change movements. For instance, the Christian Black American church was initially enforced in times of slavery when slaves were forced to leave behind their African religions, cultures, and rituals; and later it became a site of subversive cultural coding, with gospels such as “Sing Low, Sweet Chariot” containing key coded information about the Underground Railroad. The Christian Black American church has its own specific history including influence from African religions and cultures, and to refer to it as distinctly “American” as an influence to queer performance, may risk flattening key differences in various types of queer performances. Further excavation could show that queer aesthetic owes much credit to African American cultures.

**Who are the “D’FunQT”? Black Transness, Humor, and Privilege**

D’Lo defines defunct as “no longer operative or valid no longer in / effect or use; not operating or/ functioning having ceased to exist or / live; dead.” D’Lo’s D’FunQT evokes not only the fight for resisting becoming “defunct” as his website states; his capitalization also highlights the word “fun;” and the spelling of “D” with the apostrophe interpellates D’Lo himself in both the show’s fun quality and in the defunct, both identifying and disidentifying with the victories won and tragedies befallen the QTPOC community. I argue that this seeming paradox of joy through tragedy and decolonizing activism through performance is a tension in which trans-healing may occur. For it is not through the denial or transcendence of tragedy that one heals, but through the transmuting it and taking ownership of it. As queer scholar Alison Reed puts it, “What is toxic can be tonic if

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96 L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*.  
97 Ibid.
cultivated wisely.” In fact, D’Lo’s first words spoken onstage invoke a paradoxical mode of existence, one which D’Lo himself embodies. A paradox is not necessarily a contradiction, but its logic, located in a “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault), falls outside regimes of knowledge and dominant discourse. D’Lo invokes the anxieties of his presence which resists normative categorization in the beginning of his performance, briefly touched on earlier in this chapter.

Some of you who don’t know me are thinking, wait? Is that a girl who looks like a man (He stops and cranes his neck around) or a boy who looks better than my man? Do I bash it or fuck it? Don’t bash me, I’m a vegetarian but I love to watch people eat meat, I love to drink, but hate drunkards, I love weed, but don’t smoke it, and I wanna be on TV, but don’t own one.

D’Lo is embracing the multifaceted and seemingly contradictory facets of who he is and what he wants. On a serious note which incurs guffaws of laughter, he asks “Do I bash it or fuck it?” invoking the violence taken up against queer and trans people (especially people of color), and the social anxieties that arise when categorization is defied. Thus he simultaneously invokes, dismisses, queers, and frees himself from regimes of sexual and gender norms. Instead of quietly accepting the “defunct” state of existence society would enforce upon him, he rises up, speaks up, and laughs. Comedy in this case, is not only healing because of the cathartic release and burst of mirth felt in the audience. It is also healing because its function is not to cruelly laugh at a social “defunct” queer, but to rather find tragic humor in a system that would render someone like D’Lo defunct in the first place. Using the tool of camp, D’Lo turns the laughter on society:

Because you know, there is no reason why the 99% is poor and struggling. We all know that the power is in the hands of a corrupt few. And you know, the heads of the secret societies only jump in their own kind... and these heads are like “Welcome

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98 Reed, “Traumatic Utopias,” 122.
99 D’Lo, D’FunQT script, 2.
my brothers, and Hillary, we are glad that you are now a part of our secret society where there is enough money to go around to all us men and Hillary” and then they drink, be merry, fuck each other to get magical powers and they never fight for real, like we think they do on TV., because everybody come up - they all get jet planes and we the ones who have to pay for everything.

His political punches and queer quibbles are strengthened by his hip hop sensibility — which of course has its origins in anti-black resistance. You’ll notice some of his syntax like “we the ones” also embody a hip-hop sensibility. In calling out Hillary in his rant, he makes the problem patriarchal in addition to white and class-based. However, D’Lo himself came from a wealthier class, attended University of California, Los Angeles, and therefore has a certain privilege which he readily acknowledges in his performance.

D’Lo further uses humor to draw attention to the problem of representation in the media of QTPOC identified folx. He describes the desire to find himself in representations, and comically concludes that he decided the closest representation was Shrek. But then D’Lo realizes that “Shrek can get away with things that I can’t get away with” and that “Everyone loves Shrek. And nobody loves me...Everyone things I’m a black guy.”100 Even though Shrek denies socially acceptable categorization, he is embraced in a way D’Lo can’t be. Shrek is green instead of black or brown. Shrek is decidedly male and heteronormative. Throughout his performances, he refers to his affinity for and community with black artists, and all over the stage are posters and graffiti displaying activist sentiments such as #BlackLivesMattter, #TransLivesMatter.

D’Lo’s pronouncement of being read as black segues him into a recounting of problems with cops. When a cop pulled him over on his bicycle, D’Lo touts, “I did what any

100 Ibid.
man of color would’ve done at this time; I pretended to be a white woman.”  101 His affect and voice change to a flirty, coy valley girl who’s on her way home from pole dancing class. This experience of racial profiling, discrimination, and trauma that innumerable men of color face on a daily basis in this country was transformed into a comedic moment wherein once again we laugh at the ridiculousness of D’Lo on his bicycle viewed as a security threat. He both acknowledges and mirrors an experience that is traumatic for many people of color.

D’Lo explains that it isn’t only cops that interfere with his daily life. “You’d think that once folks figure that I’m not a black guy, that I’d be cut some slack because we live in this anti-black racist society, but the minute they realize I’m not a black guy, then the staring begins. I get stared at ALL the time.” 102 This recounting mirrors for many gender nonconforming people in the audience the uncomfortable, violating experience of being the object of blatant staring. In her important article, “Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson analyzes the politics of staring and how those outside the cultural norms have and might empower themselves to shift the staring dynamics in performance. She argues, “Wide human variation is the norm rather than the exception. It is the ideology of ableism that tells us we should all look the same.” 103 Though she writes specifically about disabled women, other groups that experience oppression for their abject or uncanny relationship to society norms may be analogous here. As D’Lo and so many other trans narratives indicate, staring is often part of the daily experience of being transgender:

101 Ibid.
102 Ibid, 3.
103 Thomson, “Dares to Stares” in Bodies in Commotion, 40.
By manipulating the staring ritual so fundamental to disability experience, these performances mount a critique of the politics of appearance...Moreover, these performances unmask the dynamic of staring by forcing the audience to become starers, to violate the social proscription against being captivated by the desire to stare. If gazing exercises the privilege of disappearing as a marked body, staring marks the starrer as the social transgressor. In short, these women cast the evil eye upon their audiences.\textsuperscript{104}

In his role as performer, particularly for cis white and otherwise normative audience members, D’Lo manipulates the staring ritual by implicating such audience members in their stares. Furthermore, in his dialogue on “staring back” which describes a practice he’s taken up as a trans person of color, he reveals a quotidian way in which he continues this reversal of the dynamics of staring, thereby empowering himself, and I would argue, transforming the traumatic experience into a trans-healing one. He explains:

\begin{quote}
Man, I get stared at so much that sometimes, just to let off some steam, I stare at people. Innocent people. I’ll be staring at a mufucka coming into the Trader Joe in their snoopy pajamas for a midnight ice cream run, I’m like...[he adds the stage direction:] (stare at them, look away).
\end{quote}

This is another example in which D’Lo takes a traumatic experience and transforms it on his terms—not only is it comedic, but he has changed the rules by putting himself on stage, making a spectacle of himself, using the stage as his own platform for his own purposes. In this way, his control of the staring becomes for him a queer utopic potential that opens space for healing.

From this “hyphenated” experience, as D’Lo refers to it, he (re)writes his family history—a family which both oppressed him and were oppressed themselves. D’Lo grew up in a Hindu Sri Lankan household in the small Southern California town of Lancaster. Not only had his parents fled the civil war where the Hindu minority were being oppressed, but when they moved to Lancaster, they found themselves among a white majority. In fact, the

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid, 39-40.
Ku Klux Klan has strong roots in Lancaster, being the location of the first west coast KKK church after Los Angeles.105 In D’FunQT, D’Lo performs an instance when he asked his mother:

“Amma, how come you never let us play in the front yard?”
She said, “because someone could’ve snatched you.” She was worried that the ghosts aka the KKK was doing drive-bys, swooping up colored kids off their front lawns, because little dark Sri Lankan kids were the hot commodity in the early 80s. But as a kid, I imagined the KKK was in the house and were like the ghosts in Scooby Doo with their white sheets sneaking around grabbing and killing brown kids. They were under my bed, in my closet...(whisper) not the queer closet, the other one.106

With careful comedic timing, D’Lo manages to describe how his entire family felt terrorized by the Ku Klux Klan from the tragic point of view of a child’s perspective, and yet finish off the story with humor. This is an excellent example of D’Lo’s alchemist ability with comedy.

It is also important to note that, while the KKK as a white supremacist organization, would be against all people of color in their neighborhood, historically their worst acts of violence were against black people. There are in fact several cases in D’FunQT when D’Lo refers to being mistaken for a black man. Besides identifying as “brown,” he has adopted hip hop aesthetics which is well documented in the book by Nitasha Tamar Sharma, Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness. When I spoke with D’Lo about his greatest influences, he spoke at length about the life-changing experience of discovering Queen Latifah and black emcees of the 80s when he was a kid experiencing racism and sexism. D’Lo’s intention is that performance is a “gift,” as well as

105 According to Chester L. Quarles in The Ku Klux Klan and Related American Racialist and Antisemetic Organizations: A History and Analysis (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. 1999), preacher and Arkansas-raised evangelist Wesley Swift moved to California for Bible school and started an Anglo-Saxon Christian congregation, first in Los Angeles, then by 1939 in Lancaster, California (179). To this day, Lancaster remains a town fraught with white supremacist-based violence and such groups as the “Nazi Lowriders,” a Neo-Nazi organization and organized crime syndicate.
106 Ibid, 5-6.
“peace,” and celebration, and “to feel accepted in all your glory amongst other good people,” which certainly has the utopic potential to build community, offer hope, and heal. However, healing is also experienced differently for each individual, and challenges to heal may arise if folks of color who identify as black or Latinx feel either misrepresented, misunderstood, or otherwise excluded from the utopic hopeful community feeling. With a diverse audience, there is a beautiful potential for a unifying experience of laughter and belonging from whence healing may emerge, but there is also some potential for retraumatization and feeling apart. For instance, since D’Lo is not black and hasn’t had that experience growing up, black people who haven’t had the privilege he has had may feel alienated or detached, which may thwart their healing. Keeping a critical eye open does not discount the power of D’Lo’s performance, but acknowledges the complexities involved with individual healing.

As part of his community-building strategies, D’Lo takes on the role of activist when he uses his stage as a platform to speak out against race and gender based violence and injustice. Recalling the findings of Singh and McKleroy, this kind of statement is also integral to the trauma healing of trans people of color. His first autobiographical narrative in D’FunQT is a story of his being profiled as a young black man by the cops in Santa Monica who pulled him over on his bike for riding at night without a light. He speaks out on white people’s cultural appropriation, and the white privilege of “going green,” which he jokingly revises as “going brown” since people of color often can’t afford to live otherwise. He addresses transphobia in the queer community in personal stories from before he transitioned, and being exoticized when he would date white women. These moments are performed partly as a humorous confessional, partly as a sermon to the converted. The

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107 D’Lo, D’FunQT, 4.
“random box” moments are particularly sermonesque, even delivered at the top of a ladder near center stage. In one particularly poignant, outspoken moment he painfully retorts:

I can’t tell you how much I hate that people say “Trans is the new hot shit”. There are trans women who are killed daily. Yeah, how hot is that. And I hate it when people say “our family is normal, we’re just like you”. Because the fact of the matter is, we’re not normal. We are the queer, the beautiful, the survivors, the sexy, the unaccepted, the differently-abled, the fierce, the wackers, and the fey and the queens.\textsuperscript{108}

In these moments of disjointed, trans temporality, are the most powerful call-outs against systems of oppression, which call in a community of queer and trans folks, a community he unites on his own terms. Snaps and affirming interjections are heard throughout the audience.

In his important book, \textit{Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka}, Harry J. Elam, Jr. writes about activist performance in Mexican American and Black American contexts. In these political performances, Elam describes the importance for these artists connecting with their roots in order to imagine alternative social and political realities. For instance, Amiri Baraka’s first play with the Spirit House Movers in 1966, \textit{Black Mass}, was based on the Black Muslim creation myth.\textsuperscript{109} Luis Valdez incorporated Aztec spirituality and mythology increasingly with El Teatro Compesino. Empowered by myth, history, ritual, and community, these groups demanded social change through their performances. It is well known that during the civil rights era of the sixties and seventies (including black rights, gay rights, women’s rights), the LGBT and feminist movements appropriated protest strategies from the Civil Rights Movement, but foregrounded white cis people to more easily and quickly move their agendas forward, at

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid, 22.
the expense of trans folks and people of color who were living on the intersections. In Elam’s analysis of *Black Mass*, he utilizes the work of Barbara and Carlton Molette, *Black Theater: Premise and Presentation*, which “discusses the Afro-Christian Church and the black sermonic tradition for a ritualistic and spiritually invigorated collective drama.

The Molettes argue that, through the use of repetition, rhythmic emphasis, and pitch variance, the black preacher heightens the congregation’s emotional intensity and produces spontaneous shouts and dances, communal ecstasy, and total spiritual involvement.” These are tools and strategies that have been adapted and utilized in queer activist performance, which is often still coded as white queer activist performance. And let us not forget that while Elam writes primarily about Amiri Baraka’s theatre performances, Baraka was also integral to creating political, racially charged poetry, launching a new generation of young activists into spoken word poetry, using art to resist oppression. D’Lo’s career start, in fact, was not in comedy, but in poetry slams, and he sites Queen Latifah, DJ Jazzy Jeff, Fresh Prince, and Reg E. Gaines as significant influences, all of which emerged in the 80s with foundations in the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement led by Amiri Baraka.

D’Lo typically performs in spaces which have already been queered—queer bars and clubs, LGBT Centers, and experimental performance venues like Highways Santa Monica and Dixon Place which have a long tradition of staging queer performance. Familiar sites for his queer and trans communities help ensure a community gathering. He draws from black hip-hop emcee culture, and what we should now acknowledge as the black American tradition of autobiographical activist performance. While admittedly, D’Lo is

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110 Ibid, 65.
guilty of cultural appropriation, he actively works on his allyship in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and openly, frequently credits the origins of his aesthetic style. Furthermore, while he is not black, he explains to his audiences that he is frequently mistaken for black, and that he finds community among black queer and trans folks.

**Transing South Asia & the Natyasastra**

However, since D’Lo identifies as Hindu Sri-Lankan American (and not African American), was raised by Sri Lankan parents, and broaches this point at various times throughout both *D’FunQT* and *D’Faqto Life*, to attempt to decolonize the perceived (white) queer American autobiographical tradition, I will shift to examine how his transing of Hindu Sri Lankan aesthetics and tradition further works to re/write queer and trans history and opens possibilities for healing and activism for both himself and his queer, trans, and/or PoC audience members. In the way that Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the foundational performance manual that has influenced centuries of Western performance methods and techniques, so in South Asia (including Sri Lanka), the *Natyasastra*, credited to the Hindu sage Bharata, has influenced centuries of performance.

Analyzing D’Lo’s performances from the lens of South Asian queer diasporic subject, Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Lee have written about the Natyasastric elements in D’Lo’s performance of *Ramble-ATIONS*, in which he embodies a variety of characters, many of whom are/ were Hindu (such as Gandhi), including a multiplicity of genders. Rather than essentializing D’Lo’s Sri Lankan-ness, utilizing the *Natyasastra* as an informative text may

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111 Interesting work in hip-hop studies is emerging addressing the globalization of hip-hop culture and aesthetic such as Nitasha T. Sharma’s *Hip-Hop Desis*, and E. Patrick Johnson’s work on *Appropriating Blackness* is an important conversation and direction for future scholarship on the performances of D’Lo. Though a more thorough analysis, is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to address.
offer new insights into the possibilities and potentialities of D’Lo’s performance as a queer and trans diasporic subject who performs his con/tensions with black American, white American, and Sri Lankan American pasts, presents, and futures. “Looking back” is a condition of the diasporic, as well as the queer which is “arrested in time” (Halberstam) and turns to alternative temporalities for a sense of both self and community. Looking, (and as Heather Love puts it) feeling backwards, can also be a decolonizing process in which subjugated knowledges like gender, healing, and performance possibilities, may be recovered and reimagined in postcolonial, queer, and diasporic contexts. The decolonizing work must be continuous, since colonial projects are continuous (through the prison industrial complex, through limiting rights of indigenous Americans, dependence on fossil fuels, etc.).

His performance is healing not only for D’Lo, but for D’Lo’s audience as they are trans/ported through the impossible spatiotemporal utopia of queerness. For instance, through his restaging of a traditional Sri Lankan Hindu mother, D’Lo puts himself in a utopic position of rewriting tradition as one in which the subaltern trans diasporic subject speaks, interpellating moments of history with his subjectivity—if only for the length of that performance. Furthermore, sharing such an experience creates a sense of community and fulfills various Natyasastric bhavas (particular types of experiences) to achieve rasa, the meaning of which is widely debated but broadly means the outcome of the audience’s aesthetic experience.

112 The relationship between decolonizing, looking backwards, failure, and healing is further explored in chapter 3 of this dissertation, “Decolonizing the University with DarkMatter’s Healing of/in Failure”
The sage Bharata who penned *The Natyasatra* in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} or 3\textsuperscript{rd} century (with help from a variety of anonymous sources) detailed his theories of *rasa* and *abhinaya* which have been analyzed and re-analyzed throughout the centuries and across languages and cultures. As Ketu Katrak points out in her book, *Contemporary Indian Dance*, *rasa* theory is typically understood as “taste” analogized with the satisfaction of enjoying a delectable meal. Furthermore, likely because of the difficulty in measuring “taste” and “satisfaction” in performance, there are varied and often contradictory theories on the meaning and application of *rasa* theory in Sanskrit poetics. However, Katrak reframes this classical construction for contemporary Indian dance as a complex psychophysical experience in audience members arguing that Indian aesthetics is founded on a presumed integration of mind and body.\footnote{Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance*, 21.} As we’ll see throughout the chapters of this dissertation, part of the decolonizing activism for the artists about whom I write is reclaiming healing methods and approaches from pre-colonial pasts and deconstructing the colonial divides between body/ mind/ spirit.\footnote{This sentiment is beautifully, poetically articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa in her piece, “Dream of the Double Faced Woman” found in *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (edited by Ana Louise Keating): “She had found that she could not divorce her body from her spirit. The followers of Christ did this, elevating the spirit and denigrating the body. The indigenous people had (some still have) a fine balance between the body and the spirit. The Aztecs lost it in thinking that to maintain that balance they had to sacrifice the body to the spirit. And her people, the offspring of La Chingada, the india, must achieve that balance again, must acknowledge the existence of the two on the same plane. El espíritu es carne viva, Carne viva es el espíritu. That’s why they were here-in the flesh on earth.”}

*Rasas* are emotional responses in the audience, but are also conveyed emotions from the performers, categorized in four ways: *angika* (bodily movement/ gesture), *vachika* (speech and sound), *aharya* (costume, makeup, direction), and *sattvika* (the dominant feeling evoked). Katrak points out that *rasas*, like all elements of *natya*...
(translated as “drama” but incorporate all elements of dance and music) are aimed at “infus[ing] a sense of harmony in the audience.”\textsuperscript{115} But what are the implications of “harmony” in a trans temporality in a queer space which are marked by distortion, being “defunct,” whose existence is defined by its disjunction, a subculture that often builds communities in disease, death, and suffering? Since harmony has its origins in music and presupposes a structure of comparison, the question for us is, in harmony with what? In the context of D'Lo's performance, he hopes his audience feels “accepted in all your glory amongst other good people,”\textsuperscript{116} or, put another way, feeling in harmony with the community sharing this performance. In short, the harmony referred to so often in the Natyasastra as an underlying goal in all elements of a performance, may be expanded to the subjectivity of D'Lo, a Sri-Lankan American queer trans diasporic comedic performer, whose activist and healing labor is toward a utopic experience of queer and trans community. In a movement toward “trans-healing,” the Natyasastric element of harmony may be expanded to an imperative of self-care in a performance by and for queer and trans communities of color.

Thus, my own application of The Natyasastra to D'Lo's performance diverges here from Lee and Chatterjee's analysis. They argue that “\textit{rasa} theory's emphasis on de-personalization, anti-realism and achieving transcendence on a 'higher' spiritual plane seems incongruous with political action.”\textsuperscript{117} My contention is formulating political action in opposition with spirituality, which in fact is a colonial move. Feminist education scholar Njoki Nathani Wane describes this spirituality as an “alternative to colonial knowledge and

\textsuperscript{115} Katrak, “Post-Natyam Collective,” 309.
\textsuperscript{116} D'Lo, Official Website, \url{www.dlocokid.com/dfunqt} Accessed 25 April 2018.
\textsuperscript{117} Lee and Chatterjee, 4.
education that is a viable, legitimate, and truthful way of knowing the world.”\textsuperscript{118} The queer utopia of D’Lo’s utopia is precisely utopic for its invocation of a psychological, spiritual healing even as it demands social change, making it both decolonizing and a spirituality with hope for the future which Singh and McKlavoy have shown to be crucial to the resilience and healing for trans people of color who have experienced trauma.\textsuperscript{119}

Furthermore, enacting this kind of utopic trans-healing is a form of spiritual labor. In her short but poignant book, \textit{Transforming Feminist Practice}, Leela Fernandes argues for a spiritualized feminist practice and pedagogy which includes carving space for utopias: “Utopias are inconvenient because they necessitate deep-seated changes in ourselves and in the ways in which we live our lives. The irony here is that such ‘theoretical’ utopias require labor.”\textsuperscript{120} Because these are labor practices in an episteme that is subjugated in western knowledge systems, they are typically not acknowledged, or at least not taken seriously, even in minoritized study programs. M. Jacqui Alexander states, “It is a paradox that a feminism that has insisted on a politics of historicized self has rendered that self so secularized, that it has paid very little attention to the ways in which spiritual labor and spiritual knowing is primarily a project of self-knowing and transformation that constantly invokes community simply because it requires it.”\textsuperscript{121} Certainly, for D’Lo, spirituality, healing, and what he refers to as “queer magic” are community-based projects, and connecting to community is engaging in a decolonial project, according to L.T. Smith as well.

\textsuperscript{118} Njoki Nathani Wane, “Reclaiming our Spirituality: A Pedagogical Tool for Feminism and Activism,” 164.
\textsuperscript{119} Further arguments on the need for an integrated spiritual-material-psychological approach from feminists of color may be found in Lata Mani’s SacredSecular, Leela Fernandes’ \textit{Transforming Feminist Practice}, Gloria Anzaldúa’s theories of spiritual-activist, and Jacqui Alexander’s metaphysics of interconnectedness, Cheri Moraga, Audre Lorde.
\textsuperscript{120} Leela Fernandes, \textit{Transforming Feminist Practice}, 19.
\textsuperscript{121} M. Jacqui Alexander, \textit{Pedagogies of Crossing}, 15.
as Mignolo and Walsh. Let us not take for granted this “gift” (D’Lo’s word) of spiritual labor and healing labor that D’Lo freely offers his audiences.

The efficacy of this utopic healing is partly the performance of *abhinaya* which is coded, as Chatterjee and Lee imply, not by class or even culture as much as by experience—of being a person of color and/or a queer person, etc.—which is shared with the performer’s own experience. In other words, as the authors frame it, the efficacy of D’Lo’s *rasa* is partly due to the “insider audiences” knowledge of his identity and experiences. He is forging community through counter methods, opening a queer space in a trans time. The shared experiences of gender, sexuality, or race-based oppression, the very roots of much of the shared experiences of trauma, is what holds the community together, and is further solidified through the act of communing in comedy—a comedy accessible to “insiders.” In my interview with D’Lo on healing and performance he describes the high stakes of community-based art for queer and trans people of color:

> Historically the queer community has been so in tune with how the world doesn’t make space for them that they’re just like “okay I need to create the space for myself.” And so those spaces were created in community and through art. And so, and I think that’s the root of why I say that trans and queer people are the most creative, magical motherfuckers on this planet, because you know art was never a luxury. It was a necessity.\(^{122}\)

> Rather than reject the variety of traditions rooted in the multifarious identities D’Lo ascribes to himself, he disidentifies from them, renegotiating their boundaries and limitations. For instance, what may be appropriate for a “woman” or a “man” as the *Natyasastra* distinguishes them, in performing voice, costume, gesture, and emotional

\(^{122}\) D’Lo, phone interview by Anna Winget, 20 December 2018. Significantly, Alok Vaid-Menon of DarkMatter has used very similar language about the necessity of creating art for trans people of color—the wording of course which is inspired by Audre Lorde’s “Poetry is not a Luxury.” In Alok’s words, referring to creating art, “for many of us...if we do not do this, we do not live.” See the full interview at Majarto on YouTube.
affect is queered through D’Lo’s performance of his own identity along with the other identities he embodies throughout the performance, such as hip-hop gestures and intonation. As Chatterjee and Lee further point out, the Natyasastric performance tradition of eroticism is queered through D’Lo’s trans identity and hip-hop masculinity, and doubly queered through his drag performance of his Amma. Such a performance is an example of the decolonizing practice of (trans)gendering,123 in which gender is (re)focused where it has been suppressed or ignored.

At various times throughout the performances, D’Lo refers to his Sri Lankan identity, at times with pride, and often with ambivalent tension. For instance, in D’Facto Life, when he first mentions Sri Lanka as a place his family fled because they were the Tamil minority during a civil war, he describes Sri Lanka as “the fart India left.” In D’FunQT, he explains, “I’m Sri Lankan-American. You know, Sri Lanka, wars, tsunamis, internment camps, World class comedians...”124 He humorously plays on the American mainstream Sri Lankan stereotypes even as he disidentifies with them, placing the emphasis on his comedian identity. Later, in a brutally honest discussion about gender confirmation surgery, he says to the audience, “I love this body, but hello – passing would make everything easier. Traveling on planes, traveling to racist or phobic cities for gigs. My family in Sri Lanka, I wanna see them more, but Lanka ain’t the safest place for my ass.”125 If, for the diasporic subject, “home” were a place of origin, perhaps he would feel safe there, but “home” and “origin” are doubly contentious for a queer/ trans diasporic subject. Diasporic

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123 I have added the (trans) to L.T. Smith’s “gendering” project in Decolonizing Methodologies.
124 D’Lo, D’FunQT script, 3.
125 Ibid, 23.
temporality, the aims of performance as prescribed by the Natyasastra compared to D'Lo's aims.

I argue for D'Lo's performance in *D'FunQT* as a utopic (re)act(ion) which re-claims, re-writes, and re-vises tradition as he negotiates traditional codes—understood in cultural, social, religious, and spiritual contexts. It's important to note that according to research from traumatologists Singh and McKleroy, this very process of negotiation is integral to trans people of color’s resilience and healing; and to further enact that negotiation in performance for an audience may also facilitate healing potential for audience members. This negotiation within a queer space and in a trans time which navigates as it rewrites regimes of tradition\(^{126}\) is a performance of disidentification. What pushes the performance of this disidentity to the level of utopic is not only the possibility for experiencing trans-healing and participating in decolonizing acts, but is also D'Lo's intention of healing and affirmation, an intention central to Natyasastric comedic performance. As I mentioned previously, D'Lo refers to his comedic performance as “medicinal” and he offers his show *D'FunQT* specifically as his “gift to the communities I identify with: Fierce Folks of Color, Queers, QT’s and yes, Islanders. I want to give my people a break. A moment to exhale in peace, To celebrate in laughter, To feel accepted in all your glory amongst other good people.”\(^{127}\) This “healing” as sharing community in the moment while reaching into diasporic pasts and imagining queer futures is the activist decolonizing and spiritual labor D'Lo offers as his “gift” to his audience.

D'Lo’s *D'FunQT* is located within a specifically Sri Lankan diasporic narrative; but like Chatterjee and other scholars who have analyzed D'Lo’s performances, I note that Sri

\(^{126}\) Here I coalesce and paraphrase Halberstam, Muñoz, and Halperin.

\(^{127}\) D’Lo, official website. (www.dlocokid.com/dfunqt)
Lanka’s and India’s cultural pasts are closely linked and consider D’Lo’s Tamil Hindu heritage, thereby finding some Indian discourse on queerness, nation, and diaspora apt for this paper on D’Lo’s performance of *D’FunQT*. My use of “diaspora” here is indebted to the work of Gayatri Gopinath who has written compellingly on queer diasporas in South Asian public cultures, and whose work grew out of important foundational texts in diasporic studies including those penned by Stuart Hall and Joseph Roach. According to Gopinath, “The concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy.”

D’Lo’s presence on stage interrogates binary distinctions and nationalistic rhetoric of “purity” and “authenticity” as constitutive of nation and home. The contention with purity and authenticity for a transgender diasporic subject is complicated through the trans person’s imperative to perform their gender “realness” which is not only a matter of citizenship and belonging, but “passing” can be a matter of survival in a binary society. D’Lo identifies with masculinity and male pronouns but was born female and has a feminine

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128 Gopinath, 11.
voice. His family is Sri Lankan but belongs to the Hindu minority of their homeland. His parents are immigrants, but he was born in the U.S. His aesthetic is hip-hop, but he is South Asian American. At least in D’Lo’s case, “transgender” it seems, is indicative of not only a change to one’s sex, but of continuous mobility, traversing boundaries and transcending categorization. Furthermore, his relentless resistance to any static identification permeates his performance, which transports his audience to a utopic moment where the impossible exists and needs no definition; it is experienced through participating in D’Lo’s performance. It is a site of his trauma and his potential healing.

A lengthy segment in D’Lo’s D’FacQTo Life, which incorporates aspects of his shows D’FunQT and Ramble-ATIONS, and was performed in a graduate Queer Performance course at UCLA, constitutes D’Lo in performance as his Amma, a Sri Lankan immigrant trying to make sense of her daughter’s gender and sexuality. D’Lo’s appearance and affect completely transform. No longer do we observe D’Lo’s laid-back slouch and large sweeping movements across the stage. In Amma we see a traditionally Hindu Sri Lankan feminine woman with a long black braid, gold bangles, bare feet, a brilliantly red sari, and very small, contained movements. Through D’Lo’s staging of his heterosexual and apparently traditional Hindu mother, he uses the alchemy of camp comedy to parody the feminine in a double mimeses or parodic mimicry. According to comedy scholar Pamela Robertson, “The mimicry of stereotypical images demonstrates the female spectator’s recognition of herself in those images, while it also allows the spectator to misrecognize herself, to see that her ‘self’ does not exist prior to the mimicry but is always already a construction.”129 Robertson refers primarily to the audience, but this act of mimeses through camp comedy is also a

129 Robertson in Camp, 272.
disidentification and misrecognition between D’Lo and the femininity enforced upon him at birth and in early childhood.

D’Lo’s performance of Amma is an empowering act wherein he reclaims tradition—embodying narratives in dominant discourse while rewriting the script, so to speak, for his own purposes. Instead of tradition speaking for D’Lo, D’Lo speaks for tradition, in his own way and on his own time. The spatial and temporal location of D’Lo’s performance is a queer one. As Muñoz describes:

Queerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time’s “presentness” needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness in the world.\(^\text{130}\)

This queer, and more specifically, trans time in D’Lo’s performance is a utopic time in which he restages some of his most heartbreaking moments of rejection, confusion, and self-doubt, elevating them to a horizon of levity, even joy through the alchemy of comedy shared with a primarily queer and trans community.

Queer time understands the same truth revealed to us most compellingly through diasporic and postcolonial discourse: one who controls the past is one who controls the present; thus, regimes of tradition battle to regulate the present with its limited and manipulated scope of future possibilities. For this reason, Muñoz ascribes futurity to “history’s dominant principle.”\(^\text{131}\) In this performance we experience the trans temporality of not only events and emotional experiences from D’Lo’s life, but his gender, too. We experience the “woman” D’Lo was forced to perform until he could embrace his true self as trans. To experience tradition through the narrative of an “impossible” subject like D’Lo, is

\(^{130}\) Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 25.
\(^{131}\) Ibid, 16.
to experience an utopic moment; this is the potential of queer futurity. Thus, the healing utopic potential of community and hope in D’Lo’s performance is also a decolonizing move, deconstructing colonialisms of the past through a performance of today offering a hope for the future.

D’Lo describes his own history of coming out as a continual, cyclical process of trans temporality, countering the mainstream trans narratives that are confined to linearity. D’Lo’s story does not follow a clear trajectory of transitioning, but in fact includes three times in particular when he came out to his family. Before embracing his transman identity, D’Lo came out as gay, and in D’Faqto Life, recounts the phone conversation in which his father boasted about finding two suitable doctors in North Carolina to consider for marriage, giving D’Lo the choice between the two. When D’Lo hesitates, his father jokes about D’Lo having a boyfriend.

“No…” D’Lo responds, performing both his own voice and his father’s Sri Lankan accent. “What, then? Do you have girlfriend?” When D’Lo admits to having a girlfriend, his father refuses to believe it, affirming repeatedly, “Don’t tell me you’re gay!” Ending the phone call in a disagreement, D’Lo’s Amma then calls. We hear her voice through D’Lo:

“So, Appa said something…are you a gay?”
“Yes, Amma, I’m gay.”
“Who else knows you’re a gay?”

This moment in his performance is an example of D’Lo’s alchemic ability with comedy that has trans-healing potential. First, D’Lo on stage and in control of the performance (and the performative past) instead of being silenced and yielding to a heteronormative voice is one utopic aspect. D’Lo is no victim here, but a hero who has conquered the fear of rejection, and has claimed a proud sense of self—a self-love healing

\[132\] D’Lo, D’FunQT. Transcribed play text. Video recording courtesy of D’Lo.
both for him and potentially healing as a mirroring experience for audience members. He taps into an implicit power which, in turn, empowers the audience to do the same. Second, the intimate and confrontational stand-up performance style invites the audience to participate and share in this highly personal experience. Much of the audience at the LGBT Center of Los Angeles has likely experienced their own coming out narrative, but the validation in witnessing a comparable suffering through performance has transformative potential for audience members that can be considered utopic.

In addition to the aforementioned traumatology research into the importance of mirroring, drama therapy has long claimed the healing effects of mirroring techniques—that is, observing narratives analogous with one’s own for a newfound understanding and assistance with healing.\textsuperscript{133} Third, D’Lo’s father’s utter dismissal and rejection of his child’s non-normative sexual identity signals to the impossibility of imagining alternative sexualities in South Asian Hindu culture and manifests onto D’Lo as trauma. “Impossible” in this case, also gestures to the criminalization of queer sex in South Asia, via the colonial penal code 377. By D’Lo proudly embodying an impossible identity, his performance in fact gestures to a world of possibility on the horizon—an experience of what Muñoz refers to as the not-yet-conscious, or, a utopian feeling.\textsuperscript{134}

Instead of rejecting or ignoring the regimes of tradition that seek to contain D’Lo’s sexuality and gender, D’Lo implicitly interrogates them by placing them center stage and embodying them, reclaiming and reframing the normative narrative. The rejection we witness through D’Lo’s embodiment of his parents, is not meant to demonize or even mock D’Lo’s parents in particular. Such a representation invokes a very real personal and

\textsuperscript{133} Pamela Dunne, “Narrative Therapy,” 114-115.
\textsuperscript{134} Muñoz, \textit{Cruising Utopia}, 3.
political struggle over homeland, nation, and tradition—the battleground of which is located on the female body.  

While D’Lo does not identify as female, as an AFAB (assigned female at birth) the regimes of tradition and the regulation of the female body in South Asia and the diaspora are quite apt—in fact, even more so due to his unwillingness to conform to these regimes. His lack of essential gender and his mixed gender codes further exemplify the need for performances of disidentification, particularly for the sake of those spectators who may be trans or in other ways refuse to conform to normative genders and sexualities.

In her work on the impossible desires of the queer diaspora of South Asia, Gopinath highlights the important body of feminist criticism which places the woman at the center of nationalist discourse. Such works argue that “the woman” is “enshrined as both the symbolic center and boundary marker of the nation as ‘home’ and family.” Furthermore, she points out, the vocabulary surrounding nationalism is bound up with kinship, blood, motherland and “reinforces the merging of the nation/ community with the selfless mother/ devout wife.” If the degree to which the feminized domestic space is pure, sacred, and obedient is indicative of a pure, authentic, traditional nation, then the female body and female sexuality is essential to nationalist discourse. As Gopinath points out a la M. Jacqui Alexander, “heterosexuality is a prerequisite of ‘good citizenship,’ since it depends on the family as a reproductive unit through which the stability of gender roles and hierarchies is preserved. Heterosexuality, in other words, is fundamental to the way in which the nation imagines itself.”

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137 Ibid.
138 Ibid, 263.
A concrete example of this is when the South Asian gay and lesbian organization (SALGA) attempted to march in the India Day Parade in New York City in 1995. Their request was denied by the Federation of Indian Association because the organization was not in alignment with “traditional Indian values.” Such regulations are not isolated to queer events, but to various public displays which challenge the “traditional” role of the South Asian woman. For instance, in 1990 an organization called Sakhi which assists battered South Asian women, attempted to perform a play about domestic violence during a Diwali festival, but was banned by the Association of Indians in America (AIA). In recounting these events, Purvi Shah concludes that “redefining notions of family and the individual...is considered disrespectful and alien to the culture.” And furthermore, public displays calling for social change are viewed by nationalist regimes as political (as opposed to cultural), and therefore, threatening.

Shah points out that even the term “South Asian” as opposed to Sri Lanka or India is threatening to nationalist regimes because of its inherent border-crossing and blurring of explicit divides. If this is true, how much more threatening an identity like “queer” would be for such regimes—an identity with an explicit purpose to blur boundaries and refuse compartmentalization. In their article for Transgender Studies Quarterly, “Decolonizing Transgender in India,” Dutta and Roy argue that integral to decolonizing transgender in South Asia is making space for a multiplicity of trans identity formations across nations, castes, cultures, and other identity factors. They argue, “Emergent models of transgender

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139 As quoted in Shah, 47.
140 Shah, 51.
141 Ibid, 48.
142 Ibid, 51-52.
143 Ibid, 53.
identity certainly create new possibilities for social recognition and citizenship, but they may be colonizing precisely in the ways in which they may refuse or fail to comprehend many forms of gender variance relegated to the scale of the local, even though such discourses and practices may actually span multiple regions of South Asia.” From this perspective, it is imperative to decolonize terms expounded by the Hindu right such as “traditional Indian values,” the values of which are historically intertwined with Victorian colonial regimes, the most significant of these being the still enforced section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, the anti-sodomy law.

South Asian activist organizations promoting LGBT rights are often seen as “vectors of this polluting Americanization.” While undoubtedly Americanization in South Asia has caused turmoil and threats to local ways of life, instead of pinning the disease on the colonial culprit, manifesting as the violence of normativity, the Hindu right uses Americanization as a convenient justification toward erasure of localized non-normative genders and sexualities, thereby participating in a colonial project. D’Lo gestures to this common traditional view through the enactment of his Amma, who, when coming to terms with D’Lo’s gender and sexuality, believed that only white people like Ellen DeGeneres could be gay, revealing a colonized imaginary. “I tell you, we should have never left Sri Lanka. We don’t have the gays in Sri Lanka!” Amma submits, suggesting that the “traditional values” of their homeland could have prevented her child’s queerness.

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144 Dutta and Roy, 321.
145 Since this chapter was written, India has repealed the part of the law that had criminalized sex between two consenting adults of the same sex (September 2018).
146 Shah, 53.
147 See Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender.”
148 D’Lo, D’FunQT. Transcribed play text.
Refusing to acknowledge the ways in which gender variance is localized in Sri Lanka, Amma enacts a colonial violence of normativity, and yet the painful trauma is transformed into D’Lo’s comedy. That healing process happened through D’Lo’s efforts to understand his parents: “The healing...became my understanding of the fact that they were equally flawed human beings suffering from their own unpacked pain...”\textsuperscript{149} D’Lo’s parents were under the influence of a colonial imaginary in this example, and this colonial dis/ease spread onto their child through the cycle of violence. Their interpellated diasporic conditions in this moment of the performance reveal an impossibility of authenticity (as both a traditional Sri Lankan mother and a Sri Lankan American queer trans man)—the meaning of which is lost when heterogeneity is affirmed.

In “Thinking the Diaspora,” Stuart Hall theorizes about what it is to be diasporic and live in the diaspora. He argues that, “Essentially, it is assumed that cultural identity is fixed by birth, part of nature, imprinted through kinship and lineage in the genes, constitutive of our innermost selves.”\textsuperscript{150} The “umbilical cord” of that identity “is what we call ‘tradition,’ the test of which is its origins, its self-presence to itself, its ‘authenticity.’ It is, of course, a myth—with all the real power that our governing myths carry to shape our imaginaries, influence our actions, give meaning to our lives and make sense of our history.”\textsuperscript{151} Much of D’Lo’s power is in his shaping and manipulating tradition as he sees it—one which is inherently resistant to nationalistic regimes of tradition but one which may nevertheless be viewed in certain ways as, in fact, traditional.

\textsuperscript{149} D’Lo, phone interview with Anna Winget 20 December 2018.
\textsuperscript{150} Stuart Hall, “Thinking the Diaspora,” 545.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid, 546.
That is, as much as he is an American trans subject, he is also a Sri Lankan trans subject, invoking an awareness of a transgender lineage that is specific and “traditional” to Sri Lanka. His presence as a Sri Lankan American trans performer resists erasure of trans identities in Sri Lanka, challenging mainstream trans narratives perceived from straight temporalities that contain “transgender” in a white, linear expression. Furthermore, in a trans diasporic subject, the “authenticity” of which Stuart writes has a gendered significance, since “authenticity,” or what is more popularly referred to as “realness” is a loaded term in the trans community relating to “passing” and how integrated a trans person feels in their trans identity.

Though the “diaspora” contains a promise to return, this, too, is a myth stuck in straight temporality. There is always a kind of dis-location experienced, according to Hall’s recounting of Mary Chamberlain’s diasporic research. Regimes of tradition prey on the diasporic desire to return home, to experience the familiar, but as Iain Chambers explains, “there is always something else in between.” All that can be done is making some sense of signs, clinging to memory. “Perhaps,” suggests Chambers, “it is more a question of seeking to be at home here, in the only time and context we have.” Hall and Chamber’s words gesture to queer desire—an impossible desire a la Gopinath—in which the here and now is not enough, but neither is the future laid out by regimes of so-called tradition, nor is the past as it, too, is being regulated and managed. If there is a “home” to be experienced

152 See glossary preceding the dissertation introduction.
153 See Shelley, Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing. “The aim for those pre-transition transpeople who have difficulty accepting their trans-ness is to overcome their self-oppression, to heal psychologically so as to live a life that is resilient and authentic.” (Kindle location 4063). See also Stryker and Prosser.
154 Ibid, 545.
155 Ibid, 544.
156 Hall, 544-545.
for a queer and trans diasporic subject it is in a trans temporality on a queer horizon. That is, home itself, is a queer utopia. Perhaps it can be experienced in D’Lo’s performance wherein community, affirmation, and hope may be felt.

Furthermore, because of the rejection so many trans people have experienced (at “home”), many have been forced to leave and ascribe “found family” members to themselves. In such a trans migration, reclaiming and reframing traditions becomes a way they are able to write their queerness or transness into a narrative from which they were previously erased. This kind of labor constitutes a trans-healing and occurs in a trans temporality. As D’Lo’s performance in queer time shows us, hope must be situated on a queer horizon, which Muñoz understands as “a modality of ecstatic time in which the temporal stranglehold...[of] straight time is interrupted or stepped out of.”\footnote{Muñoz, 32.} Muñoz suggests that such a modality may be signaled in a moment when one has an experience of simultaneous past, present, and future, or feels ecstasy or extreme pleasure—this could be experienced in D’Lo’s audience through eroticism or side-splitting humor, or connection to the other audience members, or feeling understood through having one’s experience mirrored, or grasping onto a future hope of visibility or love.

The devout immigrant mother, Amma, as performed by D’Lo, in many ways signifies the woman that D’Lo was “supposed to” become. Part of the humor of the performance is that we clearly see that the notion of the “authentic” Sri Lankan woman is, in fact, a ruse. Nationalist regimes would have us believe that a woman must be heterosexual, chaste, devoted, obedient, and maternal if she is to possess traditional values. According to Ketu Katrak in her book, \textit{The Politics of the Female Body}, “Tradition often mystifies actual control
over female sexuality. Tradition is often problematically ahistoricized, so that cultural traditions are presented in dominant ideologies as timeless and totalizing.”\textsuperscript{158} It is such rhetoric of timeless patriarchal authority which attempts to justify homophobia and transphobia in South Asia and the diaspora today. Katrak further argues, “A struggle over what is tradition is a battle over the female body—how to control it and keep it familiar within recognizable and legitimized patriarchal codes.”\textsuperscript{159} While patriarchal regimes may claim “tradition,” utopic trans-healing—inclusive of both queerness and spirituality—may perform decolonizing reconstructions of it. Tradition, like identity, is living, breathing, and fluid and can therefore not be reduced to such binaries as purity / pollutant. Indeed, this compartmentalization is another colonial illusion.

\textbf{Conclusion: Oppressive Dungeons and Queer Magical Horizons (an ongoing dialectic)}

The part D’Lo’s performances that seems to most directly and powerfully fulfill the utopic (and also Natyasastric) aim of offering healing to the audience, comes at the end of \textit{D’FunQT} when D’Lo gently and intimately addresses the audience with his own personal, most pressing life questions. He then attempts to answer them, as though trying to convince himself:

I only got one life. I gotta get happy. And now, we have options to get happy. We have options to survive in this increasingly nutty world where we barely have time to replenish our bodies with love, we have options to not kill ourselves. I think I’m ready to get happy, top surgery. It will be the biggest, most selfish, self loving decision I had ever made in my life. My rites of passage. [He adds the stage direction:] (Hug n Kiss Yourself)

As for testosterone... That’s all in my next show: To T or Not to T.

I gotta get grown. I gotta stop letting people think I don’t belong here. Because my mind is heavy, like most gender non-conforming people, and I gotta do everything I can to keep away from that deep dark dungeon inside my mind.

\textsuperscript{158} Katrak, 159.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
In this address to his audience, he offers hope of getting happy, of putting his self-care and self-love first in a way that he never has before, thereby encouraging others to do the same. He affirms his existence and also reveals the struggle with inner demons many trauma survivors have to combat.

What he describes is a decolonizing of the imagination; he paints a utopic imaginary that is both healing in its hope and its expression of holding onto a spirituality. In his discussion on the importance of decolonizing trauma-informed practices, Karcher draws from Imarisha who describes the power of sharing a utopic vision of “a world that doesn’t currently exist...Collectively dreaming up one that does means we can begin building it into existence...That is why decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive decolonization process of all.”

Ngugi wa Thiong’o famously demonstrated this point in his important work, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*.

Ngugi points out many cases where the Eurocentric imaginary had led to results he calls “disastrous” such as African children growing up seeing racist images that were meant to represent Africans, or Hegel’s statement that nothing harmonious could be found in the “African character.”

Ngugi writes, “[T]he negative image becomes internalized and it affects [Africans’] cultural and even political choices in everyday living.” This internalized image, from the perspective of the neo-colonial state, prevents a real threat to its power. Ngugi argues that the “democratic participation of the people in the shaping of their own lives or in discussing their own lives in languages that allow for mutual

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160 Imarisha as quoted in Karcher, 126.
161 Ngugi, *Decolonising the Mind*, 18.
162 Ibid.
comprehension is seen as being dangerous to the good government of a country and its institutions."163 Thus, decolonizing the imagination, and actively engaging in the labor of healing and utopia is a direct threat to the neo-colonial state and its institutions.

Furthermore, to return to trauma therapist and Harvard physician, Richard Kradin’s point, trauma therapy has the best results when engaging not with so-called objective truths (which is often a colonial construction anyway), but with the patient’s imagination,164 which rarely operates linearly, especially for those who have experienced trauma. D’Lo’s performance and autobiographical claims in D’FunQT affirm alternative identity formations existing outside of dominant cultural norms, opening possibilities for spectators who have felt stifled by medical and social restrictions. Through his performances in a trans temporality, D’Lo offers himself and his audiences a gift of a utopic journey through and beyond the violence of normativity. Navigating and affirming his identities, encouraging humor and community, D’Lo offers hope and healing potential for his trans spectators of color, particularly those who have endured trauma. Since imagination is integral to both decolonizing and to healing from trauma, then we should not underestimate the potential impact of hope, humor, and utopic experience in D’Lo’s performance. "Actually moving from self-blame to understanding...just that leap in and of itself is healing, is the transformable shit...we know internally that we have the capacity to change...we know this, we feel that in our bodies."165 He finds that queer and trans people of color with their resilience and lenses outside of normative structures, have a certain magic they offer the world, which he refers to as Queer Magic. “I’m always going to talk

163 Ibid, 30.
164 Kradin 193-195.
165 D’Lo, interview with Anna Winget, 20 December 2018.
about this: queer magic is about: regardless of what is happening out there in the world, regardless of the ways the system is set up against us, what are those beautiful, magical ways that we transform people, transform minds, community?\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
CHAPTER 2
Living Mythologies Performs Trans-Healing in Queer Borderlands

Creative acts are forms of political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms and are not merely aesthetic exercises. We build culture as we inscribe in these various forms. Inherent in the creative act is a spiritual, psychic component—one of spiritual excavation, of (ad)venturing into the inner void, extrapolating meaning from it and sending it out into the world. To do this kind of work requires the total person—body, soul, mind, and spirit. –Gloria Anzaldúa, “Creativity is a Coping Strategy”

You are mirrors of our Truth Speakers…..Truth—The feeling of connection between knowledge of self, space and place. Truth operates on the individual and collective level, and provides links between spiritual and physical spaces. –Shruti Purkayastha, Living Mythologies

Healing is not a destination, but rather a transformative ethic that informs the trajectory of Love Cosmology. – Shruti Purkayastha, Living Mythologies

It was D’Lo’s generous spirit and passion for opening spaces of “queer magic” that led him to help his friend and mentee, Shruti Purkayastha, mount a production of Living Mythologies at Santa Monica Highways in Los Angeles in June 2016. In fact, I learned about the performance through his promotion of this event—an evening which became one of the most transformative experiences I’ve ever had in theatre. Awestruck and full of gratitude, I was determined to bring Living Mythologies to my university, and I was able to do just that, nearly a year later.

Welcome all beings and becomings…to Living Mythologies

Based in Los Angeles, Living Mythologies is the name of a group made up of queer, trans, and intersex artists of color (QTIPoC). “Living Mythologies” is also a performative healing practice and the title of the performance discussed in this chapter. The staged production of Living Mythologies is a series of solo performances created and performed by the members that make up Living Mythologies, interwoven with Shruti Purkayastha’s divination and spoken word. For the artists themselves, Living Mythologies “rediscover(s)
and recreate(s) the traditions that we were broken from in old/ new ways.”

Each artist draws upon an ancient and (re)imagined archetype to embody for healing and activist purposes—Shruti Purkayastha transforms into the divine Oracle, and the audience’s guide, Edxie Betts becomes the trickster fairy, Black Heyoka Engkantada, Jose Richard Aviles embodies the Mexican historical-mythological figure of La Maliche, Reyna Ripper emerges as the Lordess of the Flies, and Chella Coleman announces herself as Goddexxx Chela.

In the foregoing chapter, I argue that the group, Living Mythologies, in their performance of the same name, opens an Anzaldúan “borderland” space where tensions between dis/ease and healing, death and life perform activism and healing possibilities. Through decolonial projects such as resisting colonial closures, reclaiming mythological figures, and rebuilding a community space through a “hermeneutics of love” (Sandoval) that centralizes (and thus reframes) the narratives of trans people of color, Living Mythologies performs a trans-healing. To open even the possibility of such a trans-healing, the artists of Living Mythologies perform a labor that is important to recognize and value. In the foregoing pages, I will examine the borderland space that each Living Mythology occupies, their own borderland identities, and the potential for trans-healing in each of their performances.

The borderland opening in the performance of Living Mythologies is not possible in the Western, colonial logics of identity, truth, performance, and healing. By borderland opening I mean a decolonizing process that resists colonial closures, signaling Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderland theories. I examine how such a borderland space might be opened and argue that the performances of bearing witness, or narratives in the form of trans

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autobiographical performance in this borderland space have trans-healing potential. Decolonizing, like healing, is a never-ending process of opening in a colonial world built on closures/enclosures of territory, language, bodies. Opening is important because, rather than insisting on any particular voice for domination, there is a perpetual opportunity for possibilities and dual, horizontal flows—such as that between a performer and an audience, where even these distinct categories are blurred. As I will show throughout this chapter, such openings allow flows of new and/or subjugated knowledges and new understandings that perpetually challenge disciplinary borders.

Rather than a geographic marker, I am interested in the theatrical space of the border and the affect of that space on the consciousness of audience members and performers. According to AnaLouise Keating, in her seminal work, *Borderlands/LaFrontera*, Anzaldúa “redefines and expands this [borderlands] concept to encompass psychic, sexual, and spiritual Borderlands as well. For Anzaldúa, the Borderlands—in both its geographic and metaphorical meanings—represent painful yet also potentially transformational spaces where opposites converge, conflict, transmute.”¹⁶⁸ I argue that it is this holding of contradictions and oppositions that make the borderland space ripe for both suffering and healing—for one implies the other.

*Living Mythologies* has thus far been performed three times: First at Highways Santa Monica in June 2016, then at Occidental College, Los Angeles in February 2017, and finally at University of California, Irvine on May 11, 2017 in the Robert Cohen Theatre when I produced it as part of the Queer and Trans People of Color Festival. It is the UC Irvine performance I will focus most heavily on in this chapter. *Living Mythologies* takes an

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explicitly integrative approach to activism and healing—which the show’s oracle and director, Shruti Purkayastha, describes as “ancestral, political, and spiritual.”

All members of Living Mythologies are community organizers as well as artists, and all are committed to healing queer and trans communities of color. Shruti Purkayastha is a member of a theatre company, TeAda, which centralizes the narratives of those identifying as queer, trans, womxn, and people of color. She holds a Master’s degree in Applied Theatre and has worked with a number of community groups where she’s developed performance-based healing and educational programs, including with the Labor/Community Strategy Center, UCLA Labor Center, and Power Now’s Freedom Harvest. utilizing ideologies and tactics from Theatre of the Oppressed. From this background of community organizing and performance for healing, she invited other artists and activists to develop the performance, Living Mythologies. One of her hopes in bringing the show to universities such as Occidental College in Los Angeles and University of California, Irvine was to open a space for community-building and healing within the QTIPoC community on these campuses.

The performers striving to heal themselves in their performance of Living Mythologies inspires me to explore the specific tools, acts, and analyses of “embodied mythologies,” the space they create, and their potential for healing both themselves and audience members. Embodied mythologies are extra/ordinary bodies that occupy a space that is both spiritual and material, flesh and spirit. Yet Living Mythologies, seeks “to connect day to day living with cosmic purpose,” suggesting their embodiments are just as ordinary as extraordinary. In fact, it is the slippage between the extra-ordinary and the

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169 Program notes, Occidental College, electronic version provided by Shruti Purkayastha.
171 This is the tag-line of the show as presented by the artists themselves.
ordinary that I address in this paper: the borderland, the queer which is both, and neither at the same time. It is in such a slippage that trans-healing may emerge. The slippage of trans-healing occurs in its movement, its opening—it is an ongoing process that is never “complete,” but rather what Muñoz would refer to as “arrested in time,” neither here nor there, but experienced as real. I place less emphasis on the embodiment of the borderland, and more upon the borderland space of the performance, and what such a space does or can do, though I look at both and how the two interact.

**The Portal is Open: Entering the Borderland**
“The portal is open!” the oracle demands; and her words, do, in fact, command an opening. Just as with the notion of “love,” the notion of remaining “open” to an “endless love trajectory,” is not merely a pleasant, abstract sentiment. As Irene Lara puts it in her dissertation, *Decolonizing Latina Spiritualities*, “[T]he continual process of healing is in a dialectical relationship with ‘opening.’ That is, opening and healing are both valuable
decolonizing practices, both the means and the ends.” The “opening” Shruti commands is a decolonial practice which is personal and specific to her healing and to the rest of the Living Mythologies performers, all of whom share a trans identity, located in their respective cultural traditions: Edxie Betts as Black Heyoka Engkantada is Black Sioux Indian and Filipino, Jose Richard Aviles as La Malinche is Mexican American, Reyna Ripper as Lordess of the Flies, is Puerto Rican, and Chella Coleman, as Goddessxx Chella is African American.

Shruti affirms both a grounded, specific individual experience as a queer femme South Asian American and director of Living Mythologies and a collective experience of interconnection that extends into ancestral, spiritual realms. In an institutional setting founded on colonial practices, the group’s performed trans narratives from intersectional identities and experiences with oppression, demands a “borderland” opening. Such an opening may yield what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as “conocimiento,” which, in Spanish means “knowledge” or “consciousness,” but has further implications as a modality of the interstices, a nonbinary consciousness. Ana Louise Keating explains that this term “conocimiento,” builds upon Anzaldúa’s previous theory of “mestiza consciousness” and “la facultad”:

Conciento represents a nonbinary, connectionist mode of thinking; like la facultad, conociento often unfolds within oppressive contexts and entails a deepening of perception. Conocimiento underscores and develops the imaginal, spiritual-activist, and radically exclusionary possibilities implicit in [Anzaldúa’s] earlier previous theories.

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172 Lara, Decolonizing Latina Spiritualities, 247.
173 an intuitive form of knowledge; see p 321, Keating’s appendix to the Gloria Anzaldúa Reader
In the context of a trans-healing, the nonbinaryness of *conocimiento* may be applied to an understanding between or across genders, the negotiation of which makes possible a trans-healing. Furthermore, since trauma survivors often find their imagination to be hindered or thwarted,\(^\text{175}\) a consciousness in which imagination may develop is a consciousness where healing may occur. Like Muñoz’s queer horizon of possibility, trans-healing is in process of *becoming healing*, a process which carries hope of possible healing but never fully arrives. To put it in the words of Patricia Hill Collins, “one never arrives, but constantly strives.”\(^\text{176}\)

Shruti, the oracle, explains in the program notes that the term “Living Mythologies” which forms the basis of the group’s name, their process, and the title of the performance, is “deeply personal to the ancestral, to the political, to the spiritual, to future possibilities...is being and *becoming*...is reclaiming ritual, finding ceremony, rediscovering and recreating the traditions that we were broken from, and finding growths in old/new ways...Living Mythologies is solidarity in healing; our healing is creative.”\(^\text{177}\) In her explication of conocimiento, Anzaldúa explains that it is often reached via creative acts—“Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself.”\(^\text{178}\) Performances like Living Mythologies, therefore, are a form of spiritual inquiry, connected to a larger frame of reference.\(^\text{179}\) That

\(^{175}\) See Singh and McKleroy, “Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act.”

\(^{176}\) Collins, *Fighting Words*, 189-190.

\(^{177}\) Shruti Purkayastha, Program at UC Irvine, 11 May 2017, my emphasis.

\(^{178}\) Gloria Anzaldúa, “Light in the Dark.”

\(^{179}\) According to black feminist scholar Njoki Nathani Wane, Spirituality is “alternative to colonial knowledge and education that is a viable, legitimate, and truthful way of knowing the world.” Therefore, movements and processes that open up a spiritual perspective are potentially decolonizing. As Linda Tuhiiwai Smith puts it, “The intellectual project of decolonizing...needs a radical compassion that reaches out, that seeks collaboration, and that is open to possibilities that can only be imagined as other things fall into place.” Compassion, connection, and the
interconnection goes back to healing ancestral trauma through the legacy of colonial oppression; it is also the interconnection among audience members bearing witness and connecting with the performers sharing their truth.

For Living Mythologies, healing is both deeply personal and communal. Reclaiming and connecting to one another through ritual are decolonizing practices according to Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s indigenous projects as part of her *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Sometimes recreating is part of the reclaiming process, in order to make what is reclaimed one’s own, or to reimagine what has been stolen or broken away through colonial violence. Imagining and reimagining are crucial both to healing practices and to decolonizing practices. In her book, *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison examines the cultural imaginary through literature to better understand racial formations and the perpetuation of racism in today’s imaginary. She claims, “imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, becoming.” Imagination itself creates, *is creating, is labor, is real*. Creating and imagining are healing and decolonizing labors.

**Mythologizing and Spellcasting: Decolonial Tools**

The use of “mythologies” to reclaim, reimagine, affirm social change, and heal is an effective tool that has been utilized by social movements for centuries. Myth is at the very root of both western and indigenous performance and has also been appropriated for dramatherapy and other applied theatre contexts such as Theatre of the Oppressed, the tradition of applied theatre in which the director of Living Mythologies, Shruti, was trained.

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interconnectedness that Anzaldúa describes is important both for decolonizing and for healing. M. Jacqui Alexander also argues for what she terms a “metaphysics of interconnectedness,” which engages in political and personal, spiritual and healing work from an awareness of connection.  

180 *Morrison, Playing in the Dark, 4.*
In the post-show discussion following the UC Irvine performance, Shruti explains, “the stories are living, these mythologies are us, how we walk through the world and finding the deeper connection of how we walk through the world. That is the thing that came out of mind/body/spirit land...[the mythologies] are living and breathing, just like we are.”

Chela Sandoval theorizes the power of the socially oppressed utilizing mythology toward liberation, drawing from Barthes’ “semiotic-mythology” theory. She explains that mythologizing is a semiotic deconstruction of ideas, so to engage in “mythologizing,” one can “either...be naively reproducing dominant ideology, on the one side, or participating in a powerful, liberatory process of deconstructing those very ideologies, on the other.”

Implicit in the mythologizing process is decoding, which may be utilized for decolonizing work if what is decoded is colonial systems. This is precisely the way Sandoval uses the term, and is the work Living Mythologies engages in. She explains, “I transcode Barthes’ term myth as ‘ideology’—from the Greek word for “form”—and his ‘mythologist,’ the activist who decodes ideologies, is trans-formed...into the ‘practitioner of the methodology of the oppressed.’” To take Sandoval’s perspective a la Barthes, is to view mythologizing, and what Shruti refers to as “living mythologies” as engaging in decolonial activism. Mythologizing is a needed response to negotiate the “schism of consciousness that occurs when one is ripped away from legitimized order—‘reality’—to be placed as outsider in a process endemic to coloniality-by-race, a chasm Barthes’s method invites all readers to enter.”

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181 Purkayastha, transcribed from video of post-show discussion at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
182 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 88, original emphasis.
183 Ibid, 89-90.
184 Ibid, 98.
The chasm of consciousness between the dominant order of “reality” and the oppressed outsider, could be described as a borderland consciousness. Though this is not Barthes’s view, Sandoval suggests that “semiotic-mythology” may “generate an ‘in-between’ form of consciousness...a language like that of the oppressed, which is active and political, but also able to engage with and through the languages of ideology.”\textsuperscript{185} From this view, Living Mythologies can simultaneously embody and perform revolutionary theories while de/coding and re/signifying signs of power. Furthermore, the purpose of “myth” in a generalized sense is to explain and make meaning of perceived reality—to re/claim that is to empower oneself to do the same.

Another concrete example of embodied mythologies that engage in decoding and resignifying power is explicated in Harry Elam Jr.’s book, \textit{Taking it to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez & Amiri Baraka}, Elam uses examples of Baraka’s theatre, particularly with Spirit House Movers, which draws upon myth and history in such plays as \textit{Black Mass}. Elam argues that Baraka “explicitly conflates spiritual, political, and performative elements,”\textsuperscript{186} resulting in the performance as a “communal” experience. He further quotes Robert Wiemann who observed that “there’s a point at which myth encompasses both religion and knowledge, illusion and a sense of reality.”\textsuperscript{187} Thus, the performance of Living Mythologies participates in both cultural and knowledge production, and is in fact utilizing potentially impacting the audience’s sense of reality. That is to say that a space is opened for a possibility of new social structure, a borderland space such that the travel into which may decolonize one’s imagination. Elam continues:

\textsuperscript{185} Sandoval, 106.
\textsuperscript{186} Elam, 50.
\textsuperscript{187} As quoted in Ibid, 51.
By mastering and manipulating symbols through ritual action, the ritual performer wields authority and the power to transform conventional hierarchies. Similarly, the activist/performer or farmworker/performer—by effectively negotiating the rhythms, symbols, and action of performance—asserted the power to transform not only the theatrical illusion but outside social interaction as well.188

Put another way, mythologizing has the ability to transform the very fabric of reality. As an oracle, Shruti’s role is a kind of intermediary between the embodied mythologies onstage and the audience which is being challenged both to bear witness and to participate in the mythologizing taking place.

Before the beginning of the show, the audience members were asked, “What is your problem?” and given a sheet of paper on which to write an answer. This was collected by the house manager and given to Edxie Betts (Heyoka Engkantada). The audience, including myself, was then invited into a large black box set, with little more than a screen, a bench, a music stand, and some boxes, to select a seat in a dimly lit house. As the audience enters, they are welcomed in by Shruti, our Oracle for the evening. With her welcoming, she invites us with gratitude, and prepares us for what we were about to see offering both trigger warnings and tools of self-care. She leads the audience in a brief practice of the self-care tools, which includes deep breathing and grounding ourselves to the earth. She invites the ancestors and acknowledged those who were not with us physically this evening, reminding us of the fights for liberation that must continue. Her invitation, clear intention, and offering of tools, along with the group’s shared practice of them, aided in transforming an institutional space within the Robert Cohen Theatre in the School of the Arts at the University of California, Irvine, into a borderland space of healing possibility. From the moment the audience shared their problems with Living Mythologies, they became not

188 Ibid, 102-103.
passive observers, but were active participants in the transformative production, invited to open up, witness, and perhaps challenge themselves to heal.

The artists tell the audience they stand in solidarity with #BlackLivesMatter, with an end to the school to prison pipeline, with freeing trans, queer, black, and brown folx from multiple systems of oppression on which the American economy is built. In fact, Shruti, as the oracle, involves the audience when she performs a spell to set free the incarcerated people of color, the queer and trans members of our community. In a powerful moment when the group’s (read: performers and audience members) consciousness comes together with shared intent and unified words, the audience all chants in solidarity “Set free. Set free. Set free.” The chanting and repetition evoke street activist strategies, but Shruti also pushes this technique to the spiritual when she refers to it as a spell. Harry Elam Jr. argues that much of the efficacy of protest movements lies in their ritualized form. He explains that the shift away from representation to a more ritualistic performance “called for spectators and performers to interact as equal participants. Such communal participation, I believe, was critical to the efficacy of social protest theater.”

With their spell to set free black and brown bodies, Living Mythologies simultaneously emboldens the QTIPoC in the audience while calling out and implicating white folx and anyone else complicit in daily state sanctioned violence. In this sacred borderland space, healing cannot emerge through transcendence, but through an allowance and perhaps even an embrace of the intersectional paradoxes that queer and trans people and people of color experience as daily reality—paradoxes such as grief with hope, violence with peace, destruction with self-care. Indeed, healing itself is necessarily decolonized in

189 Ibid, 49-50.
190 Ibid, 50.
such a space. Traditionally, of course, in Western psychology and medicine, healing is a linear, cure-based process, rather than a fluid and fluctuating involvement with one’s relationship to both personal and societal trauma, or a process of embracing one’s mental illness.

Since this kind of linear trajectory is often an oppressive form of colonization on people of color, queer, and trans people, it may be that embracing new, old, experimental, and more fluid forms of healing is more beneficial and empowering for those with these identity markers. However, as Goddeexxx Chella asks the audience toward the end of the performance, riffing on Audre Lorde: “Self-care is an act of revolution, but what happens when self-care looks more like self-destruction? What if you can’t tell the difference?”

(performance notes) New perspectives, theories, and approaches to healing are needed for people who carry intergenerational trauma and are subject to intersecting sociopolitical traumas implicit in the realities of daily existence. For queer theory and performance praxis to be leaders toward such approaches, they must dare to remain open.

**Living Mythologies Exists in a “Love Cosmology”**

In her first poem, Oracle Shruti welcomes the audience, introducing the cosmology of *Living Mythologies*. “Welcome to the LOVE COSMOLOGY...That the universe was founded in love and will eventually expand further and further along an endless love trajectory. The narratives we tell may push us closer and closer to accepting and acknowledging this trajectory, rather than resisting or closing it.”\(^{191}\) Immediately, Living Mythologies sets an intention in the space of performance, in its relationship to the audience, for healing. It is more than an intention—with the force of Shruti’s proclamation it is a promise, an

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\(^{191}\) Purkayastha, *Living Mythologies* script, 1 (original capitalization).
affirmation, even a spell. Her voice echoes, wrought with power, as the audience sat, spellbound in the darkness. At the UC Irvine performance, the power of this affirmation intensifies through the atmosphere of etheric magic. The lights, designed by UCI MFA lighting design student, Ebony Madry, and the bellowing, rhythmic sound of a large hand drum invite the audience on a journey in between physical and spiritual realities, a borderland space. One student present at this performance describes the atmosphere as a “calm, serene night feeling...there was this energy in the room...it was calm, quiet, but powerful in the silence.”192 A kind of reverence sweeps across the audience, which was just moments ago engaged in boisterous laughter and incessant chatting.

A “love cosmology” sounds like a vague phrase or a nice idea, but it felt like a reality experienced through the transporting effect of this performance, that quiet power described by the student. In fact, Chela Sandoval in her poignant work *Methodology of the Oppressed*, vehemently argues for the significance of love in projects for social change, human drive, and even academic discourse. Angela Davis remarks in the forward to this work that Sandoval’s hermeneutic of “love in the postmodern world” is a “utopian impulse” which can “lead her and her reader on a quest for new vocabularies that can help to decolonize the imagination.”193 Chela Sandoval further expounds on her hermeneutic of love, “Third world writers such as Guevara, Fanon, Anzaldúa, Emma Pérez, Trinh Minh-ha, or Cherríe Moraga, to name only a few, [...] understand love as a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community.’”194

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192 Venkateswaran, phone interview 12 February 2018.
193 Davis, forward to Sandoval’s *Oppositional Consciousness*, xii-xiii.
194 Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 139.
I argue that the love cosmology of Living Mythologies is a hermeneutic likened to Sandoval’s—a kind of coalitional community that finds strength, decolonizing power, and healing in connectivity. Furthermore, as postcolonial feminist scholars M. Jacqui Alexander and Leela Fernandes both argue, healing work and utopic theorizing require labor. Fernandes concludes, “Utopia is the labor itself which enables such transformation, not, as is mistakenly assumed, the outcome that results from this labor.” That is, we are all too often stuck in a colonial logic when we mistakenly think that the outcome of labor is what is valuable. It is the process itself where we should attribute value—the loving practices such as sharing self-care tools, for instance, to return to Sandoval, over (or at least alongside) the particular social change victory, the result of which is often filtered through hegemonic discourse and erases more marginalized voices.

For Shruti to situate the performance of Living Mythologies in a “love cosmology” has remarkable trans-healing implications. To affirm love and interconnectedness while sharing embodied knowledge from a subjectivity like trans, which dominant society perpetually erases and marks abject, is a revolutionary act. Each of the solo performances that unfold in their own way directly or indirectly addresses embracing or loving oneself fully as necessary to survive—even if what is loved about oneself is death, in Reyna Ripper’s case. We read in the Combahee River Collective statement so foundational to black feminism that “Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.” Similarly, Audre Lorde

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195 Fernandes argues, “Utopias are inconvenient because they necessitate deep-seated changes in ourselves and in the ways in which we live our lives. The irony here is that such utopias require labor.” Transforming Feminist Practice, 19.
196 Ibid, 120.
famously wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”\textsuperscript{198} Performing in and affirming a love cosmology is one crucial way that \textit{Living Mythologies} opens a borderland space making possible trans-healing.

At the end of the performance at UC Irvine, one audience member was so moved, she stood up, and through her sobs she said, “I want to say that I love you all. I don’t know you all but... (sobbing) I’m just so moved... I just have so much love for what you’re doing and I hope you continue doing what you’re doing. And in this space? Like this is fucking Irvine, what the hell?”\textsuperscript{199} which concluded her comment in laughter. While I won’t get into the historically conservative politics of Irvine, California in this chapter (there will be some explanation in the following chapter), the audience member’s comment suggests two things: an experience of loving connection that moved, or changed them in some way, and that the space itself was transformed during the performance.

\textsuperscript{198} Lorde, \textit{A Burst of Light}.

\textsuperscript{199} Audience member, transcribed from video performance at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
Following the spell led by our oracle, demands for the freedom of incarcerated black and brown folx forcefully continues with the next mythology we encounter: Black Heyoka Engkantada. This mythology is performed by Edxie Betts and for better insights into their performance of Black Heyoka Engkantada, it is important to preface with their own
articulation of their identity and their work. Edxie Betts identifies as a “Black Pilipino@ BlackFoot Queer Trans Gender Non Conforming Anti-authoritarian Femme neuro-divergent,” autonomous organizer, political cultural producer, and liberation artist.” So much of Edxie’s work is about not only reclaiming what’s been colonized, stolen, or lost, but also constantly critiquing the nation-state and one’s personal relationship to it. Thus, while the term “mythology” may be contentious and complex in all of these pieces, for Edxie’s piece in particular, “mythology” simultaneously explicitly evokes their reclaiming and reforming of their various identities and traditions, while interrogating the mythologies that perpetuate colonization and its multiplicity of oppressions and embodying a self which holds all of these contradictions.

As Edxie explains in the post-show discussion at UCI, “When it comes to the myth of the human or the social construct that is the human, it is built from the blood of ‘savages,’ it is built from the blood of the indigenous, it is built from the blood of black people. So what does it mean for us to continue to reify this universalized fiction that a lot of people didn’t actually fit into---still don’t fit into?” This fiction of the whiteness as universal is carved up for the consumption of American consciousness through, as Toni Morrison

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200 “Neuro-divergent” is often used interchangeable with “neuro-diversity” which Nicola Shaughnessy defines as “the atypical neurological profiles and characteristics associated with the autistic spectrum conditions (and which can be distinguished from ‘neuro-typical’ features).” See Nicola Shaughnessy, “Imagining Otherwise: Authism, Neuroaesthetics and Contemporary Performance” in Interdisciplinary Science Reviews (38: 4), 2013, 333.


202 When I say contradictions, I mean from the perspective of dominant knowledge which minoritizes and dismisses identities and structures that challenge its logics of organization. To allow for a self that contains a multiplicity is to remain in a borderland space which is open to re-centering subjugated knowledges.

203 “Myth” in this case being used as a signifier that reifies dominant ideology.

204 Edxie Betts, Q&A following Living Mythologies performance, UCI 11 May 2017, transcribed from video recording.
shows, literature, and other media that disseminate the ideology of white supremacy and black abjection. Toni Morrison likens this dissemination to a spreading virus. The power of Edxie’s embodiment of a mythology which actively decodes and deconstructs oppressive myths, affirming the freedom of incarcerated black, brown, and trans bodies, is a trans-healing power which queers colonial borders. From this borderland space, Edxie heals their own “virus” of internalized racism and transmisogyny, while fabricating a reality from whence audience members may do the same.

After several moments in a blackout between Oracle Shruti’s acapella songs and spoken word stage right, the audience can hear a crescendo of string instruments, and with the hastening sounds of a violin, a projection of a blue-purple sky and lightening can be seen. Appearing almost out of nowhere, as in a dream, Black Heyoka Engkantada may be faintly seen, their body weighed down by shadows of bars cast upon them. They walk in a line, spinning one direction, crouching down, then spinning the other. They wear a, perhaps postmodern reimagining of a traditional prison uniform: a short, shiny skirt in black and white stripes with a beige military jacket. On their head can be seen long black antlers, iconic to the heyoka figure. They limp, carrying a burden, weighed down by the bucket of problems the audience has offered up to the performance.

With the audience’s problems literally on stage with them, Black Heyoka Engkantada involves the audience from the start. They sing, dance, and chant in antistructural ritual which are “symbolic, irreverent, self-conscious moments designed to arouse audience interest and involvement.” Black Heyoka Engkantada utilizes a familiar trope of a contrary figure, the presence of which challenges audience members to rethink

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205 Elam, 49.
cultural norms, and pushes the enactment further by explicitly calling out for justice of black—and in this performance—indigenous and trans liberation. Heyoka is a sacred clown figure of the Lakota people, a trickster with visions, divine insights, and healing abilities. The heyoka is known as a contrary figure, their presence (which is traditionally either male or non-binary) may be theorized queer in their consistent disruptions of social and other material norms. Heyoka is a borderland figure, and much like the performer themself, defies categorization. The heyoka Black Elk explains the role of the heyoka and their ceremony:

> [S]omething about the heyokas and the heyoka ceremony [...] seems to be very foolish, but it is not so. Only those who have had visions of the thunder beings in the west can act as heyokas. They have sacred power and they share some of this with all the people, but they do it through funny actions...[I]n the heyoka ceremony, everything is backwards, and it is planned that the people shall be made to feel jolly and happy first, so that it may be easier for the power to come to them. You have noticed that the truth comes into the world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping. When people are already in despair, maybe the laughing face is better for them; and when they feel too good and are too sure of being safe, maybe the weeping face is better for them to see. And so I think that is what the heyoka ceremony is for.\(^{206}\)

The duality Black Elk describes and the kind of in-betweenness of the heyoka suggest that the heyoka ceremony, which Edxie has adapted, opens a borderland space which allows participants to realize “deeper truths” about social structure and inner struggles that can potentially yield healing. The power of these practices may, in part, be explained by Victor Turner’s antistructure theory which maintains that rituals occur beyond the borders of normative structures and work to disrupt such norms. It is therefore significant that as Black Heyoka Engkantada, Edxie Betts (re)stages and (re)presents ritualistic aspects of the

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\(^{206}\) Black Elk in Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 149.
Lakota heyoka. Embodying the heyoka allows Edxie to channel the reclaimed power that, through ritual and contradiction, may help the audience gain new insights.

It is not only the heyoka mythology that represents a contrary figure in this performance; indeed, in Tagalog mythology, the engkantada (also known as *diwata*, *encanto*, *engkantado*) are mischievous fairies, but with great power to help or harm others. The word Edxie Betts has chosen, Engkantada, itself, is a contentious term since it both signifies the pre-colonial Philippine mythology of the *diwata* (a Sanskrit word for a general term meaning deity or spirit); but more directly signifies the colonization of the mythology, taken from the Spanish word *encanto* meaning spell/enchantment and *encantado* meaning one who is charmed.

However, according to Maximo Ramos in *The Creatures of Philippine Lower Mythology*, the *engkantada* may have some similarities with European folklore, but it is unique to the Philippines and is most consistent with the more ancient mythology of the *diwata*. The mythological term engkantada itself signifies a decolonizing reclamation of indigenous Philippine belief and tradition. Black Heyoka Engkantada embodies blackness, indigenous knowledge, and queering of norms, all while dancing upon the native land of Acjachemen tribe occupied by the Irvine Company and the University of California, Irvine. Thus, the embodied knowledge of the *engkantada* in this performance is an embodied conocimiento—or a deep awareness (often) arising through oppression—the presence of which emerges through a borderland space, allowing for an opening from colonial closures and inviting healing.

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207 Ramos, 87.
208 This is the reclaimed indigenous term for the tribe known by the Spanish colonizers as Juaneño Indians of the Mission Indians.
Black Heyoka Engkantada is barefoot, and continues crossing left, right, walking in circles. Performing barefoot is an important choice with traditions in Blackfoot and Tagalog contexts, indicating a connection to the earth, and signaling the Blackfoot tribe whose feet were blackened from walking barefoot on charcoal. Finally settling on one spot center stage, lightning continues to streak across the projected sky. They set down the basket of the audience’s problems, lights come up on them, no longer casting a barred shadow. We can now see white lines painted angularly across the middle of their face. The look up at the audience with a smirk.

Black Heyoka Engkantada picks up a problem, then another, they react, care for it, put it down their shirt, agree with the problems. Drums are heard. The search through papers gets more frantic. Are they looking for something? They begin eating the problems, but cannot consume them, they make them sick. They compose themself, then take a bottle of liquid labeled “tears,” and pour it conservatively over the problems. A little more, a little more, a little more. There is a distress that belies a clear sense of urgency and responsibility for the problems of the audience. This empathy, too, indicates a performance of conocimiento in which awareness arises through understanding one’s feelings or situations and recognizing a commonality.\(^{209}\) The exchange between performer and

\(^{209}\) In this context, Anzaldúa refers to conocimiento as a consciousness-raising tool...It encourages folks to empathize and sympathize with others, to walk in the other’s shoes, whether the other is a member of the same group or belongs to a different culture. It means to place oneself in a state of resonance with the other’s feelings and situations, and to give the other an opportunity to express their needs and point of view. To relate to others by recognizing commonalities. Con conocimiento—speaking, listening. See Keating: *Interviews/Entrevistas*, 178.
audience in this context, then, is conocimiento in action, and conocimiento is marked by its expanding openings and interconnectivity, which is also a decolonizing act.\textsuperscript{210}

The lightning and thunder of the performance are significant because traditionally heyokas had visions of thunderstorms. According to the heyoka Black Elk, “When a vision comes from the thunder beings of the west, it comes with terror like a thunderstorm; but when the storm of vision has passed, the world is greener and happier; for wherever the truth of vision comes upon the world, it is like rain. The world, you see, is happier after the terror of the storm.”\textsuperscript{211} This image describing the thunderous vision heyokas are said to be blessed with, which welcomes them into their tribal role, serves as a metaphorical depiction of the contrary figure of the BlackFoot heyoka themself. In \textit{Living Mythologies}, the eating and tearing of the problems is both humorous and sad (which literally manifests as a bottle of tears); we see a compassionate figure who holds our problems to the point of illness. The act of pouring is also an act of offering, a pouring of libations, signifying the life of water which flows through all life and is often used in sacred ceremonies.

Another bottle of liquid appears, this liquid is black and labeled “sacred,” and Black Heyoka Engkantada pours the entire contents of it atop all of the audience’s problems. The audience is invited to share the spiritual pain and witness the embodiment of a sacred indigenous mythology who carries, consumes, and cries out for the audience’s problems. The performer, Edxie Betts speaks later about their performance, “I was hoping that people constantly challenge different frameworks that they’ve been socialized within, particularly

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{210} See L.T. Smith, \textit{Decolonizing Methodologies} on “connecting,” Mignolo and Walsh, \textit{On Decoloniality} introduction on relationality, and traumatologists Singh and McKleroy who have documented the importance for trans people of color to connect to a community of other trans people and people of color for their healing and resilience in “When Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act”
\textsuperscript{211} Neihardt, 188
\end{flushright}
colonization. A lot of the things colonization has demonized are things we hold sacred, I hold my blackness as sacred, and what has colonization done to blackness, femininity, our land? Just challenge those very notions because it’s necessary.”\textsuperscript{212} Challenging such frameworks is labor that is decolonizing—that is to say, it is to remain open to possibilities and resist colonial closures.

Black Heyoka Engkantada grasps a round hand mirror and moves it circuitously, they look in it, paint their face. Perhaps they see themselves in the problems and the problems in themselves. Drums continue. Upon the mirror, they write “REVOLT!!!” They summon the forces of nature, sacred blackness, sacred femininity, erotic power, and focus it upon freeing the incarcerated, the poor, the enslaved. These are spells or \textit{incantations} mapped into the consciousness of the audience and out into the universe. For an audience who has been, to some degree, colonized—either outwardly, inwardly or some combination of these, the heyoka’s unique and (extra)ordinary conocimiento knowledge embodied in the performance potentially awakens in the audience a capacity of intuitive knowledge that Anzaldúa might refer to as \textit{la facultad}. \textit{La facultad} both includes and goes beyond logical thought and empirical analysis, “the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant ‘sensing,’ a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning […] an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings.”\textsuperscript{213}

Electronic music begins. Black Heyoka Engkantada walks in circles with the mirror, extending it all the way out, dancing with it. It’s a slow, seemingly ritualistic dance, again

\textsuperscript{212} transcribed from video of post-show discussion at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
\textsuperscript{213} from \textit{Borderlands/ La Frontera} as quoted by Keating in \textit{The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader}, 321.
smaller movements but cyclical. Projections express in both English and the native language of Blackfoot or Siksiká, “Black is beautiful. Black is sacred. Femininity is sacred.” in different combinations, repeated in between projections of lightning streaks across a darkened, purple sky. It is notable that the sacred substance does not destroy or remove the problems, but is handled in such a way that sanctifies them—an act that makes sacred the struggles of the audience members (many of whom identify as queer, trans, and POC).

Black Heyoka Engkantada sings acapella, still weighed down. “Poverty hurts...Incarceration is a disease of a nation.” The chanting grows more and more intense as they stretch out a long piece of paper upon which they lay the individual problems out, with anger, with pain. They renounce state sanctioned violence and incarceration with their song, which gets softer as they roll the problems up in the paper and carries them. “Feeling disposable” they repeat. They seem to at once speak for themselves and for the pain of the audience. “Pain is inevitable” they cry. “But know that you’re powerful. Know that you’re powerful. Like me, so powerful.” They stand and march with the rolled-up paper containing our problems on their shoulder, like an army of one, but with a sense of hope. An embodiment of conocimiento, the powerful performance gracefully holds the contradictions of disposability, vulnerability, and sacred erotic power that tirelessly fights colonial closures.

Black Heyoka Engkantada is armed with our problems, carried as a rifle, marching as a soldier, and now places combat boots on their feet. We see an image of black power and militancy, a sacred figure who refuses caging and colonizing, and is willing to fight. The abrupt shift in imagery may also reference the genocide that led to the founding of our

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214 Betts, Living Mythologies script, 11.
215 Ibid.
current nation state and the legacy of exploitation of black and indigenous bodies to fight (dirty) wars sanctioned by this nation state. The complex and contradictory symbology is consistent with the paradoxical characters of heyoka and engkantada. However, as suggested above, these mythologies are not inherently deceitful, but act toward understanding of “deeper truths” (as is the function of the Lakota heyoka).

Furthermore, Edxie Betts, who identifies as trans, also empowers themself and their trans community by (re)claiming the trickster trope prevalent in transgender narratives by embodying a trickster figure, but elevates this by embodying one of the most important figures to the Lakota tribe whose sacred insights come precisely from their “trickery” and contrary behavior. In colonial imaginings of the heyoka, this sacred figure is reduced to a clown. Indeed, since colonialism depends on conformity and unity to maintain power, contrary behavior like the heyoka’s is not only suppressed but demonized. The heyoka can (and does) threaten the power of colonialism by opening a borderland space that offers an alternative reality. The truths Black Heyoka Engkantada reveal do not transcend oppression, but at once always already contain the oppression and the liberation.

This is precisely the type of truth-telling Living Mythologies is engaged with and the core of the show’s origins. Oracle, director, and curator, Shruti Purkayastha describes why she developed this show:

This show was really born from a place of witnessing myself and my community and how much work we do every single day and night in every aspect of life. How transformative our [QTIPoC] fucking presence is in any space, in any space, just interacting as ourselves with people. I know I’ve been in so many places and spaces where that's been exploited...We have a magic because of all the things we saw here today. Sitting at the intersections of all the things we saw here today, that’s holding magic. Crystals form in caves, diamonds form under pressure. There is a magic,
there is a transformation that happens with so many elements combined. I really believe that’s the heart of the revolution right now...\textsuperscript{216}

Shruti’s point here is not to further burden or exoticize or exploit or romanticize the trauma and institutionalized suffering of QTIPoC, but rather affirm their experiences and, as the term “living mythologies” does, connect their mundane lives to greatness that can exist amidst contexts of systematic oppression.

Throughout Living Mythologies audience members are reminded that incarceration today is a new form of enslaving black and brown bodies. Reclaiming traditional aspects of heyoka ceremonies such as circular dancing and impassioned singing, Black Heyoka Engkantada’s embodies this living mythology for their own purposes: to cry out for and honor the lives of the incarcerated and oppressed. Their presence is a reminder of alternative possibilities. The audience must contend with the truth that slavery is still at work in the prison industrial complex, and must simultaneously consider it doesn’t have to be this way. If change is possible, the audience’s responsibility to help is implied. Again, speaking about this performance, Edxie Betts questions the audience:

How do you navigate your relationship to these institutions that serve the nation-state? What is everyone’s relationship to a nation-state here? If you ask that question you will find some responsibility as far as what you need to do for your own damn self, for other people who have been genocided, to position your people on a particular hierarchy that says other people are worth more, or that set the standards of what humanity actually is...\textsuperscript{217}

**Transition: A Meditation on Healing**

I guard the earth vigilantly
So that our foresight does not forget our past
Breath Breath Breath
Remember-------

\textsuperscript{216} transcribed from video of post-show discussion at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
I honor water in every step
Puddles gathering in dinosaur footprints
   Offer ponds to smaller creatures
   Ancient ancient water flows flows as it stays
   Flows as water stays
Step Step Step
Breathe------
Flows as water prays
I honor it in me and my loves
The vastness, immensity of life---
Water carries our escape map
Regrowth from the ash
Water carries our hope for new breath
Feeding the trees as they feed me
Trees thirsty for our release
Breath breath breath
Release-----
Surrender------
Breath Breath Breath
Let go------
Breathe Breathe Breathe
Let groww--------

Oracle Shruti here describes the spiritual experience of interconnectedness and the realization of M. Jacqui Alexander’s “metaphysics of interdependence.” This worldview is shared with the indigenous cultures that Living Mythologies is representing. Furthermore, the crucial significance of water to healing that Shruti describes crystalizes the trans-healing that Black Heyoka Engkantada performed moments ago when they poured watery liquid over all the audience’s problems. Oppression is interconnected; freedom is interconnected. Trees cannot grow if we keep chopping them down. Operating from an approach that is both spiritual and material, Living Mythologies constructs a borderland

218 Purkayastha, Living Mythologies script, 3-4.
space, a space of in-betweenness, a queer space, or what members of Living Mythologies might call a space of truth within a love cosmology.

**Learning to Love La Malinche/ La Chingada (He/Him/They)**

![Image of Jose Richard Aviles as La Malinche](credit: Leo Garcia)

"Learning to love. Learning to love. Learning to love me is learning to give into the darkness. Learning to love me is dangerous, it’s decolonizing."  

219 Jose Richard Aviles embodying the living mythology of La Malinche, tells the audience they identify as a queer, femme, thicker-bodied Latina. Aviles is a community organizer with the goal of creating works “that inspire and empower others to become activists in their lives.” They also aim

to “use dance as a form of addressing suicide, bullying, self-image, healing through the
body, and dance as a form of resistance among young people.”220 In the post-show
discussion at UC Irvine, Aviles explains that they found La Malinche to be a “spirit of
wisdom; she navigates, she infiltrates.”221 They describe how through embodying La
Malinche, they have learned to “love my flaws and insecurities.”222

As Aviles performs her, La Malinche is a borderland figure dancing in a borderland
space. As La Malinche, Aviles speaks contradictions, embraces their own “darkness” as they
refer to it. They repeat their proclamations in Spanish. They find their sacred power in self-
love, and their darkness in holding the misconceptions others have of them. “I am
forbidden fruit,” they warn, evoking the Biblical Eve demonized for her desire and blamed
for the supposed “fall” of Adam. “Take a bite of me and it’s damnation for all.”223 As a trans
femme, Aviles carries not only the associative burden of Eve and La Malinche, but is also
objectified as the source of evil itself. According to Christopher Shelley in his book,
*Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*, many trans people are striving to heal the
trauma experienced for being the abject—internalized otherness and externally rejected.224
La Malinche is such a borderless/ borderland figure—a threat to the colonial order. A
nonbinary trans femme like Aviles is similarly a threat to the social order, the colonality of
gender binary.225

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220 St. Olof Alumni webpage, [https://wp.stolaf.edu/dance/alumni/alumni-2010-19/](https://wp.stolaf.edu/dance/alumni/alumni-2010-19/)
Note that the website refers to Aviles as “he,” but I refer to Aviles as “they” in this chapter, Aviles’
pREFERRED pronoun.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
224 Shelley, 192.
225 borrowed from Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender.”
Rather than exorcising the social “demon” of La Malinche, Aviles embodies her proudly, integrating their mutual abjection and finding empowerment through her resistance and strength toward a more “authentic” sense of self. They even embrace the derogatory term for La Malinche, “La Chingada” literally translated as “the fucked one” which Anzaldúa also (re)claims in her writing. In this borderland space, each living mythology seems to carry both the love and the grievances of their community, their ancestors. Part of their healing process happens in honoring all of it, without exception, filter, or judgment, speaking their truth, and the audience bearing witness.

They address the audience directly, moving with grace and swaying their hips. “Learning to love me is learning to love the revolution in the flesh. Who will dare? But you’re all still sitting.”

The figure of La Malinche in Mexican culture is a blend of history and myth, and is a highly contested colonial figure. Historically, she was an interpreter for Cortés on behalf of the Aztecs, but whether she benefited her culture or wronged them is a matter that’s been debated for hundreds of years; most agree, however, that she had remarkable diplomatic skills. Most so-called historical texts (from a colonial imaginary) refer to her as a courtesan of Cortés, rather than a prisoner, regularly raped and used for colonial negotiations, which more decolonial texts reveal. According to Irene Lara, “[M]any malign La Malinche, the ‘Mexican Eve,’ as a treacherous whore for not only sleeping with the enemy, but for speaking and translating for the enemy as well.”

Aviles, transcription from the video post-show discussion at UC Irvine, 11 May 2017.

This pronoun is reserved for the figure of La Maninche and not Richard’s embodiment of her

Cypress, 141-143.

Paz, 87

Lara, 20.
looked to her as mother of their nation. Historian Sandra Messinger Cypress argues that “Chicanas view themselves as symbolic daughters of La Malinche.” She then quotes Cherrie Moraga who states, “As a Chicana, and as a feminist, I must, like other Chicanas before me, examine the effects this myth has on my/our racial/sexual identity and my relationship with other Chicanas. There is hardly a Chicana growing up today who does not suffer under her name even if she never hears directly of the one-time Aztec princess.”

This statement is further evidenced by the voluminous La Malinche commentary found in Latinx feminist texts, including in the work of Irene Lara and Gloria Anzaldúa which is central to my analysis throughout this chapter. Anzaldúa argues that narratives such as La Malinche work to demonize women who practice or embody “outlawed knowledge(s).” As Irene Lara points out in her dissertation introduction, “[The Anzaldúan] conocimiento does not apolitically refer to just any knowledge, it explicitly denotes a ‘counterknowledge [that] is not acceptable’ to dominant culture. Like Adam and Eve who were punished for defying God, following the way of the serpent-devil and eating ‘the fruit of knowledge’ dominant society punishes conocimientos that lead to self and social awareness or challenges to the status quo.” Each of the Living Mythologies performances in some way embody this struggle between the counterknowledge conocimiento and the desconocimiento which villainizes and colonizes the queer, trans, and people of color who possess conocimiento. A key method these artists use to heal from the desconocimiento of colonization is performance.

231 Cypress, 142.
232 as quoted by Cypress, 142.
234 Lara, 19-20.
Aviles (who embodies La Malinche in this performance) was recently interviewed by Lynn Lipinski who wrote an article about them in USC’s School of Social Work newsletter. In the article Aviles explains, “Dance is the way I reconnect to my heritage while I reimagine my future...I dance, therefore I am.” In the post-show discussion with the cast of Living Mythologies following the UC Irvine performance, Aviles had also emphasized the importance of their favorite quote and incidentally their favorite tattoo as well, “I dance, therefore I am.” They explain that this statement resists Descartes’ separation of body and mind. “We are daughters of the moon; we walk sacredly.” Through dance, Aviles is able to “fight without fighting” since, as Lipinski recounts, there are parallels to dance and healing.

Significantly, Aviles’ site of resistance is also their site of healing (i.e. their dancing body), the crux of which is an anti-Cartesian embodied knowledge consistent with Anzaldúaan conocimiento which derives awareness often through creativity. “The path of the artist, the creative impulse...is basically an attempt to heal the wounds.”

Furthermore, as a foundational dance therapy author, Judith Lynn Hanna, argues:

Dance involves the culturally mediated body, emotion, and mind. So do illness and pain...Dance may help the healing process...through (1) possession by the spiritual in dance, (2) mastery of movement, (3) escape or diversion from stress and pain through change in emotion, states of consciousness, and/or physical capability, and (4) confronting stressors to work through ways of handling their effects.

By “dance,” Hanna refers “to human behavior composed of, from the dancer’s perspective, purposeful, intentionally rhythmical, and culturally patterned sequences of non-verbal

236 Aviles, transcription from the video post-show discussion at UC Irvine, 11 May 2017.
237 Aviles as quoted in Lipinski
238 Anzaldúa as quoted in Keating, The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader, 320.
body movements other than ordinary motor activities.” It is significant that each individual piece contained in Living Mythologies presents a dance piece, albeit vastly distinct from each other. It is a dance to the goddex within and without, to heal oneself from the stiffness of the cages in which society would and too often does place its trans and intersex people of color. In the borderland space of the performance, this dance is a tool of trans-healing, a respite from the policing and bodily caging to which the world subjects queer and trans people of color.

Before Aviles embodied La Malinche as part of the Living Mythologies performance, there was a tradition of Latinx authors who (re)claim La Malinche and other demonized or, as Lara refers to them, bruja-ized women toward their own healing. Specifically, Lara focuses on Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Aurora Levins Morales who bridge sexuality, spirituality, and healing in their personal-political writings...[T]hese women self-name themselves as they theorize oppression and healing from a decolonizing and feminist perspective that is not only oppositional, but works to transform relations of power as well. Through their writings, they build on different ‘bruja positionalities’ based on the cultural figures Coatlicue, Coyolxauhqui, La Malinche, brujas, and curanderas, as well as other fictional or historical ‘dark female’ figures, to heal demonized spiritual knowledges, the material wounds of sex and sexuality, and the gendered and racialized spirit/ sex split...They resurrect and reimagine ‘the’ dark female, reminding us that she has been present all along and we must understand ‘her’ if we are to understand oppression and liberation intimately tied to ‘our’ sexual and spiritual subjectivities.”

In Living Mythologies, Aviles builds on this tradition by taking the reclamation a step further and physically embodying the bruja-ized figure of La Malinche. Furthermore, as is explicit in Aviles’ performance, the “gendered and racialized spirit/ sex split” is not limited to the “female,” but to femmes and other genders refusing the binary. For a trans person to embody La Malinche and refuse gender binaries is to further complicate the Anzaldúan

240 Ibid.
241 Lara, 103.
Borderland, neplantla, and the conocimiento that might emerge from this in-betweenness. Aviles’ dancing embodiment of La Malinche is a refusal to be colonized or identified on others’ terms. As La Malinche herself, Aviles holds a host of paradoxes and complexities, and combining this embodiment with dance that moves between erotic, joyful, and passionate is an act of healing and self-love.

On stage, La Malinche dances seductively and gracefully with a blend of contemporary and traditional Mexican dance moves in a black Mexican-style dress, flipping their dress up, around, joyfully embracing the multifaceted and contradictory aspects of themselves. When the music stops, after a near blackout, they stay seated on the ground. The lights are dim and the tone shifts. After a moment of silence, they sing the *Les Miserables* ballad, “On My Own” acapella. They conclude as they began, with an address to the audience, with power, with focus, poetry in motion: “Learning to love me is learning to love the revolution in the flesh” (performance notes) They repeat it with increasing force, like a spell.

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Learning to love myself is revolutionary
Learning to love myself is resistance
Learning to love myself has no manual
Learning to love myself is commitment
Learning to love myself is raw.”
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With this spell, the power is not only in bearing witness to the mystical awareness of La Malinche, but the power penetrates the audience as well, whose consciousness is fixed on “learning to love myself.”

Recalling the opening of *Living Mythologies* with Shruti’s proclamation of the Love Cosmology, the power of Richard’s learning to love themselves, takes on a political,

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242 Aviles, transcription from the video post-show discussion at UC Irvine, 11 May 2017.
decolonial significance, along with a healing significance. Another song plays, a passionate Spanish love song, they make large graceful movements, lights change to a warm purple. The dance and song have a different feeling, a shift has occurred into a kind of celebration of self-love. They sway in circular motions, they reach up, vulnerable, with love, and with the joy that can only come when one has found themselves victorious over seeming impossibilities.

J.L. Austen’s speech act theory teaches us that words can perform. Furthermore, Gloria Anzaldúa tells us, “Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.”\(^{243}\) Similarly, Audre Lorde in writing of the illuminating significance of poetry proclaims, “It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are—until the poem—nameless and formless, about to birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.”\(^{244}\) With their dancing embodiment of La Malinche/ La Chingada and their heartfelt poetic exclamations, Jose Richard Aviles embodies a new and yet ancestrally linked knowledge from a borderland space and conocimiento knowledge, inviting the audience to awaken from desconocimiento and heal themselves.

After a blackout and the oracle’s singing of gratitude, a new mythology greets the audience.


\(^{244}\) Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in Sister Outsider. Ebook.
Reyna Ripper’s performance finds not hope, but a kind of peace in the void, in embrace of death and nothingness. Paradoxically, her “living mythology” is death. Her borderland space is dark, empty, chilling. The audience observes a red light enveloping the
entire theatre and an increasingly loud buzzing sound can be heard. Reyna Ripper identifies as “a harsh noise visual artist hailing from the city of angels. Reyna’s work explores themes of death, temptation and desire as seen through the scope of both evangelical christianity and protestant catholic fanaticism as a proud gender non conforming non-binary blasphemous queer anomaly”\textsuperscript{245} The image above was taken at a previous performance at Occidental College, so the costume and mythological embodiment vary somewhat, but readers can witness the tone of the performance, as well as the S&M eroticism Reyna plays with in her performances.

As she explained to me following the performance at Highways Santa Monica in 2016, Reyna experienced multiple near-death experiences in which she felt herself in nothingness, and her mythology attempts to embody such an experience. Under the deep red light, buzzing, layered with strained breathing, gasping, and a rhythmic beat, electronic dissonance and screams are heard. Reyna meticulously arranges wine glasses on a table center stage, pouring a substance that appears to be blood in each one. The red spotlight dissolves into a clear light and we can see Lordess of the Flies in a red dress standing at a table. The sounds continue on a loop. With her long graceful fingers and long red nails, she holds a circular tray on her left hand, while her right hand carefully arranges each glass on the tray. Through the morbid soundtrack of buzzing dissonance, the audience is pushed to meditate on the death, violence and self-harm that have run rampant through queer and trans communities, especially those of color. It seems to be an inverted sacrament—one which emphasizes death instead of eternal life, one which honors those who have been lost

\textsuperscript{245} Reyna’s Instagram page, @reynaripper, original lowercase
(by social death or physical death) often at the hands of church violence and discriminatory doctrines.

In the post-show discussion, Reyna further explicates her intentions in her mythological embodiment:

It was intended for me to be the symbology of the body, and the sound of flies buzzing is the sound of death as flies eat and lay their eggs in carcasses...It’s also a reflection on colonization—especially for Latinx people who have been forced to convert—to a faith that is foreign to us, that has basically been genocided into our bloodlines and its foundation is in rape and genocide....Also...Lord of Flies is a reference toward Lucifer and Lucifer is known as the morning star and the morning star is Venus and Venus is seen as feminine and feminine is seen as evil, so it is also inspired by that concept that vilifies femininity with religious persecution, sacrifice, and violence. (Snaps from audience are heard.)

Irene Lara echoes these sentiments with her research on the sexuality and spirituality of Latina women. "[T]he west has inherited histories in which Latinas, as racialized women of color, are marginalized as literal or symbolic “witches” because their knowledges and practices extend beyond socially acceptable norms of womanhood Imposed by colonizing discourses and therefore threaten dominant cultures.”

Reyna confronts the rape and genocide in her Puerto Rican heritage through embodying death in a feminine form. She becomes a kind of martyr, a figure of self-sacrifice who is elevated and memorialized through becoming that which is feared most: death.

Lordess of the Flies moves gracefully up and down the aisles, but with some zombie-like gestures, stiff, mechanical, vacant expression, visibly struggling for breath. The walk is seductive, apparently feminine, but she walks aimlessly and on the verge of collapse, as though not in control of her own body. She silently interacts one by one with a dozen audience members, offering each one her sacrament of death, which each one accepts.

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246 Reyna Ripper, transcribed from video of post-show discussion at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
247 Lara, 8.
Some do not drink it, but set it on the floor; others drink with a grin. When she’s finished passing out the blood she ravenously consumes one for herself, then carefully fills up the glass again, and quickly, with just as much thirst, drinks the rest. She pours another glass, drinking it all again, slightly more satisfied. The audience witnesses her not as a free agent but as an object. She gives and gives of her own blood, but who gives to her? She remains thirsty; her thirst cannot be quelled. For the dead to drink is to act in excess, if the dead can be said to be agents of their actions at all. She reaches beneath the table, producing a bloody piece of red meat hooked to the silver chain, stretched across both hands, and displaying it to the audience, with the same harsh, buzzing background sounds and the same seductive, vacant, zombie walk. She walks up and down the aisles displaying the bloody meat. Some audience members react in fear, others in disgust, a few unaffected.

In this void, Lordess of the Flies seems to make us painfully aware of the nothingness of our flesh and blood. It will all be consumed by the flies. This borderland space between material and spirit is one which primarily reveals the nearness of death for Reyna, and for other Latinx trans womxn of color. Her trans narrative truth-telling is an experience of death in which a queering of the life/death binary cannot reconcile itself, but remains open. Healing seems contradictory with this morbid mythology, and the audience must sit in their discomfort as they confront their own mortality as well. The audience is challenged to experience a borderland between life and death and open themselves to the possibility that here, too, healing may be found.

Reyna’s embodiment of a figure of death is not limited to the stage or to this particular performance at UC Irvine. In fact, she utilizes the performative sphere of social media to reflect on and reflect back to her followers the significance of death for her trans-
healing. Below is fellow Living Mythology member, Edxie Betts’ portrait of Reyna Ripper, posted on Instagram by @translifeandliberation. The caption for the artistic image Reyna Ripper created called “My Gender is your spiritual death,” based on the Death card in the tarot deck of cards. She explains, “This card is sacred to my gender. Our lives are constantly in danger when we struggle to become our most integral honest selves in a violent misogynistic patriarchal world. DEATH has become my patron saint. It is my gender and my body that I hope ultimately becomes the death of patriarchy as opposed to my gender becoming the reason for the death of me.”

We see in this explanation that embracing death for Reyna, is in fact, a survival tool. Furthermore, it is in doing so that she holds onto the hope of an alternate reality. Ironically, Reyna draws her power, and thus her life, from death. What can be stolen from one who already embraces death? Indeed, what harm can come to one who proudly wears death? In her embrace of death, she disempowers her oppressors by fearlessly reminding them that all is flesh and blood, and everything returns to nothingness. Embracing death is part of her trans-healing process.

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248 translifeandliberation Instagram [https://www.instagram.com/p/BIVUI5Qh0SY](https://www.instagram.com/p/BIVUI5Qh0SY) Original caps Accessed 10 June 2018.
"Living Mythologies is an ongoing project that holds space by and for QTIPoC people to reflect, generate narratives based on deeper truths, find/create the archetype of self that affirms the most real life path. We carry this knowledge."\textsuperscript{249}

The space Living Mythologies holds is a borderland space, opened for movements of healing, of queerness, of spirituality. From this borderland space, truths that are erased

\textsuperscript{249} Performance program, UC Irvine 11 May 2017. My emphasis
from violent binary systems are able to emerge and take shape. Oracle Shruti addresses the audience as “mirrors of our Truth Speakers” and defines truth as thus: “The feeling of connection between knowledge of self, space, and place. Truth operates on the individual and collective level, and provides links between spiritual and physical spaces.”

For Living Mythologies, speaking truth can be an act of trans-healing. In a borderland space, truth is able to contain both love and hate, and all the seeming binaries and distinctions we make in our socially constructed conceptions. Holding these paradoxes is queer, is healing, is connection. The borderland opens space for impossibilities, for metaphysical experiences, for understandings that cannot be held by one side of the border or another. This is the space Living Mythologies holds for QTIPoC. The borderland space is a becoming space, a space of possibility.

**Goddexxx Chella Can’t Breathe / and Finds Her Freedom (She/ Her)**

Oracle Shruti sings a new song about freedom, chanting her spell for “freedom, freedom, freedom.” As she does so, a cool purple light reveals Goddexxx Chella sitting center stage on a bench using American Sign Language to interpret the words Shruti sings. The performer, Chella Coleman, identifies herself and her work as “a transgender activist using art as well as organizing in the community in Los Angeles California. Using art as well as popular education to educate folks around issues that impact the trans and gender non conforming community especially low-income trans women of color.”

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Figure 8. Chella Coleman as Goddessx Chella. Credit: Leo Garcia
Goddexxx Chella stands: “We must love and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” In a symbol of resistance, she raises her right arm, making a fist, and chants passionately—her participation in ritual social protest/ spellcasting in a march of one: “Black lives matter, black trans lives matter. Black lives matter, black trans lives matter. Black lives matter, black trans lives matter.” She sways in a dance, rhythmically to hand drums beating as her chanting continues. A short pause. She turns to the audience, “Do we even really matter?” This ends her protest march and she sits back down to watch TV in her apartment, recreated on stage through miming gestures.

A spotlight hits her as the rest of the stage goes dark. “So excited. Get to watch my favorite show, just relax. Relax.” She then changes her voice to a deeper, British accent, mimicking the opening words to the cult classic show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.* “To every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons, and the forces of darkness. She is the slayer.” The audience laughs in recognition of this series which was, for many millennial queer people, an important one for its exploration of difference, queer camp aesthetic (not to mention, a main character, Willow, comes out as a lesbian), and witty social commentary. Goddexxx Chella then slips into her own voice, excited, “Oh my god, my favorite episode!” But the joy of watching Buffy melts into disgust and discouragement.

She is interrupted by police harassing someone on her street on skid row. Agitated, she considers what to do. “Oh no, the police are hounding them again! By the time I get up and go down, who know what could happen?” She returns to her show in silence, then

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252 Coleman, *Living Mythologies* script, 8.
254 Coleman, *Living Mythologies* script, 8.
crosses to center stage, intimately close with the audience. Riffing on Audre Lorde, she laments, “Self-care is an act of revolution...but what happens when that self-care turns more into self-destruction? What if you can’t tell the difference?”

In Christopher Shelley’s groundbreaking psychological, sociological book, *Transpeople: Repudiation, Trauma, Healing*, he draws from hundreds of interviews and describes the contentious relationship many trans people have with notions of “self” and “wholeness.” According to Shelley’s findings, a big part of this has to with interiorization of societal repudiation. “Past instances of self-harm or other patterns of emotional, mental, or interpersonal difficulty were mentioned in many of the interviews. These difficulties were attributed to coping with life under the weight of a social order that largely repudiates trans subjectivity.”

The trans repudiation is complicated and compounded for a black trans subject. In this poignant moment, Goddexxx Chella is caught in a paradoxical situation in which she has internalized colonialism’s violence against black bodies, yet is acutely aware of her strength and desires to care for herself.

In Tiffany Willoughby-Herard’s award-winning article on the deaths (and subsequent silences surrounding) incarcerated black women, she explains that such official reports claiming “good policing” in the murders of black women are exemplary cases “of the pervasive idea that Black Women are disposable and that whatever injury is done to

255 Ibid.
256 Christopher Shelley, *Transpeople*, 205. Shelley neglects meaningful engagement into the specificities of black trans people (and especially femme), and instead appropriates Fanon’s “phobogenic object” to draw a “parallel example pertaining to transpeople,” the position of which assumes a whiteness (or non-blackness) of the trans people about whom he writes. Shelley quotes Hook who elucidates that the black bodies in apartheid South Africa became a “phobogenic object, which produces a volatile polarity of affect...criss-crossed with relations not only of dread, disgust and fear, but also with relations of attraction, fascination, exoticism, and desire.” For a black trans woman like Chella Coleman, the social experience of “phobogenic object” is compounded and complicated.
them serves some necessary and legitimized part of the gender-racial-sexual logic of social order.” Nevertheless, though colonial society makes it an “impossibility” for black women to love themselves and each other, Willoughby-Herard emphasizes the importance of the Combahee River Collective’s statement. It, in fact, called for revolutionary attention to “healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community’ that they considered to be the foundational response to the structural forces that stalked them.” Willoughby-Herard also importantly connects the pervasive valuelessness of black women in the social order today and a history of medical plantations where experiments and gruesome practices were normalized on female slaves who were believed to feel no pain. Willoughby-Herard’s research suggests that the very history of today’s medical industrial complex and medical discoveries, the very field of gynecology itself, relies completely upon violence against black women. Therefore, in a project on healing which centralizes black and other voices of color, it is important to note the distinct possibility of a distrust, or at the very least a contentious relationship, between people of color and the “official” authority of western doctors, when seeking healing.

Goddexxx Chella sits again and chants: “Self-destruction” while miming cutting her arms, followed by an exhale, relaxing, with the chant, “peace.” She repeats this cycle three times. To trans-heal this moment is to acknowledge and contend with the complex social repudiation, the “disease” of which can spread to individuals like Chella. Despite these obstacles, she finds her strength again, and stands with power. “I am Goddexxx Chella.” In juxtaposition with the superhero Buffy the Vampire Slayer, the audience is made painfully aware that there is no black trans full figured superhero in our current time and place, so Chella must create one. She must stand against the social forces of darkness and be her own
“slayer.” Doing so, she opens a possibility—for change, for trans-healing in herself, reflecting to the audience members a power, even fictional power. As I have shown, the imaginative sphere is an important site of decolonizing and healing of trauma. She describes her powers of flight, climate control, lightness and dark, as well as “the power to destroy white supremacy, patriarchy, transphobia and all the interlocking struggles of domination. Feels good doesn’t it?”

She asks herself more than the audience. “I believe we used to have that magic. Where did it go? Is it lost? Can we get it back?” Here Goddexxx Chella gestures to an unknown but felt ancestry of powerful black women and a legacy of slavery which sought to rip the magic from their souls. This kind of reclaiming project of Living Mythologies is much of their healing and decolonizing labor.

Similar to a comic book superhero, unlike the other mythologies, she seems caught between her extra/ordinary self—where is her power? Is it really hers? Her performance is a more traditional example of theatrical storytelling than the others which resist a narrative structure. She seems to lose her superpowers when she relates these statistics to the audience: “Every 24 hours a black person is murdered by the state. Every 32 hours a trans person, more specifically a trans person of color is murdered.”

She yells at the top of her lungs, punctuating each word: “I. Can’t. Breathe,” echoing the famously tragic police killing of Eric Garner. Again, as in the previous mythology, the audience is back in the borderland between life and death, confronted with the increasing death tolls of black trans women.

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258 Ibid.
259 Ibid.
260 Ibid.
Overwhelmed with a flood of emotions upon this terrifying reflection, she calms herself down, singing in a melancholy tone, “I feel skin deep. “Thought I could be strong but it’s killing me. I want to be beautiful. Want to be worthy of love and beautiful. Sometimes I wish I was someone other than me.”\(^{261}\) She sings with pain, sincerity, and vulnerability. “Who I am is quite enough. Worthy of love. I am worthy! I am beautiful!”\(^{262}\) Her energy builds again as drums start pounding. She runs from one side of the stage to the other “I. Can’t. Win.” “We. Can’t. Win.”\(^{263}\) When will I be free? She screams with all her might, a guttural “Freedom!”

Just then, as though a response from the heavens, Beyonce’s song, “Freedom” plays. Oracle Shruti approaches and drapes a shimmery gold poncho atop Goddexxx Chella. Once she wears this magic garment, she is again empowered, and begins to dance joyfully. The lights come up and Shruti also dances. The garment seems to be a tangible extension of the trans-healing potential from friendship, solidarity, and community connection. It is almost a reward for an incessant fight to be free—physically, psychologically, spiritually. The celebratory dancing is continued and followed by Black Heyoka Engkantada (Edxie Betts), Lordess of the Flies (Reyna Ripper), and La Malinche (Jose Richard Aviles) who enter the stage dancing and continue to dance in procession through the audience out of the house doors. The performance is met with a standing ovation. While a joyful exit, it does not suggest a transcendence of their pain, but rather a transformation of it. They are still becoming Living Mythologies—crying out for freedom, not yet having won it.

\textbf{Borderland Trans-Healing from Colonial Wounds}

\(^{261}\) transcribed from the video recording of the performance at UC Irvine 11 May 2017.
\(^{262}\) Ibid.
\(^{263}\) Ibid.
This final dance at the end is an affirmation of self-love as well as social liberation through the traumatic / utopic narratives the audience has witnessed. Following the performance, audience members refer to the show in such terms as “transformative,” “moving,” “jarring,” “something I haven’t experienced before.” With the knowledge and cultural production of Living Mythologies, at the neoliberal institutional setting of University of California, Irvine, a borderland space was opened, allowing for community-building and reclaiming mythologies that centralize trans people of color (and otherwise subjugated) knowledges.

The interruptions and tenuous experiences of joy—particularly in the final living mythology—open a space from which audience members who do not identify as trans of color may experience the precarious nature of empowerment and healing for a population who, as Alok Vaid-Menon of DarkMatter puts it, gets no “break” from trauma. These more privileged audience members are invited to confront in an intimate way a social disease which may otherwise be easier for them to ignore as community members of UC Irvine. Toni Morrison warns, however, “As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability.”

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264 From anonymous interview recordings and emails from a sampling of students present at the UC Irvine Living Mythologies performance.
265 According to Toni Morrison, “Africanism [...] is an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served.” (Playing in the Dark, 6)
266 Ibid, 7.
With the spread of this virus—which is of course not only limited to the literary discourse strain—whiteness becomes the standard to which humanness is ascribed (against blackness), even in educational contexts. Sara Ahmed relates Lewis R. Gordon’s critique of Hegel, “‘White people are universal, it is said, and Black people are not.’ If to be human is to be white then to be not white is to inhabit the negative: it is to be ‘not.’” These examples of Hegel and (white) American literature reveal borders created in a reifying mythology that perpetuates white supremacy. These are among the borders that are queered in the borderland space that *Living Mythologies* opens. The audience witnesses the infection of this virus in the trauma of Chella Coleman, for instance, who “can’t breathe” and who struggles to find the magic from her enslaved ancestors. Yet she keeps fighting for her own peace and standing up, affirming that she is *Goddexxx* Chella.

Feminist scholar Alison Reed, in her analysis of the rich, complex literature of queer black feminist author Sharon Bridgforth, offers a poignant meditation on this paradoxical healing, relating specifically to black women. According to Reed:

Bridgforth’s text conceptualizes spiritual freedom not in binary terms of domination—slavery, but as an embodied practice of honoring one’s ancestors and ethics even in the most constraining circumstances of bondage and brutality...The traumatic utopia [...] remains embedded in ancestral and embodied knowledges of historical traumas, not transcendent of them.

In fact, Bridgforth has been a mentor to Shruti Purkayastha, and *Living Mythologies* is, in part, inspired by her work. Grappling with seeming contradictions, such as simultaneous embodied trauma and embodied healing, it is useful to consider this—and other “impossibilities” performed in the work of Living Mythologies—to be “traumatic utopias.”

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268 Reed, “Traumatic Utopias,” 128.
Part of the paradoxical healing in such a borderland space is contending with the inevitable or ubiquitous nature of certain social diseases. A love cosmology is not without earth-shattering heartbreak, and the hope to survive and thrive is not without violence and death. Treating a wound can be more painful than the wound itself, but it is necessary to heal it. *Living Mythologies* teaches their audience that sometimes trans-healing looks like sitting in the pain, holding the disease, grieving those for whom healing was not possible. Later, I asked several of my black friends in the audience if they would speak with me about their impressions of the performance, and they told me it was too difficult to articulate. The said, maybe after a couple of weeks of processing it, they could. Feeling that the performance left them to dress and tend to their own wounds, out of respect, I decided not to follow up, but instead took their silence and deep ambivalence as their response. I acknowledge that both my analysis and experience of the performance as a white person is limited, yet I hope to have captured at least some of the “queer magic” in the trans-healing potentiality opened in the borderland space of this *Living Mythologies* performance.
CHAPTER 3
Decolonizing the University with DarkMatter’s Healing of/ in Failure

I think it’s time we break up with success.
– Alok Vaid-Menon of DarkMatter. Ted X Talk: We are Nothing, and that is Beautiful.

Norms surrounding whiteness then are the measure for success or failure, and rewards for whiteness are not critiqued for the benefit and rewards it gives to a few and the kinds of punishment and low outcomes it gives to those who are different in terms of skin colour, religion or non-religion, sexual orientation, abilities, age, or class status.
– Marie Battiste, Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit

As you may know, the colonial system of education in addition to its apartheid racial demarcation had the structure of a pyramid: a broad primary base, a narrowing secondary twiddle, and an even narrower university apex. Selections from primary into secondary were through an examination, in my time called Kenya African Preliminary Examination, in which one had to pass six subjects ranging from Maths to Nature Study and Kiswahili. All the papers were written in English. Nobody could pass the exam who failed the English language paper no matter how brilliantly he had done in the other subjects. I remember one boy in my class of 1954 who had distinctions in all subjects except English, which he had failed. He was made to fail the entire exam.
– Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Decolonizing the Mind
Introduction: DarkMatter and the Case for Failure

In the previous chapter, I have discussed the trans-healing potential of opening a borderland space in a theatrical performance. I gestured to the significance of the institutional space which their presence trans/formed. In this chapter, I turn more explicitly to the university context and DarkMatter’s decolonizing potential through spoken word and radical pedagogy. Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian make up the
trans South Asian American performance duo, DarkMatter. In the process of writing this paper, DarkMatter has disbanded on good terms, and both Alok and Janani have continued their solo careers. They are well known in queer and trans communities internationally and have performed to sold out audiences all over queer and experimental stages around the United States, Europe, and Asia. They (especially Alok Vaid-Menon) have a huge fan following on social media where they use Instagram for black, queer, PoC and trans activism and as a venue for sharing artistic work such as poetry and gender-bending fashion. DarkMatter is known for their piercing spoken word, biting cultural critiques, humor, and fashion sensibilities. Both Alok and Janani identify as non-binary\textsuperscript{269} and use gender neutral pronouns (they/them) and I will therefore refer to them with these pronouns. Like so many millennial queer students, I first encountered DarkMatter on the social media platforms of Instagram and Facebook, and I couldn’t have been more thrilled when my university (University of California, Irvine) announced they would host the brilliant duo in May 2016.

Significantly, Alok and Janani met at their undergraduate university—Stanford—where they were disillusioned with the lack of antiracist activism as well as the lack of people of color in their classes. Upon moving to New York City, the duo performed regularly at La MaMa Experimental Theater, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Asian American Writer’s Workshop. DarkMatter has also been part of the Public Theater’s Under the Radar Festival, the Lincoln Center’s La Casita Festival, as well as the Queer

\textsuperscript{269} According to Trans Student Educational Resources (transstudent.org/definitions accessed 10 November 2018), nonbinary (also non-binary) refers to a “preferred umbrella term for all genders other than male/female or woman/man, as used in an adjective...Not all nonbinary people identify as trans and not all trans people identify as nonbinary. Sometimes (and increasingly), nonbinary can be used to describe the aesthetic/presentation/expression of a cisgender or transgender person.” See glossary for more terms.
International Arts Festival. In their #ItGetsBitter (a critical riff on #ItGetsBetter) tour in 2016, they returned to their interest in university-based activism and an interrogation of the institutional racism and elitist university policies and practices. To resist and make steps toward decolonizing institutional and pedagogical practices at U.S. universities, DarkMatter performs a radical trans/gressive pedagogy—or what transgender communications scholar Benny LeMaster calls a “pedagogy of failure.” I examine DarkMatter’s radical trans/gressive pedagogy of failure and its relationship to healing in this chapter, particularly within the context of the neoliberal university. This chapter builds upon the rich theoretical site of failure to examine the connective tissue among decolonial practice, pedagogy, activism, and healing, which, I argue, are exemplified in DarkMatter’s university tour. With this case study, I offer possibilities for trans-healing in the university and encourage educators and students to take up this challenge, best articulated by Alok Vaid-Menon, who asks, “What are you doing to liberate trans people?” Of course, for trans people, this includes one’s own liberation.

In a TEDx talk Alok Vaid-Menon gave at Middlebury College, they speak at length about the corruption of the current university system and its collusion with the capitalist value of success. Vaid-Menon laments, “I think it’s time we break up with success, or at

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272 See Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, “The Neo-Liberal University,” New Labor Forum 6 (Sage Publications, 2000), 73-79. They argue, “Public college and universities emphasize that they support corporate competitiveness through their major role in the global, knowledge-based economy...In the process, the fundamental social roles of public higher education, including providing increased upward mobility for underserved populations, have been displaced by the economic role of serving corporations' global competitiveness.”

273 Alok Vaid-Menon, performance notes UC Irvine, 7 May 2016.
least our current definition of it.” 274 They continue, “Success is a violent or manipulative process.” 275 They even go so far as to argue for failing. Why? They tell their audience, “By failing, a whole new world of possibility opens.” 276 This world of possibility is a utopic, anti-capitalist one. If, as Slaughter and Rhoades argue, success in a neoliberal university context is the degree to which the university is able to transform “raw materials” into “products” which are “purchased by corporate employers,” 277 then “failing” would be an anti-capitalist, anti-corporate, anti-neoliberal move. Failing would be an act of dissent, an unwillingness to participate in a system that dehumanizes students for capital gain. Of course, it is also important to note that the degree to which that dehumanization of the student “product” is not equal, but is modeled on colonial systems that privilege wealth, whiteness, ability, cisgender maleness, etc.

The picture seen at the onset of this article serves as a tangible depiction of the kind of intervention DarkMatter brings to the neoliberal university. The reader will notice the sterile, white and beige background, a blank chalkboard, harsh fluorescent lighting. This is Clark University but there is a sense that it could be any university. The duo’s presence as trans people of color disrupts the sterile environs pictured and suggests alternate ways of being in a corporate space. They don’t smile, for instance, but one can witness a playful eroticism from Alok. Janani shows a more defiant unwillingness to participate in the institutional expectations. However, there is another side to this visual reading. In his book, The Reorder of Things, on diversity politics in the university, Roderick A. Ferguson troubles

275 Ibid.
276 Ibid.
277 Slaughter and Rhoades, 74.
the idea of minorities getting “invited” into the university. There is a kind of “calculus” as he calls it to allowing resistant rhetoric and embodiments, but only in chewable chunks for the institution to consume, manage, and redistribute as a palatable product and a symbol of open-mindedness and “commitment to inclusivity.” I will explore this complex dichotomy throughout the chapter.

This chapter argues that DarkMatter’s pedagogy of/in failure in their performance practice is a decolonial praxis with the potential for trans-healing. The decolonizing, teaching, and healing DarkMatter engages in their activist performance are interwoven processes, each one integral to the other. Indeed, as Mignolo and Walsh put it, “I am thinking here of the practices, strategies, methodologies, and ways of making and doing that interweave with, and that are constructed in, resistance and opposition, as well as in insurrection, affirmation, and re-existence (as rehumanization), in imagining and building a different world.” Specifically, the decolonizing methodologies which DarkMatter utilizes in their pedagogical performance include practices of reframing, (trans)-gendering, remembering, and connecting.

These methodologies are among the 25 “indigenous projects” Linda Tuhiwai Smith puts forward in her seminal text, Decolonizing Methodologies. She wrote them with research in mind, but I am extending her imperative to artistic and healing practice. These performance practices are inherently resistant to dominant modes of healing and educating, and may therefore be looked upon as tactics of “failure,” but this begs asking, failure for whom? When arguing for a pedagogy of failure, and ultimately, a healing of failure, Berlant’s point that, “normativity is violent” is particularly apt. A pedagogy of queer

278 Mignolo and Walsh, Location 2291 in Kindle Book.
failure may be a weapon for minoritarian subjects to survive systems which predicate their suffering or elimination. As is consistent with LeMaster’s theory of pedagogy of failure, Gust Yep likewise argues “healing from the violence of normativity requires ‘understand[ing], unpack[ing], and demystify[ing] its invisible power.’” These words of Gust Yep suggest that the practice of a pedagogy of failure is a healing practice. The effects of the “violence of normativity” can manifest in a myriad of mental and physical illnesses. However, this chapter focuses on the disease of normativity which demands active participation in the hyper-competitive neoliberal university marketplace.

I build off the important discourses of failure in gender and performance studies, along with the performative and pedagogical theories of failure from DarkMatter toward a theory of healing in/ of failure. The tension in the slash “/” signals both the paradoxical nature of this project and the need to heal oneself in an atmosphere which casts one off as a failure—this is also a healing from failure. The “in” also suggests that in taking on failure as one’s own, immersing oneself for instance in a community of society’s rejects or failures, one may find healing. The “of” in healing in/ of failure contends that it is through failure that one can heal. The “of” also places the subject position upon failure; that is, this is Failure’s story, not the story of overcoming Failure. This discourse of failure will help examine the limits and potentials of healing in a university context for queer and trans subjects, and particularly those of color. Furthermore, due to the decidedly pedagogical nature of DarkMatter’s performance praxis and their subversive position within the university on a national university tour, I employ pedagogies of failure to examine the performance methods and potentials of DarkMatter’s workshop.

279 Lauren Berlant (who coined “violence of normativity”) as quoted in LeMaster, 86.
The Belief in Possibilities: Failure as Utopic

Failure” has long been associated with queerness and transness, and since Muñoz’s rich account of the interconnectedness among queerness, failure, and utopia, failure has found itself staunchly situated in queer theory. While failure may seem a strange topic for a project on healing, it is important to understand the function of failure to better understand the function of healing. A queer healing, much like a queer failure, is simultaneously a utopian project and an urgent refusal of the oppressive / painful realities of the here and now. One of the foremost scholars on queer and trans studies, Jack Halberstam, in The Queer Art of Failure, builds on the work of Muñoz and merges “low theory and high theory” and various cultural contexts to argue for failure. For Halberstam, “Failure presents an opportunity rather than a dead end; in true camp fashion, the queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits darkness. Indeed, the darkness becomes a crucial part of the queer aesthetic.”280 This aesthetic certainly holds true for DarkMatter who tells us to “fail more.”281 A trans-healing performance of failure is particularly concerned with this queer notion of employing failure as an opportunity and how that notion might play out in a pedagogical activist performance. I can think of no more apt a site to test theories of failure than the success-obsessed neoliberal university, a site which DarkMatter repeatedly refers to as colonial.

This chapter departs from the existing scholarship on DarkMatter, which primarily focuses on their textual poetry and social media presence, and grounds itself alternatively in performance studies and queer and trans studies, with an attention to theories of

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280 Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, 96.
decolonization and pedagogy, in order to specifically highlight the performative nature of DarkMatter’s artistry. A performance-focused examination of the group will throw light on the physical, emotional, and spiritual labor of the artist-activists while exploring what happens in their performance, and what might happen in—that is to say, the potential of their performance. Decolonial / indigenous education scholar, Marie Battiste, refers to education as “the belief in possibilities.”282 I examine the significance of the possibilities of this performance in the context of the neoliberal university, and specifically my own University of California at Irvine, at the performance I witnessed on May 7, 2016.

When Alok and Janani step onto the stage in the Crystal Cove Auditorium – what UC Irvine students have described as “a sterile university auditorium within a beige building on the very beige campus of University of California, Irvine,”283 they softly, patiently proclaim the first words of their #ItGetsBitter show: “Rewind my body.” I am immediately trans/ported and consider the rarity of a trans person of color paid to be performing at this university. Alok and Janani present themselves as the stylish, sexy nonbinary desi professors you never knew you always wanted—Janani in khaki shorts, a beige starched button down with a funky bowtie; Alok in a colorful floral dress, a generous supply of makeup, and large earrings. The lighting in the Crystal Cove Auditorium is harsh and white, while the houselights remain on, though dimmed, to present more of a lecture feel than a performance. A whiteboard is positioned upstage center. As in a classroom, the duo occasionally asks their audience of students questions and writes down answers offered on the board. When one of them wishes to emphasize a point, the other takes the role of

282 Battiste, Decolonizing Education, Section 3470, Kindle Book.
283 Interview with undergraduate student present at the performance in the context of discussing the significance of the presence of DarkMatter on UC Irvine’s campus, conducted 7 December 2017.
“teaching assistant” and writes down any key concepts on the whiteboard—though, with the occasional off-handed doodle and a flare of humor.

Alok and Janani command the stage, speaking with such fluidity and synchronicity that the affect is two bodies, one mind, or perhaps two sides of one queer coin. Their name, DarkMatter, they explain, is that “space between” that gave birth to us. The nothingness of the phenomenon of dark matter could be read as “failure” since it has not realized itself as anything. Yet nothingness or emptiness, as Buddhists and some scientists would argue, literally contains worlds of possibilities. The natural phenomenon of dark matter, which scientists theorize accounts for approximately 85% of matter in the universe is unknowable by western scientific standards, since all direct experiments have failed. Failure, then, allows the possibility of exploring freely that which has been dismissed by western paradigms of knowledge. This is very much at the heart of what the performance duo DarkMatter is about, and what decolonial praxis and trans-healing are about.

Between lectures about the university’s indoctrination and the still-wielded tools of colonialism, Alok and Janani share their poetry with the audience—sometimes individually with the other listening intently, and usually dividing up verses lines, or speaking words in unison for emphasis. “Rewind my body.” the duo repeats this as a revised echo, with Alok’s voice resounding louder and clearer. They begin slowly, calmly, and the pace along with the tone and volume gets more intense and frantic as the poem continues. The final climactic verse is delivered directly to the audience, punctuated with their synchronized claps:

Alok: Before police there was peace (Janani: after peace there was police)
Alok: Before nation there was God (Janani: after God there was nation)
Alok: Rewind my body (Janani: Rewind my body)
Alok: Before marriage there was empathy (Janani: after empathy there was marriage)
Alok: Before sex there was pleasure (Janani: after pleasure there was sex)
Alok: Before gender there was people (Janani: after people there was gender)  
Alok: After me there was us (Janani: After us there was me)  
Alok: After universe there was riot  
Janani: bang/ Alok: bang / Janani: bang/ Alok: bang

This introduction paints a contradictory ancient utopic vision while jolting their audience with the final violent punctuations of “bang/ bang/ bang/ bang.” On one level, the severity, volume, and rhythm of “bang/ bang/ bang/ bang” relates to the audience the audial experience of gunshots, a violence that emerges when “after peace there was police.”  
In the silence following the echoing “Bang!” it is difficult to not think of the black, brown, and trans bodies that have succumbed on the other side of the bullet—who have suffered and died from the “bang.”

In the silence following, that sorrow and heaviness is felt, and likely intentionally so. Even as the workshop performance begins on this note, due to the sort of “creation myth” element of this poem, there are further possibilities to explore. This repeated “bang” in the context of the universe also evokes the “big bang theory,” and thus the creative force of the universe, a nod to the duo’s name, DarkMatter. Implicit in the words and their voracious performance of them is both destruction and creation performed with a melancholic utopic longing which grows more and more intense throughout the poem. In their article on trans poetics, Oliver Moore points out that, elsewhere in their work, Vaid-Menon “employ[s] the word ‘trans’ itself as a kind of metonym or synonym for ‘utopia’ or ‘dream’”:

Our trans means the end of imperialism  
Our trans means the end of militarism  
Our trans means the end of police  
Our trans means the end of borders  
Our trans means the end of the white man’s house

284 DarkMatter, transcribed from video recording of It Gets Bitter tour on YouTube  
286 Vaid-Menon, “girls wear blue; boys wear pinkwashing” published on Vaid-Menon’s website
This utopic function of transness has been a prevalent theme since the emergence of trans studies itself. One of trans studies’ founding scholars, Susan Stryker, admits that the utopian potential she had yearned for in the 1990s has not been realized, but she continues to put hope in “radical queer potential.” That potential—the dream space of transness seems to be crucial for an understanding of what it means to be trans and what it means to be an activist. In a decolonial context, opening such a space of utopian potential is part of the process of decolonizing the imagination and what Battiste calls “nurturing the learning spirit.” The jarring finale of “bang/ bang/ bang/ bang” in DarkMatter’s first poem is likewise “enmeshed in a complicated set of contradictory meanings.” From the perspective of DarkMatter’s activism, this early moment in the performance suggests that it was the rioting, exploding, contrary conditions that erupted into our universe. Thus, change is forged in the sphere of riot, the pain that comes with resisting the way things have been to yield the way things must be. It is with this same energy and urgency that DarkMatter continues their workshop performance.

The “rewind my body” poem gestures to a utopic past before gender, even as it invokes the violent “after” temporality that attempts to erase the trans utopic longing almost as quickly as it is expressed. Holding onto a utopic vision elsewhere of a queer time whilst suffering the particular realities of the here and now in which transness and queerness are consistently threatened is a predicament of queer and trans subjectivity, scholarship, and activism. Implicit in this contradictory struggle is failure—since contradiction and paradox are defined by Western models as being logical failures. To

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advocate for a “logical failure” like a paradox is to reject a kind of educational model that is defined by “this, not this,” a categorization that is tied up with colonialism. Alternatively, the decolonial is about “creating and illuminating pluriversal and interversal paths.”

To “rupture” the “foundational containers of desire” and “release a raw erotic power” (Stryker a la Lorde) would, in fact, be a failure of modernity, and arguably even post-modernity. Indeed, as queer studies scholar Heather Love describes in her book, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, in order for modernization “to move humanity forward,” it honed “techniques for mapping and disciplining subjects considered to be lagging behind.” She lists those “lagging behind” as sexual and gender deviants, women, colonized people, nonwhite, disabled, poor, and criminal which were “all marked as inferior by means of the allegation of backwardness.” Disciplining these subjects who “lagged behind” (or, put another way, were failing) may be considered acts of violence—whether the discipline happens externally or internally.

We can conceptualize Stryker’s “containers of desire” as tools of colonialism—containing, regulating, controlling cravings, sexuality, even dreams. According to Mignolo and Walsh, decolonial practice (at least in part) “seeks to…disobey the universal signifier that is the rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality, and the West’s global model.” The “raw erotic power” Stryker mentions, evoking Audre Lorde’s theory of erotic power, is an enemy to the colonizers, an enemy to the so-called progress of modernization. Thus, to yearn to “rewind my body” is to yearn to go what Love refers to as “backwards,” a utopia that is not a progress narrative. The healing potential in this failure seems to be in the

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288 Mignolo and Walsh, Location 150, Kindle Book.
290 Ibid, 6.
291 Mignolo and Walsh, Location 167, Kindle Book.
striving, the decolonizing of the imagination and healing of the spirit. New possibilities are
opened, along with new connections, and these are not necessarily in spite of the violence,
but through and from the violence/ disease of normativity that they emerge.  

**Decolonizing and Inciting/Insighting: Pedagogies of Failure**  

Following the powerful and emotional opening of the performance workshop,
Janani buttons their collar, mockingly offering a stiff professorial affect. Simultaneously,
Alok tosses back their absent long hair (like they just don’t care) and adjusts their floral
dress coyly as they collectively address the audience/students at the whiteboard.
DarkMatter reminds us that we are currently standing on stolen land. They lecture
persuasively about the fact that institutions of higher learning were funded on slavery and
indigenous murder, and that black and indigenous people should therefore go to college for
free. “The university exists to indoctrinate you,” they warn. They explain that the
university teaches us we have a mind but not a body or a heart and encourage the students
to interrogate and resist that. Much as bell hooks does in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy
of Hope*, they call for a feelings-affirming classroom space and firmly contest that
kindergarten is where the most radical training happens due to such pedagogies such as
kindness, friendship, and hope. They point out that there are very few trans people of color
at universities because if you are trans and a person of color, the university teaches you to
hate yourself. Alok later argues that the university institutionalizes the most corrupt people
and calls them smart. Not only does DarkMatter highlight the injustices of the history of

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292 This is not to advocate for violence/ oppression, but to point out the strength and resiliency that
can come through confronting it. Singh and McKleroy similarly state with regards to the resilience
of trans of color communities, “not to endorse this oppression, but to rather to understand how to
work with these strengths in healing from these oppressive circumstances,” 35.
American universities, they provide a trans people of color narrative and encourage students to likewise “understand, unpack, and demystify” (Yep) the invisible power of the institution.

The structure of DarkMatter’s performance workshop is interweaving decolonial pedagogy consisting of reframing, (trans)gendering, remembering, and connecting while teaching students about the neoliberal university’s colonial past insidiously spreading its dis/ease into the present—all of which is punctuated with their poignant poetry—creative embodiments of the decolonial rhetoric they are teaching their audience. They forcefully speak out about how most schools are paid in part by the Department of Defense, how the university teaches you to hate yourself if you’re trans; there’s almost no trans people of color at universities. They broach the subject of eugenics and the corrupt history of medicine in the United States. Bringing their audience to the present, they exclaim, “you’re too busy reading rather than revolting.”

Both Alok and Janani are well read and well educated, but they are provoking their audience to take action, since the university won’t do it for them.

*Guernica* author Kevin St. John writes of DarkMatter’s performance: “In a 1979 interview with Adrienne Rich, the writer and activist Audre Lorde argued that ‘the learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot.’ To watch the trans South Asian performance art duo DarkMatter perform, and to speak with Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian in person, feels like both an education and an incitement—an incitement to think, question, dismantle, reassemble, perhaps even to riot.”

Kevin St. John quoting from Audre Lorde here is particularly appropriate since Alok Vaid-Menon

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294 DarkMatter, performance notes
295 Kevin St. John, “DarkMatter: Be the Kill-Joy” in *Guernica*
explicitly moved to New York, at least in part, to work at the Audre Lorde Project where they still volunteer to this day. In her essay, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” Lorde argues for the necessity of poetry for the survival of black women in particular.

However, the applicability may also be appropriate for other queer, trans, two-spirit, and gender nonconforming people of color, which is the population that the Audre Lorde Project in fact serves. Poetry, for Lorde, is a pedagogy and epistemology, a way of life, “a vital necessity of our existence.” She continues, “It forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.”

DarkMatter certainly utilizes their poetry toward change-making. Alok Vaid-Menon goes so far as to say that their creative work is a matter of living. They supplement their poetry with piercing politically charged comedy and with efforts to rally their audience, charging them with the rage, hope, and communitas necessary to lead a protest. We see similar arguments from feminist theorist and poet, Gloria Anzaldúa, who boldly asserts, “Our [oppressed women of color] survival depends on being creative.”

Alok Vaid-Menon themself draws connections among their activist work in the transgender community, their performance art, and healing. In an email interview with them on the subject of activism, healing, and their QTPOC community in New York, they told me, “Care work, emotional justice work, healing work -- are all deeply political projects. Holding space, bearing witness, processing grief, creating beauty -- these acts sustain and fulfill us. In a world that targets us and treats us as disposable I believe that

fighting for our wellness and dignity is a political project.” While Alok acknowledges that healing is not “one size fits all,” they told me “I do believe in the power of artistic expression and I wish our movements would take art more seriously.” They explain that “performance in particular has given me the confidence to take up space, to listen to my body (and tune it out when I need to), to speak with intention, to read nonverbal cues. So much of the transmisogyny I experience makes me feel divorced from my body and art helps me return to it.”

Traumatology teaches that trauma is located in the body and therefore physicalized remedies may be needed. M. Jacqui Alexander in writing about diasporic and intergenerational trauma, argues that healing must begin in the body. Taken in a performance studies context, the performative nature of the trans-healing is significant, not only to the possibilities for healing, but also with regards the labor of activist performance. This is physical labor, healing work is spiritual labor, the creative work of sharing personal narratives is emotional labor, and the pedagogy is intellectual labor. These multifarious layers of labor are often overlooked in analyses of activist performance. Acknowledging such labor is part of the decolonial methodological practice of claiming and reclaiming what is taken for granted because of dominant white settler narratives which decide what’s worth claiming and what isn’t.

For their own trans-healing, Alok physicalizes and verbalizes their poetry, offering their truth and perhaps new perspectives to their audience. Sharing their own trans-healing work with others who may be in need of guidance or representation of their

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298 Vaid-Menon, interview by Anna Winget, 19 April 2018, email transcript.
299 Ibid.
300 Ibid.
identity markers, helps create an environment where both learning and healing can emerge. When Alok is leading workshops and classes, they invite in what normativity would dictate as “failure.” In articulating their process, they relate, “Rather than approaching anxiety, depression, and dysphoria as obstacles to the creative practice (as many formal art institutions do), I welcome them into the space and incorporate them in my creative process and pedagogy.”

This was their approach when arriving at UC Irvine for a student activism workshop. For instance, they tell the audience whatever their struggles, their pain, their trauma, whatever they are grappling with in this moment is okay, allow it space, because “none of us fits into this dystopic reality called reality.”

They gesture to the importance of imagination and play, which most people stop engaging with as adults, but that it’s a matter of survival to (re)turn to pretending, imagining.

Put another way, for some, it may be a matter of survival to decolonize the imagination.

In fact, DarkMatter here employs L.T. Smith’s decolonizing methodologies of reframing, creating, and remembering. It is reframing work because it is shifting the focus of from obstacle to transformative art, thereby also engaging in creation. Traumatologists Singh and McKleroy cite Burstow who refers to this kind of shift as “radical” trauma work, which focuses on the voices of survivors and does not rest upon a “deficiency model.”

The decolonizing project of remembering is also significant because of the “frequent silences” following traumatic events. According to Smith:

[R]emembering is painful because it involves remembering not just what colonization was about but what being dehumanized meant for our own cultural

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302 Vaid-Menon, interview by Anna Winget, 19 April 2018, email transcript, their parentheses.
303 DarkMatter, my performance notes at UC Irvine, 7 May 2016.
304 Ibid.
305 as quoted in Singh and McKleroy, p. 35-36.
practices. Both healing and transformation become crucial strategies in any approach which asks a community to remember what they may have decided unconsciously or consciously to forget.\footnote{L.T. Smith, 146.}

Typically, with clinical mental illness, there is social stigma and an expectation to suppress or hide it. There are often feelings of isolation attached to mental illness, and the majority of mental health practitioners fail to examine the societal factors that contribute to conditions like depression. However, new, radical traumatology research echoes the importance of remembering and confronting societal oppression in the healing process. Indeed, as Alok and Janani do, welcoming depression, anxiety, trauma, and other mental states into a creative, performative space, allows for a trans/formative healing process while holding space for acknowledging both individual, personal struggles and the very real societal factors present in those struggles. Traumatologists Anneliese A. Singh and Vel S. McKleroy, writing on trans people of color’s trauma and resilience,\footnote{Singh and McKleroy, “Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act.”} emphasize the importance of recognizing and negotiating gender and racial/ethnic oppression in the healing process.

Alok and Janani remind the audience to decolonize not only the violence of normativity brought on by privileged majority groups, but in their own communities. For instance, they lecture about the “mainstream” LGBTQ movement, which still identifies itself as a minority group, but too often continues to erase people of color with myths such as cis white gay men started the Stonewall Riots. Alok also raises complexities such as the ways in which trans people who pass\footnote{See glossary of terms provided prior to the introduction chapter.} may discipline non-passing trans folx, or heterosexual
cisgender people of color may punish queer or trans people of color who don’t conform, or how cis gay men fight for equal rights at the expense of queer and trans people of color. In an email interview with Alok Vaid-Menon, they explain, “Rather than being able to name this fear [of violence] and sit with it I found that we often deputized our trauma on one another. It was the perennial cycle of hurt people hurting people.”

**Trans Performance Art and the Neoliberal University**

The Cross-Cultural Center and Associated Students at University of California, Irvine invited the duo as part of their Critical Consciousness Speaker Series. Marketed as a student activist workshop at University of California, Irvine, DarkMatter’s promotional poster (which aforementioned student emailed me) claimed the performance would teach students “how we can use the university and its capital to our advantage to be in solidarity with social movements happening within and without.” Thus, even before the performance begins, it is clear that DarkMatter’s work is explicitly pedagogical. As promised in the poster, the duo uses the performance opportunity to raise questions about how and to what end we are educated in the United States and other Western societies. Nevertheless, in circulating an image of trans people of color under the headline of “Resist!” is also an example of the way the university can “enhance its multicultured public image” in a celebration of cultural diversity and an apparent commitment to student activism, even as it reduces such representational markers “to the terms of hegemony.”

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309 Vaid-Menon, interview by Anna Winget, 19 April 2018, email transcript.
312 Ibid, 178.
In her book, *The Spectacle of Japanese American Trauma: Racial Performativity and World War II*, Emily Roxworthy theorizes the spectacle-archive as a space where the regimes of the archive perform their dominance even as the dominated other (in this case, Japanese Americans imprisoned in internment camps) subvert the spectacle by performing resistant cultural codes. The spectacular images reproduced in this chapter from DarkMatter’s university tour, depict the subversive “feminist kill-joys”313 with excessive, gender-bending fashion and serious expressions at once vacant and provocative in their refusal to conform to any sort of normative category. This spectacular resistance becomes both a coded call to like-minded queer, trans, and PoC to respond and attend, even as it is subsumed in university archival property—an archive by the way which is only accessible to the Cross-Cultural Center; the library’s archival database did not show a record of this performance nor these images.

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313 A phrase taken from Sara Ahmed but one which Alok and Janani have evoked in numerous interviews, including one interview entitled “Be the Kill-joy,” which was also a direct quote from Alok Vaid-Menon in that interview.
Even as a graduate student active in the performing arts, Cross-Cultural Center, and LGBT Resource Center, it was an undergraduate student in my theatre history course who informed me about DarkMatter’s performance on campus, enabling me to attend. She learned about the event because she interned at the Cross-Cultural Center which sponsored DarkMatter’s performance. In part, perhaps because of this limited publicity, the audience consisted of only between 30 and 40 people in an auditorium that seats hundreds. Of course, another plausible explanation is that those members of the campus community who would most resonate with the message and tactics of DarkMatter tend to be queer, trans, people of color, or activist allies, all of whom are statistically more likely to take on service projects on campus such as diversity and sexual harassment training, multicultural
education, department obligations, or may have their own wellness to tend to or family members to care for. Whatever the explanations surrounding sparse marketing and attendance, it is worthwhile to question when a neoliberal university boasts a “commitment to diversity” or “inclusivity,” how does that manifest, and who benefits most?

In the introduction to his book, *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference*, Roderick A. Ferguson offers an illustrative example in a complaint (among a full dossier containing documents from 1993-2007) to Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College from Adrian Piper, a professor in their Department of Philosophy. After combatting illness and repeatedly being rejected for institutional support, she states “Wellesley has used my public visibility to enhance its multicultured public image while in reality actively preventing me from doing the multicultural work it public claims to welcome.” Ferguson shows how neoliberal universities are able to celebrate difference whilst suppressing oppositional movements, reducing them “to the terms of hegemony.” Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, and Sara Ahmed tackle the problematic structure of multicultural and diversity education within existing university frameworks, which tends to put additional, not less, pressure on precisely the people it is meant to serve. Similar arguments have been made in a decolonial context by Marie Battiste, M. Jacqui Alexander, and L.T. Smith.

Universities like UC Irvine may fund cultural “products” as part of their allocated diversity funding, but also turn a deaf ear to those “diversity projects’’ critiques that more

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315 Ibid, Location 178.
fundamentally address structural concerns. This, in fact, becomes part of the mechanism of university operations. Ferguson argues that neoliberalism in the university has become “a means of using difference to foster capitalist distribution while curtailing social redistribution for the underrepresented folks.”

Therefore, while universities inviting in a trans nonbinary South Asian American performance duo can be decolonizing and may open a space for alternative possibilities, a critique must remain open to analyze, caution against, and attempt to resist the ways neoliberalism “get[s] hold of and neutralize[s] difference.”

DarkMatter’s trans pedagogy of failure performs both decolonizing and healing labor which resists such neutralization. Their critics chalk up their insurgency and incitements to youth and idealism. But indeed, what scholars of radical and decolonial pedagogy urgently argue for is precisely an education predicated on imagination, dreaming, and a feelings-affirming pedagogical space, rather than consumer driven, outcome-based, instrumental. Such a space could be viewed by dominant pedagogical discourse as a “failure,” if the measure is capital-based productivity and the emphasis is a successful product (e.g. test scores, grades) over process (e.g. embodied learning, compassionate understanding). If imagining, dreaming, feeling, and inciting are indicative of failure, what kind of success does that leave us striving for? Failing, when claimed in this empowering way that resists systems ridden with diseases of colonialism, can perform a trans-healing. In this way, trans-healing suggests affirming alternative models to the Eurocentric colonial success model. A trans-healing of/in failure stops trying to “measure up” to the impossibility of the “mythic norm” of wealthy white (and otherwise

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317 Ferguson, location 3763 Kindle Book
318 Suart Hall as quoted in Ferguson, location 4175 Kindle Book.
privileged) male, to free oneself from the colonial expectations and colonized imaginary attached to success. To be an artist, to be creative, to be spiritual is a “failure” in the neocolonial, neoliberal model which views higher educational institutions as corporate suppliers valued by the degree to which they participate and compete in the global marketplace.

For the purposes of this analysis of DarkMatter’s performance, and toward a decolonizing methodology to reframe, reclaim, and remember, I offer some brief illustrative points about the campus environment to better understand what their workshop was teaching students to resist in the first place. Their performance speaks more generally about the American university, but some specifics about the location may provide some insights into the potentials for healing in this performance. While UC Irvine boasts a few radical departments that include doctoral studies such as culture and theory and comparative literature, the school is situated in one of the most conservative and wealthy areas in California—Orange County. Irvine, in fact, is not even a city but a corporation, The Irvine Company, corporatized in 1894, formerly known as the Irvine Ranch, comprised of 120,000 acres of land, acquired through Mexican and Spanish land grants for an estimated $26,000.\(^{320}\) The Irvine Company claims that James Irvine’s master plan with the Irvine Ranch is “what many today consider the finest example of master planning in the country.”\(^{321}\) The incorporated “city” of Irvine prides itself on being one of the safest cities in the nation, and repeatedly the safest one of its size.\(^{322}\) However, the question many queer,
trans, PoC, and undocumented students on campus have asked in response to this is “safe for whom”? In an environment that strives for uniformity where even the architecture is indistinguishable and inescapably beige\(^{323}\), those who stand out from the crowd or resist norms could be seen as dangerous. Where is the “safety” for those whose presence disrupts the homogeneity of the institution in power?

The land that was to become University of California, Irvine—land that had belonged to Mission Indians—was dedicated by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1964\(^{324}\) to become part of the California public education system in fulfillment of the California Master Plan designed to guarantee access to higher education.\(^{325}\) For the dedication, Native American and spokesperson for the Juaneño branch of the Mission Indians, Clarence Lobo was present along with some other tribal members. Officially, the only comment from notably outspoken activist\(^{326}\) known as “Chief Lobo” was printed in the first ever UCI yearbook in 1966 and reads, “Our children shall not know the experience of roaming over these rolling hills and listening to the wild birds as they talk to nature. Here now will be a fountain of knowledge where the cream of our youth shall drink from the rivers of learning…. The future belongs to our youth. Our footprints upon the sands of time shall be history to them.”\(^{327}\) Lobo’s words clearly belie a painful acquiescence to the inevitability of so-called progress.


\(^{325}\) California Master Plan 1960


\(^{327}\) UCI Yearbook 1965, UCI special collections.
Around this time, Clarence Lobo was significantly involved in bringing a case on behalf of the Mission Indians against the United States “for taking land without just compensation, specifically the lands and compensation lost because the United States Senate shelved, rather than ratified, the eighteen treaties made with California tribes and bands between March 19, 1851 and January 7, 1852.” Among other complications in the case was that most of the tribal parties filing the case lacked “having a recognized governing body.” The result of the drawn out, complicated case was that California Indians were offered 47 cents an acre. The Mexican and Spanish land grants that made it possible for James Irvine to purchase the Irvine Ranch, which would become the largest scale planned community in the country, was possible only through seizing land from and enslaving Juaneño and other Mission Indian tribes. The case of UC Irvine serves as an example of first of all the need for decolonizing work at universities—most of which have colonial histories—and secondly, helps us better understand the significance and impact of the decolonizing pedagogy that DarkMatter offers in their performance on this campus.

**Trans Erasure and the “Will to Institutionality”**

While DarkMatter doesn’t directly address UC Irvine’s history, they draw parallels between the colonial history of the area and that of other university locations. For instance, they argue that since universities are historically funded on slavery and indigenous murder, black and indigenous students should get to go for free. They also speak out against the indoctrination of children during colonialism which included imposed Christian conversion, gender binaries, policing hair, clothing, and other aspects of the native peoples’

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329 Ibid, 412.
330 Ferguson, location 4190, Kindle Book.
331 Performance notes, UC Irvine. 7 May 2016.
bodies, engaging in decolonizing projects of reclaiming and remembering as integral to their radical pedagogy of failure. However, while UC Irvine may share certain key colonial characteristics with other universities, being situated in a planned community that is essentially a large corporation has had significant impact on the campus climate and the narratives surrounding campus climate that are allowed in the archive and become general knowledge on campus.

The stakes of decolonizing work on campus that challenges systems of power that perpetuate the failure of trans students of color in a university environment is quite literally a matter of life and death for some. It certainly was for transgender student and activist, Christien Rodriguez, a former student at UCI. In March 2013 in broad daylight, Christien Rodriguez took his own life by jumping off a major campus parking structure. The administration’s silence was deafening. I began my studies at UC Irvine in September of the same year, and only verbally heard about it from a fellow queer student. In my research, I found archival comments from students on unofficial blogs and statements issued from the Rodriguez’s department (Social Ecology) as well as Gender and Sexuality Studies and the LGBT Resource Center, but otherwise very little by way of official remarks from UC Irvine. Perhaps in part because the community was reeling from grief, trans activism on campus has ostensibly slowed since Rodriguez’s untimely passing.

In their workshop at UCI, Alok Vaid-Menon performs an emotional poem reflecting on a stranger’s suicide on a New York City train track, the platform upon which Alok had been standing too. “we just sit there in silence / as they remove his remains.” Alok is disturbed by the Americanness of the silence, “this is america / where pain is a ritual we

are required to conduct in private: / an elaborate symphony on mute.” Alok’s voice grows louder with their own pain, their own anger, “to live in america is to blame the / dead for their own death, not/ the country for creating the very/ conditions that already killed them.” They look out at their audience-pupils with desperation and concern. They seem to be talking to the cis majority when they say that as a trans person or someone who loves trans people, there is a “constant worry about safety. We shouldn’t have to be doing it alone.”

Later in the performance Alok and Janani specifically acknowledge the rapid death rates, including suicides, of trans people. In an urgent crescendo, they share, “Trans people are murdering themselves more than anyone else in this country because you’re told from the minute you’re born you’re wrong...I don’t believe in depression, I believe in oppression...You see, there is no difference between suicide and homicide. In both cases society erases queer and trans people.” For society to acknowledge this would be to take responsibility for murder. Much easier to remain silent wherein the violence can continue and power remains unquestioned. The decolonizing practice of remembering, in part, honors those who have been brutally and unjustly taken from us, while demanding change now. If true education is a “belief in possibilities,” then education can help us “rehearse the revolution” as Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire have famously written, can decolonize the imagination, and therefore help “nurture the learning spirit,” envisioning and enacting new ways of connecting to each other and our world.

334 Ibid.
335 DarkMatter, performance notes, UC Irvine. 7 May 2016.
336 Ibid.
M. Shadee Malaklou, a critical race, gender, and sexualities scholar and former graduate student at UC Irvine, composed a brief and poignant article for the UC Irvine journal, *Trans-Scripts* written in remembrance of Christien’s life and activism. In her piece, she argues that “UC Irvine [is] a university that has pursued neoliberal goals at the expense of student education and the California Master Plan’s commitment to the creation of an educated public citizenry.”\(^{337}\) Of course, UC Irvine is merely following the public university trend toward privatization of knowledge. In their article on the neoliberal public university, Slaughter and Rhoades argue, “Academic capitalism, as with capitalism generally, reduces the calculus of public interest to the economic health of capitalistic enterprises.”\(^{338}\) Malaklou also points out that Christien’s sole support system was located in the pockets of security at the LGBT Resource Center and Cross-Cultural Center; therefore, leaving the university was not solely about education or career opportunities, but about a community that was integral to his resilience.

In the case of Christien Rodriguez, not enough has been said to acknowledge the conditions that killed him. As Alok asks their audience in the poem “*Trans/Generation,*” “Isn’t gender always about being blamed for your own violence?”\(^{339}\) It is easier to isolate the incident as a singular tragic event, rather than a lethal effect of a disease of colonialism still inflicting the university. This ideology plays out in institutional racism, which Sara Ahmed argues is individualized precisely for the perpetuation of this racism. She argues, “[T]he very identification of racism *with* individuals becomes a technology for the

\(^{337}\) Malaklou, 1

\(^{338}\) Slaughter and Rhoades, 79.

\(^{339}\) Vaid-Menon, “*Trans/Generation*” in *It Gets Bitter Chapbook.*
reproduction of racism of institutions.” Part of DarkMatter’s intervention, then, is revealing the systemic problems behind individual incidents—such as pointing out they were invited to this school as performers, not professors. They ask the audience to consider how many trans professors they’ve encountered. Responding to “none” or “almost none,” they then put the blame on institutional transmisogyny.

The failure of the university to fulfill its emancipatory goals, or even the implicit presumed goal of student survival is importantly and convincingly argued by feminist scholars of color such as L.T. Smith, Battiste, Ferguson, Ahmed, and Anzaldúa to name a few. Ahmed critiques (among other things) the language around diversity, and argues, “Equality can be treated as an institutional performance and as contributing to the optimal performance of the institution.” These scholars argue that while some diversity initiatives may engage in important work, typically the labor is primarily on those already at the margins, precisely because, as Ahmed notes, “diversity and equality work is less valued by organizations than other kinds of work.” In part, this is due to the institutional claim that equality and diversity work is “already mainstream when it is not.” The overburdened and underrepresented at the neoliberal university, then, may need healing from the failure of the university.

From a neoliberal perspective, the “successful” way of managing “difference” in the university, would be, as Ferguson describes it “to cannibalize difference and its potential for rupture.” Those who are labeled “failures” by the university would be those who

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340 Ahmed, On Being Included, 44.
341 Ibid, 85.
342 Ibid, 135.
343 Ibid, original emphasis.
344 Ferguson, location 4183, Kindle Book
were unable to be consumed and neutralized by the neoliberal model. They have failed the university’s “calculus test” of what Ferguson calls “a will to institutionality,” or the negotiation of the incorporation of difference. Unable to be “subjects” of the neoliberal university, these “failures” are objectified; however, they are not subordinated by its power. The life and death of Christien Rodriguez is a tragic example of a student whose difference was unable to be negotiated and incorporated by the neoliberal university. He wrote a poem which addresses the systemic problems that exclude and oppress him:

What do you do with a ‘glitch’ in the system?  
An incompatibility with a world that has formulated 
its own exemption from inquiry?  
...They ask all the wrong questions when I fail to compute,  
When the appearance of my structure resists placement by mocking it,  
When my sign is absent of meaning.

Malaklou argued that it was “from th[e] oppositional and counter-hegemonic groups that Christien drew his life blood; these groups served as a reminder that he was not alone—that he was not the only body that failed to easily ‘compute.’” Due to lack of funding and institutional support, Christien was forced to drop out of university, where his friends and oppositional groups were located, which were so important to his resilience and healing as a trans student of color. Three months later, he returned to the university to commit suicide.

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345 Ibid, location 4190.  
346 This is adapted from Judith Butler’s statement in The Psychic Life of Power, “’Subjection’ signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject.” Quoted in Ferguson, 4197 Kindle Book.  
348 Ibid.
The trauma of colonial practices that are at the foundation of educational institutions, which as DarkMatter boldly states to their UC Irvine audience, have been “funded on slavery and indigenous murder,” have left festering wounds that demand healing work. They fester because cycles of violence, of trauma, and continue through lack of access, through silence at harassment and discrimination, through always already failing students of color and queer and trans students, disabled students, poor students, indigenous students (and otherwise underprivileged students). Nevertheless, in spite of festering wounds, educational work must continue, and Battiste is interested in strategizing ways to move forward with meaningful and realistic change to educational systems. She notes some examples of good attempts at institutional change and encourages more of this. For instance, she requests to bring indigenous content into curriculum, improve access, recruitment, and retention of indigenous students. She acknowledges efforts made but also urges for educational strategies that encourage a transformational approach to learning. According to Battiste, voices of indigenous people must be legitimized, for instance, and indigenous knowledge and experience embraced, while

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349 In *Decolonizing Methodologies* p. 2-3, L.T. Smith offers further arguments positioning the Western university as a colonial site: “This collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized. Edward Said refers to this process as a Western discourse about the Other which is supported by ‘institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles’. According to Said, this process has worked partly because of the constant interchange between the scholarly and the imaginative construction of ideas about the Orient. The scholarly construction, he argues, is supported by a corporate institution which ‘makes statements about it [the Orient], authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching about it, settling it, ruling over it’. In these acts both the formal scholarly pursuits of knowledge and the informal, imaginative, anecdotal constructions of the Other are intertwined with each other and with the activity of research.”

350 DarkMatter, my performance notes from UC Irvine, 7 May 2016.
respecting mainstream knowledge and experience.\textsuperscript{351} Perhaps diversity initiatives at universities like UC Irvine, and other public universities, could accomplish this, if there is a willingness and openness to take action toward transformative justice, that can ethically answer Alok’s question, “What are you doing for the liberation of trans people”? of indigenous people? of queer people? Of black people?

The paid invitation of queer trans PoC bodies to UC Irvine to perform, speak their truth, and instruct on activist resistance is an affirmation for other students who share some or all of these identity markers, and sharing that experience in a group of primarily queer and trans people of color opens a possibility for healing from the university’s failures and in finding solidarity among those who have also “failed” to comply with (neoliberal) dictates of success. When queer and trans students’ lives are very literally at stake, there is an ethical call to action to take some responsibility and ask what actions have we taken? As Marie Battiste puts it, “hope is a cause and a consequence of action.”\textsuperscript{352} Thus, the hope that has the potential to lead toward healing is not possible without an action that can usher in such a hope. Furthermore, traumatologists Singh and McKleroy show in their work with trans people of color that community-building and meaningful connections with transgender communities of color is crucial to healing from trauma.\textsuperscript{353}"

\begin{footnotes}
\item Battiste, Decolonizing Education: Nurturing the Learning Spirit, Location 4685, Kindle Book
\item Ibid, Location 3480.
\item Anneliese A. Singh and Vel S. McKleroy, “‘Just Getting Out of Bed Is a Revolutionary Act’: The Resilience of Transgender People of Color Who Have Survived Traumatic Life Events” in Traumatology, vol. 17, no. 2 (2011): 34-44. Further, In an article on trauma, social justice, and arts therapies, Owen Paul Karcher quotes Van der Kolk who explains, “Trauma almost invariably invokes not being seen, not being mirrored, and not being taken into account. Treatment needs to reactivate the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored, by others…” As quoted in “Sociopolitical Oppression, Trauma, and Healing: Moving Toward a Social Justice Art Therapy Framework” in Art Therapy. Vol 34, no 3 (2017), 124.
\end{footnotes}
DarkMatter’s decolonizing performance offers not only theories and tactics of resistance, healing, and queerness, but through their radical pedagogy of failure, offers hope through connection (a la hooks and Smith), and encourages insurrection, bucking the colonial practices of the neoliberal university. Though current neoliberal university models fall short, such programming is certainly needed on campuses. Because the neoliberal model undervalues liberal arts, it is crucial to open spaces to critique the university and encourage reflection—including the decolonizing projects of remembering and reframing—and together imagine counter models to the capitalistic, student-consumer education structure.

(Trans)gendering: A Decolonizing and Healing Project

For the duo, decolonizing gender is of central focus to their poetry and performance art. I would further argue that for DarkMatter, to trans is a decolonizing act, since decolonizing gender is enmeshed with the decolonization of class, race, ability, sexuality, and so on. Furthermore, “gendering,” is one of the decolonizing projects that L.T. Smith calls for in her Decolonizing Methodologies concluding chapter. She explains “gendering” as showing specificity of gender experiences, but since gender itself is a colonial category, one can build on this notion of decolonizing through “gendering” to be decolonizing through trans-gendering, which challenges essential aspects of gender and reframes the gender category all together. The following is reprinted from an interview with Guernica:


354 The use of trans as a verb comes from Lucas Crawford who denotes trans as an “operation that works (like ‘queer’) against the very imperative to maintain strict propriety in relation to the identity categories, bodies, lives, and movements that gather around the concepts of gender and sexuality” (Currah/Stryker/Moore 2008: 13; Crawford 2012: 60; Leung 2012).

355 This point was perhaps most famously and critically argued by Maria Lugones in her article, “The Coloniality of Gender.”
Guernica: Okay. Please help me understand that.

Alok Vaid-Menon: I think one of the biggest betrayals that a lot of people don’t understand is that the term "gay" was never about signifying sexuality. When the gay liberation movement started, it was actually about political confrontation of gender as a system, and some of the foundational divides in the gay movement were between gay men who wanted to assimilate into masculinity and gay men who were challenging the very idea of masculinity...What happened in the gay movement was that trans became the space for gender non-conformity, whereas gay became nice, palatable, assimilate-able.

Janani Balasubramanian: I think what Alok was saying with the idea of how we’ve never met a man in our lives, is that manhood is not just an ideal of gender; it also becomes a set of ideals around race, class, respectability, purchasing power, whatever. I’ve never met a single person in their lives who’s rich, has no feelings, goes to the gym every hour, drinks protein shakes all day. This person doesn’t exist.

Alok Vaid-Menon: They’re a fairy tale. What’s difficult is that gender has become only the domain of trans people and women. But we all have gender, and we all have a stake in ending gender.\(^\text{356}\)

For Alok and Janani, there are as many genders as there are people.\(^\text{357}\) For them, decolonizing gender means decolonizing education and all colonially grounded systems of power. In their workshop at UCI, Janani strongly states that “Gender is a racial construct.”\(^\text{358}\) Similarly, for South African feminist decolonial scholar, Oyeronke Oyewumi, patriarchal regimes are inextricably bound with colonialism. She argues that “gender categorization emerged during the colonial period,”\(^\text{359}\) which, though located in Yoruba traditions, has been echoed in South Asian contexts by Lata Mani, Gayatri Gopinath, Superna Bhaskaran, and others who point out the colonial Indian penal code section 377
and criminalization of gender-based and sexual behavior contrary to Victorian principles in colonial India that continue to impact postcolonial India.\textsuperscript{360}

Many moments during DarkMatter’s #ItGetsBitter performance gesture to gender as a colonial category rooted in violence. “Would you accept me if I told you / my gender came from violence? / / because sometimes I wonder / if there would be gender if there / were no violence.”\textsuperscript{361} Elsewhere, in their “Trans/Generation” poem about taking a photo with their transphobic grandmother, Alok softly states, “You see in my culture we have learned that/ there is no difference between silence and violence. / We inherit both from our men.”\textsuperscript{362} For Alok, gender is racialized, patriarchal, and oppressive. Succumbing to gender is voicelessness, and DarkMatter’s words and performance explicitly combat that. Later in the same poem they further identify gender as violence when they describe the “underground economy of rage” in their culture: “[W]e hate our men so much that sometimes/ We even hate ourselves for them: / Call it gender for short.”\textsuperscript{363} The poem Trans/Generation crystalizes the cyclical nature of violence with an epicenter at the

\textsuperscript{360} Though in the course of this dissertation, the sodomy law in section 377 of the penal code in India has been overturned, the point these authors echo in particular is the colonial project of adherence to gender and sexuality roles as a requisite for citizenship, and therefore at least a perceived inclusion into the colonial nation-state. As Gopinath points out \textit{a la} M. Jacqui Alexander, “heterosexuality is a prerequisite of ‘good citizenship,’ since it depends on the family as a reproductive unit through which the stability of gender roles and hierarchies is preserved. Heterosexuality, in other words, is fundamental to the way in which the nation imagines itself” (\textit{Impossible Desires}, 262). Implicit in this statement is that post-colonial regimes (which of course emerged out of and not separate from colonial ones) adopted the colonial means whereby the nation imagines itself, specifically in relation to preservation of “stable” gender roles. Thus, one of the most common backlashes from the Hindu Right in response to LGBT rights demonstrations or even (as Gopinath has famously documented in her book) through depictions of non-normative genders and sexualities in Bollywood and other public cultures, is that such displays are “unIndian” or “anti-Indian” (see Bhaskaran p 71, Gopinath p.), or are “vectors of this polluting Americanization” (Shah 53).

\textsuperscript{361} Vaid-Menon “When a Birth Certificate hijacks a body and tells it to speak or forever hold its peace” in \textit{It Gets Bitter Chapbook}.

\textsuperscript{362} Vaid-Menon, “Trans/Generation” in \textit{Ibid}.

\textsuperscript{363} \textit{Ibid}.
colonial project of gender. It further depicts both the cyclical flow entering inside from
without directed from sociocultural paradigms, and the flow from within, manifesting
without, inflicting hatred and violence, infecting gender on those around us—even in our
own families and communities.

This particular poem seems to elicit deep emotional responses from the audience
who become witnesses to a traumatic memory when Alok’s grandmother painfully blames
them for the violence enacted against them. Alok somberly recounts, that she calls them the
“biggest disappointment in her life.” But, in their reflection, Alok understands how gender
oppression has enacted its own violence on their grandmother.

You see, I come from a long legacy of women punished by men
who continue to push the man inside of me.
How good it feels for the hurt to hurt someone else.364

Alok refuses to call their grandmother transphobic, and instead finds “solidarity in
the silence.”365 In the performance of the poem, the audience may feel the sorrow and
lamentation Alok feels—not only to be victim, but to be caught in a systemic cycle of
violence much greater than any one or two individuals. As LeMaster importantly argues, a
paramount feature of a pedagogy of failure is its self-reflexivity such that one may become
more intricately and intimately aware of how one is complicit in the multi-faceted systems
of oppression. All are inextricably linked from these systems of dis/ease, thus no matter
how privileged or how underprivileged, all are in need of some form of healing from these
invisible forces of power. This echoes bell hooks’ assertion that education must be “about
healing and wholeness.”366 Similarly, for Battiste, to decolonize education is for indigenous

365 Ibid.
366 hooks, Teaching Community, 43.
people to embark on a “transformative journey, but this time it is not assimilative; it is a therapeutic education process of healing of the relationships within and among communities.” This kind of healing, connection, and decolonial activism is the work of DarkMatter and this is the possibility of a pedagogy of failure.

Reclaiming their own traditions, Alok and Janani look backwards to temples in India thousands of years old which depict images of queer and same-sex eroticism but have been hidden and largely forgotten. They boldly argue that part of colonization was enforcing gender binaries, and that transphobia began with Columbus—a time often marked as a turning point in “modernity,” yet marred by the mass genocide. DarkMatter’s turn backwards is a queer and trans turn, and also a decidedly decolonizing one in its remembering, reclaiming, and challenging dominant principles and logics of modernity.

This decolonizing-backwards turn opens an experience of trans-healing, a utopic hope and possibility in the energetic exchange between performers and audience. Though it can be a powerful experience to read the poignant, insightful poetry alone in a cozy armchair, the collective experience of coming together to learn and resist in solidarity is something else entirely. The radical queer potential Stryker describes feels more real than the systematic oppressions waiting for DarkMatter’s audience members when they leave the auditorium. That the group found its way to this “beige,” neoliberal university only to dismantle its multi-layered models of oppression instills hope even in the face of inevitable failure.

367 Battiste, Location 2118, Kindle Book.
Toward a Healing of/in Failure

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz discusses at length the utopic potentiality of failure. “The history of actually realized utopian enclaves is, from a dominant perspective, a history of failures. Hope and disappointment operate within a dialectical tension in this notion of queer utopia. Queerness’s failure is temporal and...potentially utopian.” He uses performer Dynasty Handbag as an example of “failure and bad sentiments” which are also “active political refusal.” To defend this claim, Muñoz utilizes Paolo Virno’s theory of ambivalence. Virno suggests that the laborer may employ “negative sentiments” such as cynicism and depression as an escape from capitalism’s values. Muñoz further argues that “Negative sentiments such as cynicism, opportunism, depression, and bitchiness are often seen as solipsistic, individualistic, and anticommmunal affective stances associated with an emotional tonality of hopelessness. Yet these bad sentiments can signal the capacity to transcend hopelessness. These sentiments associated with despondence contain the potentiality for new modes of collectivity, belonging in difference and dissent.” One can also view Ahmed’s “feminist killjoy” in this category of “failure and bad sentiments” which resist and disrupt the oppressive status quo.

It is this collectivity of difference and dissent that Alok and Janani are building through their performances. They name their tour #ItGetsBitter which is a cynical refusal of the famous campaign #ItGetsBetter started by cis gay white male Dan Savage. With a tone of confidence, mockery, and yes, bitterness, Alok and Janani recite their poem “It Gets Bourgie Project” read to Dan Savage in the format and style of a breakup letter to an abusive ex you can’t quite seem to shake.

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369 Ibid, 176-177.
“You see, Dan,
It’s so much easier to love yourself when you use the #equality filter
on Instagram and come out white!

What you forgot to mention is that it only gets better
if it gets bourgie.”³⁷⁰

They continue with sharp criticism and piercing sarcastic humor, feeding each other lines, overlapping, hopping energetically from one side of the stage to the other. The audience eats up the humor with roaring laughter and snaps of recognition. “These days you can’t tell the difference between a gay party and a cheesecake: they’re/ both rich, white, and bland.” They repeat “Dear Dan:” followed by an interrogation of who he is leaving out of the conversation and hopeful sentiment that “It gets better”:

What about the trans women of color who started Pride?
Oh darn! They couldn’t afford the cover fee to your party,
Didn’t have a good enough credit score for the Gay Visa Equality Card,
Guess the only change you believe in is the one in your bank account!³⁷¹

In an article for _Guernica_ magazine, Alok’s ultimate answer for “How do I help the transgender community?” is to “Be the kill-joy.”

When overcoming serious physical injury or surgery, it is quite common to complain that the healing process is more painful than the initial injury. Perhaps this is another paradox of trans-healing that part of the healing process is the experience of trauma itself. In their poem, “Trans/Generation,” Alok Vaid-Menon vulnerably asks their audience, “Can I show you what / it means for an entire body to be a wound? / Can I tell you what it feels like to / watch a gender rewind itself?”³⁷² Gender, body, and wound seem to be in a

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³⁷⁰ Vaid-Menon and Balasubramanian, “It Gets Bourgie” in _It Gets Better Chapbook_. Original emphasis.
³⁷¹ Ibid.
³⁷² Alok Vaid-Menon, “Trans/Generation” in Ibid.
contentious but interconnected relationship. Here, Vaid-Menon paints a portrait of a tenuous healing—one in which gender is a dis/ease and, when trans/ported to another time, or another understanding, can be a healing process.

When I interviewed Alok Vaid-Menon on their artistic process, activism, and healing for the purpose of gaining new insights into their performance, they shared with me their own articulation of healing:

For me healing is about developing a relationship with myself unmediated by the trauma and violence I experience. Because the violence I experience is constant, the healing work I have to do has to be constant. It’s cyclical in that way. Healing isn’t the same thing as happiness or even functionality, it’s about bearing witness, actually reckoning with. So many times I have to desensitize myself in order to get by. Healing is about re-sensitizing myself, falling apart so that I can build myself back together again. I’m not sure I believe in defining healing for other people. I think we have to break out of the idea that there’s one way to look/be/act "healed," (which is already always informed by ableism, racism, classism, transmisogyny, etc). I’m more interested in holding plurality: what does healing look like for you and how can I help you get there?373

Here, Alok articulates the violence of normativity they experience constantly which, for Alok, necessitates a trans-healing process. Part of this healing process, then, is a pedagogy of failure that affirms connectedness and hope while decolonizing the power structures which continue to enact violence. As Alok rightly states, it is important to break out of potentially oppressive formations of healing, which tend to be grounded in colonial structures that don’t consider systemic power in relation to dis/ease, nor the importance of addressing such structures in one’s healing process. Since my project intentionally resists static definitions of healing in order to honor the nuances of variation and the fluidity in individual healing processes, I argue only for healing possibilities and potential, based on articulations from queer and trans artists and arguments already asserted by pedagogical

373 Vaid-Menon, interview with Anna Winget, 19 April 2018, email transcript.
and decolonial scholars. I do not claim to have answers to what will bring transgender
death tolls down, but the fact that murders and suicides disproportionately happen to
transgender people (and especially those of color) demands a response that must include
discourse on healing—not only with hopes of prevention but also for those in the
community left grieving even as they continue to endure violence in daily life.

The experience of recognition between an audience member and performer during
an exchange of truth in which the audience member recognizes some of their own story/
feeling/experience in the words and energy from the performer has potential for healing
audience members, who feel understood, and performers, who feel seen and heard.
Furthermore, engaging university students on a level of aspiration toward a creative vision
of a world where trans people belong—while simultaneously deconstructing the
oppressive forces that seek to demean or annihilate trans people—is a significant
pedagogical tool. Students experience for a brief moment not the world as it is, but as it
could be, as it perhaps once was, as perhaps it should be once more. However, as
foundational trans scholar, David Valentine suggests, a trans pedagogy would not only offer
a utopic/deconstructing, revolutionary lens, but also weighs importance in the
particularities of varied experience. Indeed, Vaid-Menon and Janani argue that there are as
many genders as there are people. Furthermore, the heavy moment of violent shots ringing
out (literally in their opening poem, and in continuous reminders of acts of violence against
trans and PoC) also demands empathy for violence against the trans community, against
black and brown bodies who did not survive the violence that is gender.
Limits and Potentials of Healing in/ of Failure

It is important to acknowledge the work of Nat Raha who rightly points out that for some queer and trans and people of color, “at times healing may neither be possible nor desirable.” For instance, there were at least 27 trans people murdered in 2017 for whom healing is impossible. Raha refers to the need for a “cultivation of care enacted in the spaces we inhabit” when there can be no healing. The healing of queer and trans communities, in a sense, is a utopic project, but nevertheless, healing can be felt and experienced as real, powerful, and transformative. The work of the artistic healers about whom I write, including DarkMatter, takes material, emotional, and spiritual labor, and it is important to acknowledge their work and assess their impact on a scale free from arbitrary distinctions and violent binaries such as “success/failure,” “male/female,” “cure/illness.”

DarkMatter’s trans-healing is a decolonizing one and an effective example of a pedagogy of failure. Through their resistance, they encourage healing. For Alok Vaid-Menon, arts in particular hold tremendous significance. “I do think arts should become a core foundation of every creative person’s life because if it doesn’t, they live profoundly unhappy lives because there’s a sense of urgency to being an artist for many of us, where if we do not do this we do not live. I mean we might be existing but we’re not living, and it’s a really crucial distinction.” Thus, sharing their truth in a performance setting is a critical aspect of the healing potential for Vaid-Menon, and their example could likely inspire young people in the audience to follow suit.

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Their show closes with a call to action consistent with the decolonizing project of “connecting.” They urge the audience to see people in the world as friends, not as strangers. They tell them to organize with groups doing important work for racial justice and trans rights. They encourage them to their families about these issues, to listen to trans people. “Don’t let people die in social isolation.” This encouragement of connection is also a decolonizing aspect of their pedagogy of failure. Colonizing is dividing, separating, prompting individualism for capitalistic ends. For Battiste, part of decolonizing education is:

about restoring a balance in relationships and undoing the hegemonic authority over our lives. We are interdependent in our ecology and environment, and we will have to develop institutions, policies, and practices that go beyond signaling respect for cultural diversity and acknowledge their own interdependence with our place and the people of this place.

Battiste writes specifically from the prospective of an indigenous educator and theorist in Canada; however, perhaps we can extend the application of this powerful statement to UC Irvine, the very campus which houses a Cross-Cultural Center that hosted DarkMatter’s Resist! performance workshop.

Students who have been required to suppress their feelings, indigenous knowledge, desires, raw erotic power, and other impulses and predispositions in opposition to the university’s normative culture, could for a time, experience a trans utopia through DarkMatter’s trans poetics of resistance, solidarity, and empowerment. This experience can help facilitate healing from the violence of normativity at an individual level. Sharing in that with other students and with DarkMatter, while learning truths of oppression and how to challenge them works toward a similar healing at a collective level. The pedagogy of failure

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376 DarkMatter, my performance notes, UC Irvine. 7 May 2016.
377 Battiste, Decolonizing Education, Location 2123 Kindle Book.
employed by DarkMatter, then, works toward the decolonization of education, fostering a potential of trans-healing at individual and collective levels. Perhaps the success of DarkMatter’s pedagogy of failure can incite educators, administrators, policy makers, and various members of the university environment, to create more opportunities for “failure” and for trans-healing from the violence of normativity. Put another way, perhaps we can each and all commit to a trans-healing of/in failure.
CONCLUSION

A Pedagogy of Healing

Queer solo performance comes out of a sense of community and thus helps inform and shape our understanding of identity and community. – David Román, O Solo Homo

Healing is understanding all the factors in play...actually moving from self-blame to understanding all the factors in play. – D’Lo, interview

The disease of powerlessness thrives in my body, not just out there in society. And just as the use of gloves, masks, and disinfectants fails to kill this disease, government grants, equal rights opportunity programs, welfare, and food stamps fail to uproot racism, sexism, and homophobia. And tokenism is not the answer. Sharing the pie is not going to work. I had a bite of it once and it almost poisoned me. With mutations of the virus such as these, one cannot isolate the virus and treat it. The whole organism is poisoned. I stand behind whatever threatens our oppression. I stand behind whatever breaks us out of our bonds, short of killing and maiming. I stand with whatever and whoever breaks us out of our limited views and awakens our atrophied potentials. – Gloria Anzaldúa

Trans-Healing Reflections

A common thread that emerged throughout the case studies in this dissertation was the artists’ reclaiming and embracing aspects of their identities that are considered most abject by society’s normative borders. D’Lo titled his show D’FunQT (pronounced Defunct), defining “defunct” as no longer of use, without function or purpose. The artists of Living Mythologies chose some of the most contentious figures—even a kind of embodiment of death in Reyna Ripper’s case—to open space for possibilities of their healing. In the same vein, DarkMatter repeatedly encouraged their audience members to “be the killjoy” (referencing Ahmed).378 and Alok Vaid-Menon of DarkMatter advocated for “failing more.” Thus, the following theme in this dissertation has emerged: healing that empowers and builds community through failure. Part of the project, then, involves understanding the

trans-healing process to embrace paradoxes and seeming contradictions within oneself and one's community.

As both a theatre scholar and practitioner, my thinking has emerged from my own experiences with both community-based, healing-focused activist performance projects, such as creating the *Queer and Trans People of Color Festival* and *inQueery Arts Collective* at UCI. I have sought understanding to better understand how we—as scholars, educators, and theatre practitioners—might best *do the labor of trans-healing*. Two central theses about healing emerged: 1) the importance of locating knowledge subjugation practices both within medical fields and within the neoliberal university institution; and 2) for fields working with healing for performance (applied theatre, social justice theatre, drama therapy, etc.), to engage healing as a decolonizing process. Coloniality has made healing a subjugated knowledge, but as my research have shown, it is further subjugated in queer and trans PoC contexts. This project reframes healing by examining performance and activism that produced new (and/or reclaimed) healing modalities, and defining it in light of those who are the healed, rather than by “experts” and externally-imposed definitions. Thus, healing can be understood through conflict/paradox; it can be pain(ful), and sometimes even categorized as self-destructive by institutional normative standards. But, in fact, any of these states may be precisely what is necessary for a particular individual to heal. As queer scholar Allison Reed puts it, in her response to the complex work of Sharon Bridgforth, "What is toxic can be tonic, if cultivated wisely."\(^\text{379}\)

The urgency of such a performed reimagined blueprint has emerged from the ethical imperative to respond unequivocally and forcefully to what Eve Sedgwick refers to

as queer-eradicating impulses\textsuperscript{380} directed at queer subjects by society, and what critics of anti-blackness, such as Orlando Patterson, describe as the societal drive towards social death of the Other.\textsuperscript{381} We see these ideologies manifesting in the startling statistics shared in the introduction.\textsuperscript{382} When there is nowhere to survive and thrive (as activists say) in this racist, homophobic, transphobic world, you must create your own world. As queer of color theorist José Muñoz explains, “Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough.”\textsuperscript{383} Forging a space of discourse for queer and trans healing, in both performance and in scholarship, means opening up to the uncomfortable paradox of holding trauma, suffering, and what Munoz’ describes as the “melancholia”\textsuperscript{384} of queerness, while relentlessly, fiercely continuing to dream and fight for a better world more inclusive of queer, trans, and people of color.

**Implications for Theatre Pedagogy and Applied Theatre**

To be invited into a university to perform requires a certain amount of visibility and intelligibility in order to acquire funding. I note throughout the dissertation, that several of the artists about whom I write, for instance, have university degrees and/or carry some class privilege. Trans people of color lacking this privilege are often unseen or undervalued at university institutions. Chella Coleman of Living Mythologies, for instance, speaks about living “on skid row” in Los Angeles. It was Shruti Purkayastha, who holds a Master’s degree in Applied Theatre, and organized the group and coordinated a performance venue for Chella (and the other members of Living Mythologies) to share her story. I encourage

\textsuperscript{380} Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” 3.
\textsuperscript{381} See Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
\textsuperscript{382} More statistics and details can be found at the National Transgender Discrimination Survey \url{http://www.ustranssurvey.org} Accessed 20 November 2018.
\textsuperscript{383} Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.
\textsuperscript{384} Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, Part 1.
future scholarship that continues trans-healing in performance research with a broader pool of artists, including a variety of backgrounds and residences. Future scholarship on the implications of trans-healing performance work in communities with people who may not identify as artists or practice performance professionally ought to also be regarded as an important future scholastic endeavor. The question of accessibility and transmission of subjugated embodied knowledges is a further important point to be explored in future inquiries outside the scope of this dissertation. For instance, there is much grassroots healing work being done in trans communities today which, because they are minoritized, do not receive the acknowledgment, respect, or serious study in academic contexts.

A few other local artists who I hope to work with in the future and whose work in healing and performance has been influential to my research and theorizing trans-healing are Miss Barbie-Q, Jade Hambaro, Cherry Diggs, Ser Anzoategui, and Nicolette Ibarra. For this particular project, I became interested in artists performing in university contexts to consider how the artists trans the university with their performance, and who gets “allowed” in to trans the university. While this line of questioning isn’t at the center of my argument, it helped inform cross-disciplinary theorization into pedagogy, including considering the artists as pedagogues and knowledge producers as well as the relevance to university diversity politics.

Significantly, many of the scholars whose work was most resonant with the artists discussed in this dissertation have convincingly argued for the crucial role of pedagogy as part of healing, decolonizing, and activist processes. Furthermore, scholars working at the intersections of theatre and healing also find a pedagogical usefulness in their applied theatre work. A process of unfoldment and understanding can occur within the performer,
within the audience, and between them during energetic exchanges when, for instance, trauma is mirrored back to an audience member and seen in a new light. In *O Solo Homo*, David Román argues that “Queer solo work is usually pedagogical...[they] have something to teach us about what it means to be queer and how that aspect of their identity intersects with various other identity factors such as race—including whiteness—ethnicity, class, gender, and religion...Queer performance serves to educate queer audiences of all backgrounds even as it entertains us or mobilizes us politically.” 385 We certainly see the blatant positioning as “pedagogue” that DarkMatter took up in their university #ItGetsBitter Tour, in offering workshops to teach student resistance.

For the solo comic performer D’Lo, in particular, healing and understanding are closely intertwined. In my phone interview with him regarding his experiences of healing and performance, he reflects on the experience of healing from the trauma of his parents’ rejection:

Healing can...be like literally graduating from an understanding of a situation to another ... As a young queer person I had an understanding of my relationship with my parents right? But the healing came when instead of assuming that my parents were perfect because they were just elder to me...the healing then became my understanding of the fact that they were equally flawed human beings suffering from their own unpacked pain, issues, or whatever, right? So, when I realized that, I then could understand that this was not about me at the end of the day, necessarily. Yes, it was about me, but it was so much more about them, right? And that, just knowing that and understanding that was healing for me. And actually allowed me to understand them more in order to create healing for both of us.

He concludes his reflections stating, “healing is understanding all the factors in play...actually moving from self-blame to understanding all the factors in play.” 386 To understand is to be open to a new knowledge, a new consciousness, a new perspective. It is

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385 Hughes and Román (ed.), *O Solo Homo*, 5.
386 D’Lo, transcribed from a phone interview with Anna Winget, 20 December 2018.
neither to erase nor to transcend. For pedagogy scholars, bell hooks, Marie Battiste, as well as for M. Jacqui Alexander, Catherine Walsh, and Walter Mignolo, learning, healing, community connection, and decolonization all share important resonances that should be approached in conjunction with foster what Marie Battiste refers to as the “learning spirit.”

Unfortunately, for many QTIPoC university students, that “learning spirit” is often discouraged, marginalized, or even erased. As indigenous scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains: “I understood research as a set of ideas, practices and privileges that were embedded in imperial expansionism and colonization and institutionalized in academic disciplines, schools, curricula, universities and power,”387 Her experience of research, personally and in her communities, had been an exploitative process more than an educational one. While Tuhiwai Smith may be grounding her critique in social science traditions, the point is highly relevant to understand the institutional struggles many indigenous and PoC students face at the university. It is likewise significant for performance studies practitioners and researchers who write about, or work with, “objects of study” from populations different from their own.

In her important book, Critical Ethnography, performance studies and critical race scholar, Soyini Madison, writes on the responsibility of advocacy and ethics when working with “disadvantaged groups.” She writes, “As advocates, we aim for a cycle of responses that will set loose a stream of response-abilities that will lead to something more, something of larger philosophical and material effects.”388 As a scholar and theatre practitioner, it is important that the “aim” I intend is in support of the aims of the artists and thinkers I am writing about. I have attempted to decolonize my approach to performance

387 L.T. Smith, forward to Decolonizing Methodologies.
388 Madison, Critical Ethnography, 98.
studies analysis, practice, and writing in three primary ways: (1) decentering whiteness as a critical perspective while centering the artistic production, critical approaches, and experience of queer and trans people of color (2) queering the theory/practice binary by writing about artists as enactors and embodiments and producers of theoretical discourse, and (3) refocusing this scholarship upon openings while resisting closures.

When it comes to healing from one’s own whiteness, there is inevitably a point of uncertainty—what is the disease and what is the healing? Like a spoiled child used to having their way whenever they throw a tantrum, and suddenly being challenged, whiteness has been internalized to make white people feel justified in being the center of the universe; to change that Copernican center is undoubtedly painful, and not only for the duration of one occasion.\(^{389}\) Acknowledging the ways we have and do participate in and benefit from our whiteness is an important part of our healing. Much of this healing can be done in white spaces, without demanding the additional pedagogical labor from people of color. Shruti and Living Mythologies hosted a healing workshop at UC Irvine—open only to students identifying as QTIPoC—stating the importance of carving out some time for being among all, or predominantly POC, for their healing processes. White spaces are also important for healing, to avoid white fragility responses, to learn actively antiracist tactics and theories, and to honestly reflect on one’s privilege and the behavior that stems from that.

**Foundational Texts to Trans-Healing / Suggestions for Further Exploration**

Important to this dissertation have been texts which examine pedagogy in relation to resistance, community-building, and healing. For instance, bell hooks’ pedagogy series,

\(^{389}\) See DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why it’s so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism.*
and further developments on her foundational work, very much inspired by Paolo Freire, such as transgender communications scholar Benny LeMaster’s “pedagogy of failure,” and Marie Battiste’s decolonial pedagogy, *Decolonizing Education: Cultivating the Learning Spirit* have provided crucial theoretical contributions. Each of these cases centralize the minoritarian experience while insisting upon openings to allow subjugated knowledges to emerge. Though not an explicitly pedagogical text, Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh’s important new work, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, privileges pedagogy as an important decolonial praxis. M. Jacqui Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing* shares this view. Furthermore, community, connection, a feelings-based, spirituality that affirms the interconnectedness of creation and each other, as well as parallels between understanding and healing were all key concepts from these works that became foundational to this dissertation.

In a performance studies context, I gained much from the field of applied theatre (both scholarship and practice), which is very much concerned with “possibilities” that may emerge through performance, particularly writings and contexts which focused on decolonizing strategies, ethical concerns, and trauma narratives. *Applied Theatre: International Case Studies and Challenges for Practice* edited by Monica Prendergast and Juliana Saxton is an ambitious, broad collection of theories and case studies, useful for a breadth of foundational knowledge about current and historical uses of applied theatre. The authors outline six different contexts for applied theatre: theatre in health education, theatre for development, prison theatre, community-based theatre, museum theatre, and reminiscence theatre. The final section on ethics includes a reminder for facilitators of

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LeMaster, “Pedagogies of Failure.”
applied theatre to continuously reflect on their positionality and practice, as well as a reminder of Conquergood’s four “ethical pitfalls”: The Custodian’s rip-off, the Enthusiast’s Infatuation, The Curator’s Exhibitionism, and the Skeptic’s Cop-Out, which I have considered in both my research and practice and in conjunction with a whiteness critique.

Applied theatre literature is vast in scope and context but the fundamental link of connection is the notion that applied theatre practitioners are in the business of using theatre to “make a difference.” Though most authors today address the inevitable ethical dilemmas that emerge from theatre practitioners working with “vulnerable” populations, more scholarship is needed to address more nuanced questions and concerns that emerge within specific community groups and in specific geographical regions. I hope to see more engagement with critical race studies scholarship, queer and trans theories, and decolonial theories and practices, and further case studies with queer, trans, and intersex people of color. Without such interventions, there is a risk of perpetuating systematic oppression, however unwittingly, and increasing instead of mitigating trauma. In my role as an ally in QTIPoC spaces, I’ve found huge mistrusting toward white organizers who try to “make a difference” with various social justice tools, often based on negative experiences these communities have had in the past, such as white people co-opting PoC spaces.

In my research, works that I found to start bridging this gap include a Master’s Thesis from Concordia University by Carlos Wilson titled “Narrative Therapy and Playback Theatre into a Drama Therapy Intervention for LGBT Adolescents,” though its survey

392 Prendergast and Saxton (eds), Applied Theatre, 6.
population is limited and it does not explicitly enough factor race into these documented experiences; Alexandra Sutherland’s important, culturally specific research which utilizes mad studies, arguing for decolonial practices in dramatherapy work in South Africa (with implications in other contexts, too); and James Thompson’s *Performance Affects* which, particularly in his chapters on trauma, argues for a culturally specific (and sensitive) “storytelling,” which may include no “story” in the western traditional sense. He argues for the importance to recognize that the trauma experienced by a particular group of people and the *story* about that trauma is *culturally specific and individualized*.

Thompson’s work inspired me to look deeper into trauma studies and the potentially overlapping frameworks between trauma theories and performance theories of applied theatre. I thus examined radical psychology studies that have focused primarily on the trauma and resilience of trans people, and especially those of color. Of this body of work, the most relevant for this dissertation proved to be Christopher Shelley’s research which was the result of hundreds of interviews with self-identifying trans people, *Transpeople: Trauma, Repudiation, and Healing*. An important contribution to trauma studies is an article in *Traumatology* by Anneliese A. Singh and Vel S. McKleroy, “‘Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act’: The Resilience of Transgender People of Color Who Have Survived Traumatic Life Events.” From their interviews, they discovered the following common themes (which my own research has corroborated and which was foundational for my development of “trans-healing”):

(a) pride in one’s gender and ethnic/racial identity, (b) recognizing and negotiating gender and racial/ethnic oppression, (c) navigating relationships with family, (d) accessing health care and financial resources, (e) connecting with an activist
transgender community of color, and (f) cultivating spirituality and hope for the future.\textsuperscript{393}

In a healing performance context, the particular areas of interest are points (a), (b), (e), and (f). Making similar connections in a university context, Alex Kulick et. al have an important new contribution published in the \textit{Journal of Homosexuality} in 2017, “Heterosexism, Depression, and Campus Engagement Among LGBTQ College Students: Intersectional Differences and Opportunities for Change,” which explicitly addresses the “complex trauma”\textsuperscript{394} queer students of color experience on campus. Finally, as an arts therapist, Owen Paul Karcher has written an important decolonizing intervention into the arts therapies field with his article, “Sociopolitical Oppression, Trauma, and Healing: Moving Toward a Social Justice Art Therapy Framework” published in the journal, \textit{Art Therapy}. These therapists all move toward definitions of healing that resist normative frameworks and attempt to reposition the focus from pathology to empowerment. Shelley's book engages in theoretical discourse toward an articulation of a transgender “self” which may be unified or shattered, must hold contradictions, and may be fluid or fixed—most important for Shelley is that the trans subject is in control of their articulations of their own selfhood.

**Trans-healing and Im/Possibility as In Process**

I have discussed throughout the dissertation the importance of insisting on “openings” for decolonizing and for healing. Sara Ahmed further describes the institutional (and therefore white) need to jump to solutions once the moment of realization yields discomfort, and argues for the need to remain open to critique. She explains that when she’s

\textsuperscript{393} Singh and McKleroy, " Just Getting Out of Bed is a Revolutionary Act," 36.

\textsuperscript{394} This term is coined by Ginwright to describe oppressive experiences of marginalized social categories, processes, and structural organization. See 1126-1127 of this article.
spoken on the phenomenology of whiteness to white audiences, the dialogue often turns to where/ how can things be undone? Yet, Ahmed warns, “If we want to know how things can be different too quickly, then we might not hear anything at all.”

I take “too quickly” to mean the temptation to escape discomfort of statistical evidence about the rate trans people of color are dying, before allowing an opening where new understanding, new awareness, new connections may emerge. If the inner and outer critiques don’t continue through the social action white folks take as allies, then their action may become more about assuaging their guilt, or putting themselves in a savior position to feel a sense of purpose or superiority, rather than about engaging in ethical listening that truly reorients the thoughts, feelings, opinions, and experiences of people of color to a central focus. As a white person, this is necessary work if I am interested in assisting people of color in their healing processes.

Sara Ahmed argues that the process of critique in the case of whiteness is more valuable than uncovering a “solution.”:

In not being promising, in refusing to promise anything, such an approach to whiteness can allow us to keep open the force of the critique. It is by showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine in “the what” of the world, that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes, without using that possibility to displace our attention to the present, and without simply wishing for new tricks.

Here, Ahmed describes a process-based approach to what we might call a social healing, or healing on a social level, answering how white people might make steps toward restorative justice and social change, as allies. Without this un-doing work, and even in the midst of this habit-changing work, white people perpetuate systems of violence against people of

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395 Ahmed, 165.  
396 Ibid, my emphasis.
color, even if unwittingly. We must diligently heal ourselves of this participation, and continue to heal ourselves as we forge ahead in the necessary ally work to improve the lives of people of color, and among them, trans people.

And yet, in the featured artists’ engagement with failure, trauma, and dis/ease, audiences and scholars are also pushed to asked: When one’s social death (Patterson)\(^{397}\) or what Ahmed refers to (a la Fanon) as “not being”\(^{398}\) engages in a process to heal oneself and one’s community, is there any hope? For the abject members of society who are featured in this dissertation, hope is necessary, but is necessarily not a passive notion or wish,\(^{399}\) but rather an act. A performance. As decolonial scholar and educator, Marie Battiste puts it: “EDUCATION IS THE BELIEF IN POSSIBILITIES...It can sustain colonization in neo-colonial ways or it can decolonize...Teaching is the psychology of hope, and hope is a cause and a consequence of action...Teaching creates the infrastructure of the art of the impossible.”\(^{400}\)

The “performances of hope” I’ve included, are inherently pedagogical, although I only explicitly delve into the pedagogical nature of them in chapter 3. As pedagogical case studies, they hold deeper meanings of possibilities in educational contexts—whether that be on a stage, in a classroom, or in the streets.

Possibility is about finding, making, demanding openings where there have been closures. It is a utopia in the face of its counterpart, “impossibility.” In the preceding pages, each artist has a different ideology, perspective, and method from which they work and for

\(^{397}\) Patterson, *On Slavery and Social Death*, introduction.

\(^{398}\) Ahmed, “The Phenomenology of Whiteness.”

\(^{399}\) “Passive notion” or “wish” is not to be confused with “imagination” which, as I show throughout the dissertation, can have great healing and decolonizing potential. The emphasis here is on “passive” which is a kind of blind acceptance of “the way things are.” One can act-ively resist this, even only on the level of imagination. In fact, Leela Fernandes refers to that kind of act as a type of labor.

\(^{400}\) Battiste, Location 3470-80, Kindle Book, original caps.
which they live, but what they all share is that they use performance to open a space for possibility. I recognize and honor the queer performance theorists such as José Muñoz and Jill Dolan, along with queer feminist theorists such as Leela Fernandes and Susan Stryker who have argued convincingly for the utopic potential of performance (meant both as a theatrical staging and as an activist cultural production).

I have found the most useful works toward an articulation and broadened understanding of such possibilities for community and healing in queer and trans communities, have come out of queer black feminism, theories of failure, and decolonial theories. Queer black feminist writers were integral to my critique of recent contributions to psychology, drama therapy, and applied theatre. As a queer white scholar writing a dissertation about healing that centralizes trans people of color, it was often tempting to quickly pass over the artists’ suffering, and painful relationships toward death and destruction, toward offering my readers (and myself) a “healing possibility.” However, as part of my “ethical listening” methodology, it became clear that to engage in such hasty scholarship was to submit to the discomfort which emerged from the very whiteness I am trying to critique in performance healing contexts. Certainly, my critique remains imperfect and my own healing from phenomenological whiteness remains in process. This dissertation has been part of my own praxis toward such a healing process.

Part of what I mean by my healing (and therefore my critique) being in process is that when it comes to the relationship between disease and healing, life and death, my research unearthed more questions than answers, and the relevance of the research turned more toward feelings, subjective experiences, and spiritualities, than to rational logic, factual data, and material realities. One such open-ended question was posed by a black
trans woman and performer of Living Mythologies, Chella Coleman—who in her performance, riffing on Audre Lorde, turned to the audience and asked—“Self-care is an act of revolution, but what happens when self-care looks more like self-destruction? What if you can’t tell the difference?”

I don’t think it’s necessary to answer poignant and impossible questions like this, but it is crucial to open spaces where they can be asked and engaged with. That is an important part of what I hope to some extent this dissertation accomplishes—asking questions that, because of transmisogyny, racism, homophobia, white fragility, ableism, or other oppressive reasons, are shut down, suppressed, ignored, or erased. I invite my readers to continue sitting in the discomfort that comes from being confronted with one’s privilege. Perhaps new understanding will even emerge that has no bearing in language or the rational mind, but is nevertheless felt and real. Such an understanding is how people, regardless of background or identity markers, can themselves experience “trans-healing.”

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