

*Relajo y Jotería: Reimagining Family, Devotion, and Desire through the Work of
Teatro Alebrijes, 2011-2022*

A dissertation submitted by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Theatre and Performance Studies

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

February 2024

Adviser: Noe Montez

Abstract:

“Relajo y Jotería: Reimagining Family, Devotion, and Desire through the work of Teatro Alebrijes, 2011-2022” explores the relationship between history and embodied practice through queer adaptations that Mexican pageant plays that recount the nativity of Christ. This project makes a necessary intervention in the discourse of contemporary Latinx theater about the West Coast by highlighting queer practitioners and illuminating the extensive archive of Queer Latinx performances in San José, California. Specifically, this documents and analyzes the psychic and social impact of the Teatro Alebrijes’ parodic pastorela adaptations. Over the last decade, Teatro Alebrijes has joyfully imagined and modeled new expressions of devotion, formations of kinship, and understandings of desire for their audience through their queer Christmas tradition.

Acknowledgments:

I could not have undertaken this journey without my advisor's steadfast, robust support and mentorship, so I want to acknowledge the patience and generosity with which Noe Montez has encouraged the development of this project. I am deeply indebted to committee members Kareem Khubchandani, Lily Mengesha, and Deborah Vargas for their feedback and guidance. I am grateful to the Tufts Department of Theater Dance and Performance Studies graduate faculty, including Heather Nathans, Barbara Wallace-Grossman, Laurence Senelick, and David Krasner.

I developed sections of this project at convenings for the American Society for Theatre Research. Chapter Five began as an idea for Matthew McMahan and Maria DiSimone's 2022 "Comedy Studies Working Group" and Chapter Two in Jon Rosini and Patricia Ybarra's 2019 "Latinx Publics" working group. *Ecumenica: Journal of Theater and Performance* published early sections of Chapter One. Sections of Chapter Two appear in an essay published in *The Routledge Companion to Latinx Theatre and Performance*. The Research in Theater & Performance Dissertation Boot Camp provided opportunities for focus and feedback. Research librarians, especially Chao Chen and Kate Steffens, played a vital role in developing this work. The Center for Humanities at Tufts supported this project with a Dissertation Fellowship.

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the ensemble members of Teatro Alebrijes, who welcomed me into the group and shared their homes, thoughts, artistry, and laughter with me. Finally, I want to thank my mother, Gilda Figueroa, who instilled in me a lifelong love of performance as well as a commitment to teaching and learning, and my father, Javier Ponce Hurtado, who modeled devotion to faith, family, and laughter as a lifelong praxis.

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Introduction: Relajo, Jotería, Memory, History

A *pastorela* is a Catholic pageant play. These plays narrate the story of a community of shepherds on a pilgrimage to pay their respects to the newborn Christ child. Audiences witness as devils confront shepherds who are traveling to Bethlehem. The devil (and frequently devils) tempts them to stray from the path. The devil's antics are repeatedly thwarted by an angel, usually by the archangel Saint Michael, which traditionally leads to a spectacular battle where heaven and the angels triumph. Ultimately, the shepherds arrive safely at the manger and bestow gifts and tributes onto the newborn Messiah and the holy family. The play is a popular production staple for multiple Latinx theatre companies across the United States and México and has been since the late 1970s. Before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down theatre globally, at least seven Latinx theatre companies across the Southwestern United States produced adaptations of *pastorelas*.¹

This project pushes back against a reactionary narrative about Latinx theatre that frames it overwhelmingly as emergent from or an extension of experiences of social injustice. Instead, through this dissertation, I argue that Teatro Alebrijes is a product of the legacy of Latinx theater in San José that emerges at the crux of performance, survival, and social justice. It is also nurtured and produced accidentally and communally through social groups that gather for beauty pageants, pride parades, and holiday parties. This dissertation highlights the emergence of performance from social and recreational spaces like community centers and gay bars, an

¹ Some U.S. based theatre companies that produced a *pastorela* in 2019 include: El Teatro Campesino (San Juan Bautista, CA); Teatro Vivo (Austin, TX); TuYo Theatre (San Diego, CA); Teatro Máscara Mágica (San Diego, CA); La Gran Pastorela de Belén (Socorro, NM); Teatro Audaz (San Antonio, TX); New Carpa Theatre Co. (Tempe, AZ); and Teatro Alebrijes (San José, CA).

important legacy of Latinx theatre in California and the United States. I suggest that the work of Teatro Alebrijes is significant because it is evidence of a trajectory that is not rooted in the Chicano movement of the 1970s, and instead traces a queer nightlife genealogy through drag pageants and informal gatherings.

Because of the multitude of Chicanx/Latinx theater companies that emerged in response to the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, there is a trend toward understanding and making Latinx theatre legible through a rubric of struggle. Queer Latinx performance is missing from the archive of the Chicano Movement. Likewise, Latinx performance history is also limited in the history of Queer Liberation in California. While I respect the urgency and importance of the Latinx and Queer theater and performance that emerged between 1960 and 1970 and their necessary intervention in the history of performance traditions in the United States, I intend to highlight a different history through this project.

One of the critical interventions of this project is the investment in San José, California, as a binding site for Mexican/Chicanx/Latinx performance. San José's contributions to Latinx performance go ignored in favor of documenting performance that emerges in other major coastal performance markets like the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles metropolitan area. If not ignored for larger markets with more revenue-generating LORT houses, then San José's history is overlooked in favor of the ultra-rural communities, where the aim is not revenue but social change. Throughout this project, I assert that San José is an essential site for Latinx Theater and offer an extended analysis of Teatro Alebrijes's first decade of work as one case study. This project adds to the limited scholarship about San José by focusing on the work of Teatro Alebrijes in a historical moment where it is easy to cast minoritarian artists as reactionary.

This project insists that queer Latinx performance can be revolutionary while imagining, living in, and creating joy. In the following chapters, I explore how Teatro Alebrijes's work adds to the discourses of modernity, activism, gender performance, affect, desire, and laughter. The following paragraphs highlight my efforts, chapter by chapter.

Chapter One pays explicit attention to the devil's dramaturgical function across the history of theatre as it emerges in México. I trace the dramaturgical cartography of the shifts that this archetype undergoes across time and, eventually, through the work of Teatro Alebrijes what happens as it disappears. I argue that by transcribing the antagonist's labor onto various other characters and eventually omitting the devil outright, Teatro Alebrijes illuminates how the devil has been a substitute, or a metaphor for the structural violence of capitalism. Teatro Alebrijes uplifts the importance of queer joy and kinship in surviving systemic violence.

Through an engagement with the LGBTQ Archives at San José State University, Chapter Two traces the roots of activism and drag in the Latinx community from the 1960s to the present. This chapter highlights how drag performance and nightlife spaces have historically provided resources for communities to perform care work to support each other. By tracking the legacy of nightlife fundraising, from informal fundraising drag collective to Casa de San José, to the annual queer pastorela adaptations produced by Teatro Alebrijes, I show how the queer Latinx community in San José has survived for a decade in a nation that is openly hostile to many of the intersecting identities that make up the ensemble (queer, monolingual Spanish speakers, non-citizens). Through my engagement with archival material, this chapter also theorizes loss, archival absence, and its impact on my investment in queer Latinx theater historiography.

Chapter Three interrogates the labor of devotion within monastic orders to feature these acts of labor as central to a practice of devotion that would one day lead to their utopia. This chapter understands the pastorelas of Teatro Alebrijes as acts of devotion to their community and investments in joy and liberation. To this end, I argue that gender play, and investment in sanctifying what I call a “quotidian diva” in their works, Teatro Alebrijes practices their devotional labor in ways that mirror the mendicant devotees that initially brought the pastorela to the Americas—like self-fashioning, performing acts of care and repetition, and exalting ancestors of a tradition—but I contend that these two parties do so to very different ends. In doing so, the work of Teatro Alebrijes also contributes to an expanding range of stock characters circulating in contemporary Latinx theater. The quotidian diva shifts the way women are allowed to come alive onstage beyond a virgin/whore and male/female binary.

Chapter Four is an exploration of queer desire in the work of Teatro Alebrijes. In this chapter, I argue that these plays are an important, early addition to a queer Latinx archive of plays for the ways they stage queer desire. This chapter offers close readings of pastorelas in three distinct groups: the “traditional” pastorelas that follow a highly recognizable pastorela narrative frame, the Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) pastorelas—crafted as children’s tales—and their *Villancicos* plays, which do away with the traditional pastorela framework in favor of the family comedy format.

Chapter Five uses ethnographic data and scholarship from humor studies to analyze Teatro Alebrijes’ use of comedy as a strategy for survival and to salve trauma in the wake of the COVID-19 lockdown. As a member of the cast for their 2021 production, which performed a live, limited run just as the Omicron variant was gaining a foothold in California, I experienced

the impact that the laughter and levity in their pastorela had on the audience and this small ensemble of performers. We leaned into the absurd to make ourselves and our audiences laugh at and laugh through the catastrophic toll the pandemic has had on the Latinx community in California. This chapter narrates my experience as a co-performative witness to the pandemic and the artistic process of Teatro Alebrijes.

Pastorelas: A Brief Overview

The origins of pastorelas are sometimes attributed to Early Modern English morality plays like the Wakefield Cycle's *Second Shepherds' Play*. While these two performance traditions share some transatlantic similarities, this play diverges from the pastoral comedies of the late Middle Ages. The pastorelas in México began as a liturgical puppet show invested in modeling the importance of willpower and kinship, as well as the consequences of expressing desire or devotion that fall outside the bounds of the Catholic Church's edicts. Over the years, devout and secular performance troops have adapted and performed pastorelas in their communities. Sometimes, adaptations fortified faith in the church congregations; other times, these plays fortified the coffers of early impresarios who would take this familiar story on tour to make a living.²

In California, evidence of pastorelas performances dates back to as early as 1833.³ When this nativity play was brought to México by missionaries, the play's action departed from

² José Soledad "Chole" Aycardo was one of the first Mexican clowns to make a living as a touring clown in México. In the mid-1800s, Aycardo toured a pastorela around Mexico City, according to Armando de María y Campos and Sergio Lopez Sanchez. For more, see María y Campos, *Los Payasos Poetas Del Pueblo*, 114.

³ Turn Verein Hall, "Grand Performance of the Spanish Play Pastores," in *Los Angeles Herald* (California Digital Newspaper Collection, University of California, Riverside, February 13, 1883).

previous investments in the comedic or reverential performances of devotion to Christ. Instead, the pastorela proliferating in México—beginning as a liturgical puppet show—invests in modeling the importance of willpower, the cisgender and heterosexual kinship formations, and the consequences of deviant expressions of desire or devotion. In the Americas, pastorelas became a model for acceptable comportment concerning kinship, devotion, and desire under the purview of the Catholic Church. Throughout the dissertation, I argue that adaptations performed by Teatro Alebrijes refuse the archive of extant works from which they might draw in favor of crafting new narratives about devotion, desire, and kinship that reframes them through what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz terms a “complete life” outside of compulsory, hegemonic frameworks like masculinity or heterosexuality.⁴ In *Cruising Utopia*, one of Muñoz’s arguments is that a “complete life”—a life in which one is allowed access to one’s basic needs and desires—is not promised to people who choose not to produce children.

The pastorela reinforces heteronormative dominance by including explicitly staged moments where procreation yields rewards and resources. This ranges from performative gestures of devotion like a pilgrimage, song, dances, and prayers, or practical material resources, like live animals, blankets, lard, honey, spoons, and blood pudding.⁵ A clear example is the shepherds’ arrival in Belén (Bethlehem). Upon seeing the newborn Christ child, this group of travelers will perform songs and dances for the holy family before doling out gifts to celebrate the child’s birth and exalts of the holy couple. The pastorela offers audiences a pathway to this normative notion of a complete life and buttresses these frameworks with gifts and promises for

⁴ Jose Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 98.

⁵ Litvak and Vega, *El Nacimiento Del Niño Dios*, 2.

those who adhere to their mandates. Pastorelas exist within a constellation of performance traditions and alongside a legacy of adaptations that cross borders because of colonization, religious conquest, or globalization. As such, this project intervenes in academic and in-the-field conversations around queer adaptations, theatrical traditions of the Mexican diaspora, and contemporary scholarship about queer kinship, desire, and worship.

My use of “complete life” to describe the work of Alebrijes signals an investment in queer performance theory that interrogates the utopian possibilities of embodied practice. Jose Estebán Muñoz and Jill Dolan’s scholarship heavily influenced this project—Muñoz and Dolan both write about the utopian potential of performance. I also bring this sensibility to bear upon conversations in religious studies, specifically through an engagement with the texts of John Cassian, Benedict of Nursia, Francis of Assisi, and Bonaventure, which provide foundations for monastic and mendicant devotional practice. I interpret the ritual and embodiment of the Alebrijes pastorelas through the work of Amy Hollywood, Kris Trujillo, and Niki Kasumi Clements. My analysis of monastic and mendicant devotional practice through these contemporary scholars allows me to attend to these texts through an optic that privileges a reading of queer, feminist, and US Latinx lived experiences.

Throughout my dissertation, two terms come up consistently, and both words carry a distinct legacy that shapes how I collected and interpreted data for this project. The first is *relajo*. This word has been in my family's lexicon for generations. I remember parents, grandparents, uncles, and great aunts warning my siblings, cousins, and myself when we were being loud, making a mess, or, more than likely, doing both, not to make “*un relajo*.” I understood this word to have a flexible meaning that generally denoted chaos within the context of my fieldwork with

Teatro Alebrijes. Teatro Alebrijes used *relajo* to describe a spectrum of performance events, from spatial configurations onstage or outbursts during rehearsal, to eruptions of laughter or chaos outside of rehearsal.

In an academic context, I first encountered the word *relajo* through the work of Race, Gender, and Performance scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez. In the text, *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement*, Broyles-Gonzalez turns to the work of Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla, whose 1966 treatise, *Fenomenología del relajo*, offers a sustained engagement with *relajo*. Portilla understands *relajo* as one end of a binary spectrum of social and performance phenomena in which people, motivated by modernity, either invest in suspending seriousness or clenching to it as a way to create order in society. Philosophy scholar Carlos Alberto Sánchez's book, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla*, offers a deep engagement with Portilla's text and the first English translation of Portilla's treatise. Sánchez's work explores *relajo* for its liberatory potential, a potential which I could also identify in the moments of *relajo* experienced with or recounted to me by the ensemble members of Teatro Alebrijes.

The second term that I engage in throughout this dissertation is *jotería*. For this project, my working definition comes from the articulation shared with me by members of Teatro Alebrijes. In conversations during field research, ensemble members have defined *jotería* as a collective of affective responses to modes of dress, gestures, and acts which engender joy, inspire fantasy, and fortify networks of kinship formation.

Jotería, according to members of Teatro Alebrijes, is also methodology, a way to make a life that celebrates gender expression and queerness. *Jotería* is an expression of embodied

freedom, the ultimate act of respect for yourself and those around you.⁶ In foregrounding the theories of the members of Teatro Alebrijes, I respond to Gloria Anzaldúa's call to action in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, "Listen to what your jotería is saying."⁷ *Jotería y relajo* are the frameworks I use to examine embodied memory, self- and collective preservation, ensemble theater-making methods, adaptation, and humor. Anzaldúa's provocation has invited abundant scholarship and a network of activists and artists called to respond to the world through a *joto/a/x* subjectivity.

Jotería also serves as an analytic complement to the ethnographic research methods I used to collect data for this project. Ethnic Studies Scholar Michael Hames-Garcia identifies "face-to-faceness" as a central characteristic of Jotería studies, an emergent field that centers a *jota/o/x* subjectivity across the arts and social sciences.⁸ This "face-to-faceness" evokes an ethnographic ethos, or what performance ethnographers D. Soyini Madison and Dwight Conquergood have called "co-performative witnessing," where "witnessing meant a shared temporality, bodies on the line, soundscapes of power, dialogic inter-animation, political action, and matters of the heart."⁹ Performance is crafted, embodied, and exchanged live. Ethnographic methods position this project as a way to think and create with a community. To both co-perform,

⁶ Private correspondence between members of Teatro Alebrijes via text, March 2023.

⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 85.

⁸ Hames-García, "Jotería Studies," 137.

⁹ Madison, "CO-PERFORMATIVE WITNESSING", 827.

as citizens and artists, and as a means to uplift these artists as “coproducer(s) of knowledge”¹⁰ This project’s investment in a “face-to-faceness” also required me to lean into oral history to capture memory which, as queer Central American oral historian Horacio Roque Ramirez notes, requires “patience and tenacity, a certain naiveté” and that “like mine, many of our projects are late... because memory is about history and history is about survival—mine, my family’s, my community, my peoples...”¹¹ In the chapters that follow, I will begin by offering an analytical framing for that chapter through the interpretive lens of *relajo*, *jotería* or both.

Data collected for this project happened in three distinct moments that shaped my research. I spent time with the ensemble in person before the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 nationwide lockdown, I shared regular digital space with the company via Zoom and social media before returning to San José for in-person gatherings as restrictions were lifted, “post”-COVID-19 lockdowns.¹² The pandemic impacted our temporal sensibilities, bodies, and hearts: “Co-performative witnessing is to live in and spend time in the borderlands of contested identities where you speak ‘with’ not ‘to’ others and where your (and their) ethnographic interlocutors are as co-temporal in the report and on stage as they were in the field.”¹³

Ethnographic methods allow for an exploration of what performance studies scholar Diana Taylor cites as “the repertoire” or “embodied memory.” Fieldwork where I collected interviews,

¹⁰ Jose Esteban Muñoz refers to Luis Alfaro as a “coproducer of knowledge” in the essay “Queer Theatre, Queer Theory: Luis Alfaro’s *Cuerpo Politizado*” in *The Queerest Art: Essays on Lesbian and Gay Theater*, ed. Solomon and Framji (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Roque Ramirez, “My Community,” 91.

¹² To date, the CDC is still using the word “pandemic” to describe the scope of the spread and impact of the COVID-19 virus even after declaring an end to the “Public Health Emergency” on May 11, 2023.

¹³ Madison, “CO-PERFORMATIVE WITNESSING”, 828.

attended and participated in the rehearsal, cooked and shared meals with the company, cried, laughed, and performed took place in formal and quotidian contexts between 2017 and 2023.

While performance ethnography has allowed me to understand power, affect, and history in and on the body, it was also essential to understand how these things manifested as structures of power and movements across time. Therefore, this project is simultaneously rooted in performance historiography that is deeply indebted to the archive, which Taylor deftly complicates by highlighting the “myths” of archival stability before noting that the archive and the repertoire “usually work in tandem and... alongside other systems of transmission.”¹⁴ The following archival visits were instrumental in shaping how I understood the context of the theater-making practices and performances I witnessed and co-performed throughout this process. My archival site visits include El Teatro Campesino Archives and the Tony Curiel Papers at California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives at UC Santa Barbara; the Juan B. Rael collection of nativity plays at Stanford University’s Special Collections and University Archives; and multiple visits to the LGBTQ Archives at San José State’s Special Collections and Archives.

¹⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 21.

Chapter 1: A Lingering Promise: Staging the Devil in Pastorelas from Post-Invasion México to Present-Day California

Some of my earliest experiences of live performance are pastorelas. As a child, I was an audience member for multiple productions of El Teatro Campesino's (ETC) adaptation, *La Pastorela*. Later, as a young actor and make-up artist, I played multiple roles and designed make-up for this show for many years. What lives most vividly in my memory is not the nativity, the shepherds, or the angels' majesty. My most vivid memories are the spectacular antics of the devils. In performance, the actors who played devils would sit, stand next to, or stare at audience members while the play's main action transpired center stage. These micro-performances transform witnesses into participants and invite people to think about what it means to watch as they "enjoyed the show." Their low-stakes invitation to acknowledge their participation in the spectacle made watching the show a dynamic, multivalent, shared sensorial experience. ETC's *La Pastorela* was performed inside a mission church until 2019. The acting company that remained (actors playing angels or shepherds) was hidden from the audience's view unless they were actively performing in a scene. However, the devils were encouraged and directed to engage with the space in otherwise inappropriate or unconventional ways.

I remember being asked to jump, scream, and slither along the church floor when I played a devil. These actions would have been disruptive or transgressive if I were to perform them in the same space during mass. What made playing a devil so much fun was the recognition that we were encouraged to transgress expectations for normative behavior in the space. What follows is an exploration of the utility of the devil as a symbol across the development of a

theatrical tradition in México post-colonization, and the tradition of embodying transgression via the devil across time to theorize a phenomenon that emerges in the Teatro Alebrijes adaptations, where the devil disappears.

Between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, plays about Christ's nativity and shepherds were abundant across Europe.¹⁵ However, as I noted earlier, pastorelas have distinct roots in México. Chicana literary scholar Norma Cantú's extended analysis of the pastorela genre highlights the lack of a pastorela "ancestor text" from Spain. However, the origin of many of the early texts collected across the Southwestern United States have traceable origins that extend back to the conquest of México. Those texts share elements of both religious and secular dramas rooted in early liturgical dramas of Early Spain.¹⁶ In the Americas, these plays began as puppet shows.¹⁷ According to medieval theater scholar Robert Potter, "the very earliest theatrical records of post-conquest México document a Christmas time performance of *Los Pastores* for Spanish soldiers garrisoned in what is now México City on January 9, 1526."¹⁸ Puppets and puppeteers circulated the lore of the Catholic Church by providing entertainment. In addition to enslaved

¹⁵ Plays about shepherds and Christ's nativity in Europe also include works like the German *Erlau* plays, which include the nativity *Play at the Cradle of Christ* and *Play of the Three Magi*. However, the earliest emergence of these plays can be found in Spain at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century. By the fifteenth century, Spain produced multiple cycle plays about Christ's birth that focus on shepherds and some, like *Égloga de Fileno, Zambardo y Cardonio* (1509) by Spanish playwright Juan del Encina, begin to move toward more secular stories about the lives of shepherds.

¹⁶ Latinx literary scholar Norma Cantú uses the term "ancestor text" in her dissertation. For a more in-depth discussion of the genealogy and development of the pastorelas as a genre across Europe and the Americas, see Cantu, Norma Elia, "THE OFFERING AND THE OFFERERS: A GENERIC ILLOCATION OF A LAREDO 'PASTORELA' IN THE TRADITION OF SHEPHERDS' PLAYS (SPAIN, MEXICO, TEXAS)" (Ann Arbor: ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1982).

¹⁷ For more, see: Beezly, "Introduction: Mexican Puppets as Popular and Pedagogical Diversions," in *The Americas*, Volume 67, Issue 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, January 2011) 307-314.

¹⁸ Potter, "The Illegal Immigration of Medieval Drama to California," 140.

people and priests, Hernán Cortés brought puppets and puppeteers with him to México. Cortés, however, did not introduce puppets to the indigenous communities of present-day México—evidence of puppetry in México dates to 1300 BCE.

This project does not invest in detangling the alchemy of sources drawn upon to create *pastorelas*. If it were, the following pages would loop into an unending ouroboros. Instead, this project thinks with adaptation to understand the impact of significant shifts in the *pastorela* genre. This chapter's focus is the devil characters and the shifts this character has undergone. As Carlos Alberto Sánchez points out in his reframing of *relajo*, this phenomenon manifests as people “suspend the possibility of commitment.” Sánchez continues, “In order to be who we are—world-making subjects—we must maintain a constant vigilance over interruptions and displacement of our commitments.” In this chapter, I read the devil as a symbolic agent of this interruption, as what Portilla would call a *relajento*, or an agent of *relajo*, as a stock character whose core attributes remain consistent and always cast as the *relajento*. The devils in Mexican and Mexican diasporic performance traditions across the Southwest consistently frame this character as a receptacle of semiotic signifiers for structural oppressions, experienced and unarticulated. In this chapter, I describe the devil as a symbolic scapegoat for violence experienced in daily life by communities under the duress of colonialism. I further argue that for Teatro Alebrijes, a company that is thinking about and staging the labor of world-making in late-stage capitalism, the devil as a symbol eventually renders its character useless to the more direct citations of the structure of violence, homophobia, national borders, and capitalism itself and as such, they do away with the devil entirely.

In the pastorela scripts collected by anthropologist Juan Bautista Rael in *The Sources and Diffusion of the Mexican Shepherds' Plays*, the devil regularly appears in texts as the central antagonist. With the introduction of the devil (and sometimes devils), the pastorela ceases to be a pageant about traveling shepherds who follow a star and arrive to adore the Christ child with gifts, songs, or dances. Instead, the devil shifts the stakes of the tale. Instead, the pastorela becomes a story about families and communities who fail or succeed at thwarting the temptations of the seven deadly sins of Christian religions.

This adaptation is a clear example of what literary scholar Linda Hutcheon asserts about interpreting texts for adaptation. Hutcheon writes that when an adapter engages with a text, they also “take a position on it.”¹⁹ In the Americas, adapters of the pastorela take the church’s position to bolster the church’s community ideals. The pastorela makes a clear pathway for audiences to see a complete life that ends with adoration and resources for people who procreate. The pastorela was one of many plays circulating to indoctrinate native populations in early México with Catholicism.

The rehearsal of an embodied understanding is critical to the goal of colonization. Missionaries used the embodied strategies of theatrical training in an attempt to reshape the worldview of Indigenous communities into a “New Spain.” Deeply informed by a Jesuit worldview, these devils were imported and imposed on Native communities in México during the conquest.

¹⁹ Hutcheon and O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 92.

Colonization and Conquest: The Jesuit Devil and El Relajo Principal

Relajo, as I note in the introduction, describes a moment of rupture for the members of Teatro Alebrijes. This chapter explores the trajectory of the devil onstage across México in tandem with the ensemble's definition. I begin by examining the pastorelas changing narrative across Mexico. In so doing, I highlight the conquest as a moment in Mexican history and Mexican theatre history that I identify as *el relajo principal*, or the foremost rupture.

The pastorela in México proliferated after the arrival of Hernán Cortés; this is distinct from the pre-conquest pastorelas that proliferated across Europe. The Mexican pastorela narrates a tale about shepherds caught between a distinct mix of biblical narratives that do not intersect in the Bible: Christ's nativity, discussed in the Gospel of Luke and Matthew, and a battle between Saint Michael and Satan from the Book of Revelation. This first moment of rupture was impressed upon native communities of México at the hands of Catholic friars and clerics, most notably the Franciscans and Jesuits.

Jesuits were not the first to arrive in México. A Franciscan presence in the Americas began with the arrival of Jerónimo de Aguilar, who, captured by the Mayans in the Yucatan Peninsula, became a translator for Cortés. The Dominicans and then the Augustinians followed the Franciscans. Then, finally, in 1572, the Jesuits arrived in Veracruz. In her book, *Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theatre in Colonial México*, anthropologist Louise Burkhart describes the way that misunderstandings guided a Jesuit approach to conversion:

Catholic priests believed that the Nahuas' gods and goddesses were actual beings: devils who had tricked the people into serving them... they admired the devotion of the deeply

religious people who, ignorant of Christianity, had been misled by opportunistic demons.²⁰

Dramatic texts reaffirm a Jesuit investment in implanting the idea of a devil into the imaginations of native Mexicans during the conquest. Anthropologist and ethnohistorian Daniel Reff frames a Jesuit's approach to Catholicism as organized around deep central beliefs about the devil. "The Jesuits were convinced that Satan was everywhere setting snares," Reff writes, "but particularly in America, where he had frightened away the holy angels and had ruled for millennia."²¹

In his book *Plagues, Priests, and Demons: Sacred Narratives and the Rise of Christianity in the Old World and the New*, Reff argues that the Jesuit experience of converting pagans of the late Roman Empire, coupled with the spread of disease, aided their mission to convert Native peoples in México. According to Reff, Satan became a selling point for Jesuit Catholicism. The idea of a devil resonated with Native populations as they fell inexplicably ill. Reff posits that Native communities "questioned themselves and how they may have offended the spirit world" when they succumbed to foreign illness. However, the Jesuits offered the devil as a scapegoat. In Satan, native Mexicans had an origin story for these foreign illnesses, a name and a physical form, an entity that could shoulder the burden of blame for the illness's origin. According to Reff, the Jesuits believed that Native people were just "caught in a cosmic struggle between God and Satan," an argument which proved to be very useful in shifting the Native worldview.²²

²⁰ Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 5.

²¹ Reff, *Plagues, Priests, and Demons*, 136.

²² Reff, *Plagues Priests and Demons*, 179.

Before the arrival of Catholics, Nahua people had a well-defined practice of creating spiritual manifestation through artistic rendering independent of the Catholic Church. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “Imperialism frames the indigenous experience,” and one way that it does so is through language.²³ Eurocentric frameworks like “a god” or “gods” reinforce a Judeo-Christian imperialist lens on an Indigenous, Mexican epistemology of the natural world and are an insufficient juxtaposition of terms. Pre-Invasion, the Mexica had a visual code of signs depicted in codices that signified natural phenomena like rain (*Tlaloc*) or cosmic identity (*Tezcatlipoca*); through this visual code and a series of embodied movements that signified natural phenomena and frameworks of interpretation, like the rain or cosmic identity through dance, drawing, and other visual and embodied ritual practices. Words like Tlaloc or Tezcatlipoca are not references to “gods” but representations of natural entities that were respected and honored. The Jesuits came to the Americas with visual representations of the devil. However, through the theater and live performances, embodied manifestations of the devil began proliferating in the Americas. Beyond pastorelas, the devil makes several appearances in liturgical dramas translated into Nahuatl.

For the Jesuits to concretize a devil for Indigenous populations, the idea of a devil had to be made flesh. It behooved the Jesuits to build a shared understanding wherein a specific set of phenomena were grouped and understood as “the work of the devil,” usually a way to clarify misfortune and trauma. As power shifted and the church established its power, the performance

²³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 19.

of these liturgical stories shifted into the bodies of Jesuit students, regardless of the presence of a purpose-built space, as early as 1571, according to literary scholar J.R. Spell.²⁴

In the mid-1600s, the tradition of producing Spanish *auto sacramentales* (street plays originating in Spain as part of celebrating Corpus Christi) was popular in México. In these plays, as Spanish scholar Alejandra Juno Rodríguez Villar argues, the devil incites negative emotions that “work as purgatives.”²⁵ One of the playwrights most celebrated for his *autos* is Pedro Calderón de la Barca. His plays, *The Wonderworking Magician* (1637) and *The Poison and the Remedy* (1677), feature devil/demon characters. The messaging in the autos was easily accessed by non-Spanish speakers in México because these plays were translated and performed in Nahuatl. Translations of Calderón’s *The Greatest Theatre of the World* exist in Nahuatl, as do translations of Lope De Vega’s *The Animal Prophet and the Fortunate Patricide* and *The Mother of the Best Famous Play*.²⁶ The shift from scripted liturgical dramas to the autos from Spain evidences a continued investment in reinforcing a Jesuit understanding of man’s relationship to the devil as a trickster figure. If the early liturgical dramas gave audiences a flesh (or puppet) receptacle for their fear, the auto sacramentales reinforced the possibility of redemption, for these unintentional transgressions balanced the experience of being tricked and harmed by the devil.

²⁴ Spell, “The Theater in New Spain in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 137-164.

²⁵ Villar, *Memory, Will, and Understanding in El veneno y la triaca by Calderón De La Barca: A Cognitive Approach*, 2017.

²⁶ The translations of Calderon and Lope De Vega’s work in Nahuatl are held at UC Berkley’s Bancroft Library. Lope De Vega’s plays both feature devils. Translations are published in: Sell, Burkhart, Wright, Mosquera, Bierhorst, and Schwaller. *Nahuatl Theater: Vol. 3, Spanish Golden Age Drama in Mexican Translation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008.)

Burkhart describes performance spaces for early Nahuatl liturgical dramas as either the church or “other public plaza areas,” both organized around “large open-air patios.”²⁷ J.R. Spell marks the emergence of purpose-built spaces beginning with the patio of México City’s Hospital Real De Los Indios, which was destroyed in 1629 and rebuilt ten years later.

The Real De Los Indios performance space provides an example of early formal, indoor theatrical space in México.²⁸ Real De Los Indios was the precursor to The Coliseo, one of México’s earliest purpose-built theaters, which produced works like the autos of Calderón as well as a wide variety of unscripted entertainments like *guanajas* (buffoon acts) and *maromas* (acrobat acts), especially during Holy Week.²⁹ These, along with pastorelas during Christmas time, make up early theatrical seasons in México.³⁰ Maromas were popular in México throughout the 1700s. Their legacy in the Northern state of Sonora—which eventually becomes Arizona—is chronicled by Performance historian Rosemary Gibson, who writes about “the circulation of guanajas by maromas and acrobats,” in addition to a substantial market for puppeteering which supported “four permanent puppet theaters in México City” as well as itinerant puppeteers and performers.³¹

As performance traveled, so did the image and idea of the devil. As social historian Sonya Lipsett-Rivera points out, “By the end of the colonial period, the Devil had become an

²⁷ Burkhart, *Aztecs on Stage*, 21.

²⁸ Spell, “The Theater in New Spain in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 137-164.

²⁹ Gipson, “THE MEXICAN PERFORMERS,” 235-252.

³⁰ Spell, “The Theater in New Spain in the Early Eighteenth Century,” 137-164.

³¹ Gipson, “THE MEXICAN PERFORMERS,” 235-252.

unchallenged part of the culture of daily life in the countryside.”³² According to Lipsett-Rivera, the devil “reflected shared concepts—ideas that may have been imported from Europe, but that fitted into a Nahua worldview.”³³

The Proscenium Devil

Given the devil’s ubiquity across México, it is unsurprising that formal performance venues soon embraced this character onstage. As historian Nicolás Kanellos observes, “professional stages in California had become so established and important to the Spanish speaking community, that by the 1860s, theatre companies that once toured México settled down to serve as repertory companies, choosing Los Angeles and San Francisco as their home bases.”³⁴ In his thorough documentation of the early Mexican American theatre, Kanellos documents a multitude of companies actively traveling between San Francisco, California, and Mazatlán, México by steamship, as well as south into Northern México and east to Tucson by stagecoach. Plays that were circulating across California and the various travel routes included small Spanish *zarzuela* operas whose subgenres include the popular *revistas* (musical revue) and the *genero chico* plays (short light-hearted musical comedies that mixed music and scripted drama).

After independence, Spanish colonial drama fell out of favor, and European Opera began to take its place. Mexican theaters had a history of producing translations of operas like *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* by Gioachino Rossini under a 1779 law that “required any theatrical work

³² Lipsett-Rivera, “Mira Lo Que Hace El Diablo,” 201-219.

³³ Lipsett-Rivera, “Mira Lo Que Hace El Diablo,” 201-219.

³⁴ Kanellos, *Mexican American Theatre*, 20.

performed anywhere in the Empire to be translated.” However, as opera scholar Francesco Milella points out, the opera production trend in México shifted in 1827.³⁵ Milella describes opera in México during this time as “nothing less than a vessel for the values of modernity and civilization.”³⁶ Latin American literature scholar Nancy Vogeley attributes this shift to a desire for theatre in México to be more “worldly and political—just the entertainment form to teach good lessons for success in international exchange.”³⁷ As the communal relationship and discourse around the devil shifted, works like *Robert le Diable*, an opera written by Eugène Scribe and composed by Giacomo Meyerbeer, gained popularity in México.

Robert le Diable is a generative case study for understanding performance circulation because of its unusual origins. The story of Robert the Devil first circulates in thirteenth Century France as a story about a knight who learns that his father is the devil. Meyerbeer first adapted this story in alignment with the French opera Comique tradition. Eventually, Meyerbeer’s opera shifts in tone to a formal, more serious work of art, but humor lives in its marrow and the devil. The humor in *Robert le Diable* made it accessible and widely popular with Mexican audiences. Opera, as a genre, also served to formalize a Mexican national identity that was more worldly. That reputation gets crafted by putting the devil on display as a way to mark cosmopolitanism, a trend we can see decades before the Meyerber opera circulates in México through the work of José Joaquín Fernandez de Lizardi.

³⁵ Körner, and Kühl, “Italian Opera and Creole Identities,” 2022.

³⁶ Körner, and Kühl, “Italian Opera and Creole Identities,” 2022.

³⁷ Vogeley, “Italian Opera in Early National México,” 280.

The devil characters traveled across the continent, touring places like the Coliseo by 1817. José Joaquín Fernandez de Lizardi wrote the first pastorela adaptation explicitly for an acting company. His play *La Noche Más Venturosa: Ó, El Premio De La Inocencia* marks a milestone in Mexican theatre: the birth of the secular, scripted pastorela.³⁸ Lizardi's devil, Luzbel, is an eloquent theologian who speaks at length about the history of the bible.³⁹ Lizardi is also explicit about the devil's dress. A stage direction detailing Luzbel's costume describes the devil's costume as resembling the popular Spanish cloak-and-dagger play style modeled after the Spanish army. This choice came a few years before the war for Mexican independence was a few years away from ending. Lizardi tailors Luzbel as a devil of history, someone cast in time, always subject to a specific social and political moment which an actor or designer can recreate. Lizardi's text offers the actor playing Luzbel multiple, multipage monologues that vacillate between trochaic and iambic tetrameter. These monologues are written as humor, which requires an actor who is both literate and understands how to deliver a line with comedic timing. The characters in Lizardi's *La Noche Más Venturosa* are to be played by experienced actors to take on tour and not the novice parishioner, monastery student, or traveling puppeteer. In Meyerbeer and Lizardi, the devil shifts from a conquest receptacle of misfortune and misery to a symbol of international sophistication. However, this image did not last through the century partially due to the rapidly shifting transportation technology like railways and steamboats, which aided and

³⁸ Fernandez de Lizardi, *La Pastorela: Tradición Escénica De La Laguna*, 9.

³⁹ Devil and angel characters in pastorelas are flexibly cast. These roles can accommodate a critical mass of participants and often do. However, there is a hierarchy that is strictly adhered to. The "main" angel is San Miguel, who may or may not have lieutenant angels who then command an army of lesser angels. Luzbel is the ruler of hell. He is often supported by *Satanás* (Satan), who might have a few lieutenant devils who might oversee an army of devils, but it is common to see Luzbel and San Miguel in these plays.

extended the accessibility of traveling troops to rural and urban audiences across México and the Southwestern United States. This technology made traveling much easier and faster than the stagecoach, the primary means of circulation.

Anthropologist José E. Limón meticulously chronicles this circulation through South Texas in what he calls a “historical ethnography of writing (adjective) cultures in its historical moments.”⁴⁰ In his book, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican American South Texas*, Limón engages with the anthropological work of John Gregory Bourke, J. Frank Dobie, Jovita Gonzalez, and Américo Paredes, anthropologists who all, in a distinct way, engage South Texas as a primary research site and the devil as a cultural phenomenon.

The earliest of Limón’s intellectual interlocutors, John Gregory Bourke, documented pastorelas in 1894. Bourke does not cite Lizardi as a source but makes precise gestures to his influence in his observation about the devil costume, which he describes as that of a “cavalry officer.” This military costume trope first emerges as an explicit part of Luzbel’s costume in Lizardi’s *La Noche Más Venturosa*.

Another anthropologist Limón engages, Americo Paredes, documents a parallel pastorela tradition from Brownsville, Texas, which dates back to 1891.⁴¹ Paredes suggests that his translation of the pastorela in Brownsville and Bourkes pastorela both show evidence of a shared origins and the distinct sensibility of the communities where they were adapted. They share multiple common themes, humor, characters, and bits of dialogue.

⁴⁰ José Eduardo Limón, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 12.

⁴¹ Paredes, “Pastorela” in *Buying the Wind: Regional Folklore in the United States*, Richard M. Dorson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 466.

The narrative similarities are secondary to the fact that the Parades script and the Bourkes script are further evidence of the migration of this genre from Mexico. One way these texts traveled, as evidenced by Lizardi's text, is the circulation of these stories in purpose-built theater spaces. However, this is not the only way they traveled. Pastorelas also traveled informally through what could be called the *carpa* circuit, an interconnected and informal network of pathways that allowed this small Mexican tent circus to engage with rural audiences in cities from Brownsville, TX to Fresno, CA in the United States. Carpa circuits transgressed contemporary state and national borders. These small itinerant circuses had an immense reach. One such carpa was that of Chole Aycardo, Mexico's first circus impresario. Historian Sergio Lopez Sanchez, in a revised edition of Armando De Maria y Campos's book *Los Payasos: Poetas Del Pueblo*, documents Aycardo's continued circulation of the pastorela as a puppet show through his traveling circus.⁴²

The following section tracks the itinerant devil across the southwest through carpas as he settles into plays and pastorelas of the Chicano movement.

The Itinerant Early Chicano Movement Devil

Carpas are tent circuses that offer audiences a variety of traveling performances for poor and working-class audiences. An itinerant performance style taken up by early Chicano theater practitioners like El Teatro Campesino, who mixed activism and entertainment, emerged from this tradition. The carpa, in pre-Chicano theatre iteration, was a circus tradition. However, carpas

⁴² Armando De María y Campos, *Los payasos: Poetas del pueblo*, edition, apostilles and iconographic selection by Sergio López Sánchez (Ciudad de México, citru/inba/Secretaría de Cultura, 2018).

entertained on a much smaller scale, utilizing what folklorist and theater historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto describes as “fluid, open, semi-structured presentational events with direct audience interaction and feedback.”⁴³ These traveling variety shows delighted working-class, Mexican, and Spanish-speaking audiences in the United States until the early sixties.⁴⁴

Part of the carpa’s contribution to Latinx theater is a pantheon of stock characters that get taken up across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose echoes can be seen in the performance traditions from Mario Moreno and Adelberto “Resortes” Martinez Chavez to protest performance on the picket lines of Delano by El Teatro Campesino. The stock characters of the carpa are also alive onstage in the twenty-first century in the psycho-politico spoken word theater work of groups like Salinas-based HeadRush Crew in the early 2000s and, as I argue in a later chapter, in the work of Teatro Alebrijes.

One of the central personas to emerge from the carpa tradition and who finds their way into all of the work mentioned above is the *pelado*, an everyman character whom a clown or comedian typically performed. The pelado was a conduit, channeling the frustrations of raucous crowds and the various systems of oppression they encountered daily. The pelado could answer the crowd’s jeers, taking quotidian frustrations and reimagining them into biting critiques of power.

In an interview with Broyles-Gonzalez, Cesar E. Chavez, the co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America union, recounts an early understanding of the carpa’s utility for organizing farm workers. “I wanted a *carpa* in the union for purposes of communication. With

⁴³ Ybarra-Frausto, “I Can Still Hear the Applause,” 47.

⁴⁴ Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 10.

the carpa, we could say difficult things to people without offending them... Instead of being offensive, it would be funny. Yet it could communicate union issues.”⁴⁵ In 1965, Luis Valdez joined the picket lines with the United Farm Workers in his hometown of Delano, CA. In 1972, Valdez and El Teatro Campesino developed *La Gran Carpa de Los Rasquachis* (*The Grand Tent of the Underdogs*), a cautionary tale about migration that solidifies the pantheon of stock characters into the aesthetic lexicon of the budding Chicano theater movement.⁴⁶ In ETC’s *Carpa*, the devil character (El Diablo) and death (La Muerte) team up to narrate the fate of Jesús Pelado Rasquache (the pelado) and his family.⁴⁷ The Hemispheric Institute’s digital library houses a recording of touring productions from 1973. The following is a close reading of the Hemispheric Institute archival footage.

The play begins with a conch blast and slow rhythmic drum, a heartbeat. The first image offered to the audience is a procession, a reenactment of Christ’s crucifixion. El Teatro often mixed sonic elements derived from pre-Columbian instrumentation, like conch shells and drums or rattles juxtaposed with Catholic religious imagery. This investment in *mestizaje* (a mixed identity) is also present in other cultural products of the early Chicano movement. One of the earliest and most clear examples being Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez’s epic poem, “I am Joaquín,” whose denouement reads, “I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ./I SHALL ENDURE!/I WILL

⁴⁵ Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 13.

⁴⁶ Chicano is used here to acknowledge the early Chicano movement’s understanding of a unified people (who were gendered male by default); in other parts of my dissertation, I use Chicana when talking explicitly about women in the movement, and Chicanx when talking about gender non-conforming people. When explicitly talking about a wider scope of people who include a variety of gender expressions, I will use Chicana/o/x or Latino/a/e/x.

⁴⁷ In addition to the pelado, the devil and death ETC’s *Carpa*, the compadre, the virgen and the Chicano (second generation children).

ENDURE!”⁴⁸ Given the prolific way that pre-Columbian sounds and images circulated in this cultural moment, it is clear that the company understands its audience’s relationship to religion. They understand it so clearly that it freely draws from the Bible to hold its audience’s attention and offer an example of suffering. By offering this familiar scene of suffering, ETC is teaching its audience how to respond to the upcoming suffering that the protagonist, Jesus Pelado Rasquache, experiences at the hands of the Devil and of Death.

The first visual action the audience experiences is the actor playing Christ entering carrying a crucifix. A skeleton (Death) pulls the crucifix on a rope while two devils flog Christ. Women weep and pray for Christ as the devils take violent delight in nailing him to the cross as the offstage band sings an *alabanza* (worship song) about the passion of Christ. The *alabanza* is another example of ETC drawing from a familiar religious archive. They draw on the archive of Catholicism as a scaffold for this prologue, as we watch the actor playing Christ trudge through the station of the cross, including crucifixion and resurrection. A woman in white enters and announces that he has ascended. The ensemble of actors left onstage rejoice in Spanish. “He has risen,” they scream. The devils join the crowd. They scream as well. Their shouting becomes unison and begins to crescendo. An actor in a horned devil mask cuts through the sizable burlap curtain framing the action and shouts above the crowd, “Well then, let’s go Christianize this whole GODDAMN WORLD!” The crowd is in a frenzy. The devil runs offstage. The crowd follows. What I am describing is a moment of explicit critique of the Catholic Church by ETC that invites the audience to hold the complexity of embodying a colonized subjectivity and

⁴⁸ Antonio De La Cova, “I Am Joaquín”(<https://www.latinamericanstudies.org/latinos/joaquin.htm>, n.d.).

holding the faith's violent past up to the light, while simultaneously contemplating their existence framed through the *relajo* of colonization.

In the next vignette, the ensemble enters while the band plays a joyful march. Their faces are covered with skeleton masks as they reenact pivotal moments throughout the history of México through multiple *tableaux vivant* that commemorate conflict by using props and costumes placed on and removed from a central, non-masked actor. At the end of the montage, this non-masked actor stands alone with a short-handled hoe—a symbol of the back-breaking stoop labor the union was fighting to end. The actor begins to pantomime, tilling the soil, but is scared offstage when he faces an actor in a devil mask. Alone, onstage, the devil addresses the audience. The devil takes on the persona of the Master of Ceremonies, introducing his “sister,” a performer in a skeleton bodysuit who plays the role of Death. Together they will tell the story of “*La Gran Carpa de los de Abajo*” (“The Great Tent of the Underdog”). However, before they start the show, the actor with the devil mask takes it off. His voice loses its gruff “Master of Ceremonies” bravado, and he first begins to address the audience in Spanish and then unmasked in a calm, empathic English. “I will only be playing a character of the devil that has nothing to do with the devil, nor does any member of the family who wears this mask, and nor does my sister who wears the mask of death, and with that in mind...”. The actor puts the masks back on and resumes the persona of the devil—including a reversion to Spanish—to tell the story of Jesus Pelado Rasquache. This moment is crafted cautiously, and this caution is important to note. As an organization committed to advancing the Chicano Movement and that emerged from the United Farm Workers’ struggle, El Teatro Campesino’s careful attention to their audience’s

relationship to religion and religious imagery is pivotal to the political work of achieving fair wages and safer working conditions for farm laborers.

Latinx Historian Felipe Hinojosa documents the complex relationship between the farmworkers' fight for justice in California and religious organizations in an essay where he highlights the contributions of a "small and mostly forgotten organization, California Migrant Ministry" (CMM) that "would profoundly transform Latina/o religious politics."⁴⁹ Hinojosa describes the CMM as "ecumenical and Protestant-led."⁵⁰ Their efforts to support the farm workers struggle put their congregants in direct coalition with the Roman Catholic Church, with whom the Protestants have a historically antagonistic relationship.

The history of the Roman Catholic Church and Latinx communities is part of the previous chapter's focus, and its engagement in the Chicano movement has been the subject of extensive scholarship. Latinx cultural historian and literary scholar Richard T. Rodriguez documents the history of the Chicano Movement through its imagery. In his book, *Next of Kin*, Rodriguez illustrates a triangulation of family, religion, and politics that helped advance initiatives in the early Chicano movement through art and an investment in the family. These images include depictions of Christ and the Virgen De Guadalupe, who are central figures in ETC's *Carpa* alongside Muerte and El Diablo. The direct address moment in *Carpa*, when the actor distances himself from the devil by removing the mask, echoes the stakes shared by the early ETC ensemble and the traveling carpa circus companies decades prior. The small tent circuses curated performance through direct and immediate audience feedback. Losing your

⁴⁹Hinojosa in Hinojosa, Elmore, and González, eds. *Faith and Power* 2022. 168

⁵⁰ Ibid.

audience meant losing your pay, so it behooved the early carpas to understand and play to their audiences.

In *Carpa*, the devil is a ringleader and his sidekick La Muerte takes on the role of Portillan relajento. Through their *Carpa*, ETCs stages the Jesuit devil of the conquest that is, in fact, everywhere setting snares, and La Muerte is there every step of the way to make sure Jesus Pelado Rasquache falls into these traps. This comedic duo structure, where the Devil is the brains and Muerte is the bumbling muscle, continues in their pastorela and echoes in pastorelas across the United States that emerged during and after the Chicano Movement. However, La Muerte is usually recast by a second devil, an assistant devil.

The most popular contemporary production of a pastorela is Luis Valdez's *La Pastorela*. In Jorge Huerta's field-defining text, *Chicano Theatre: Themes and Forms*, Huerta contextualizes works like *Los Pastores* to a Chicano theater ethos that explores the complicated relationship between Chicano theater makers and Christian faith practice.⁵¹ Yolanda Broyles-Gonzales uses El Teatro Campesino's play, *La Pastorela*, to develop her theory of the "sacroprofane performance genre," in which the sacred and the profane (or the political) work in tandem.⁵² *La Pastorela* continues proselytizing to non-Catholics while inviting non-Latinx and non-religious theater audiences to laugh together. ETC's engagement with the devil, unlike Lizardi's Luzbel, is not bound to history, but instead, through their prologue in *Carpa* and the sacroprofane structure of their pastorela, the company constructs a devil of politics, who is not bound to history. Instead, history is bound to the devil. He is the inciting incident in these not-

⁵¹ Huerta, *Chicano Theater*, 192-193.

⁵² Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 59.

quite-secular spectacles. The pastorela is also a faith-based tradition and the next section focuses on the way those communities craft the devil.

The Devil in Faith-Based Productions⁵³

As the Catholic mission system spread across present-day Texas, through New México and Arizona, and up the coast of California, so did the pastorela. The play shifted to meet the needs and sensibilities of each community as it toured the southwest on offer through touring secular productions and local parishes. In the 1990s, two projects archiving how the play proliferated within faith-based communities emerged. The first is a 1995 ethnographic monograph by Richard Flores, detailing and analyzing the author's participation in a San Antonio parish-based production.⁵⁴ The second is a 1997 documentary, *Los Pastores* by Judy Chaikin, which documents the work of Sangre De Cristo Liturgies.⁵⁵ The pastorela tradition at Sangre De Cristo is part of an emergence of pastorela productions that begin after a long hiatus. As performer and American Studies scholar, Larry Torres posits that war—beginning with World War I and continuing through the Vietnam War—facilitated a decline in the popularity of this tradition and a “renaissance” after Vietnam, when Latinx soldiers who were no longer overseas

⁵³ As I was editing this dissertation for submission, I came across a copy of Larry Torres's adaptations of *Los Pastores*. Given the time constraints, I have omitted it as part of the texts I consider in this chapter. I look forward to offering an analysis of Torres's play alongside ETC's pastorela in the book manuscript.

⁵⁴ Flores, *Los Pastores*, 1995.

⁵⁵ Chaikin, *Los Pastores*, 1997.

fighting attempted to reconnect with some semblance of home, tradition or culture by doing “the things that we used to do years back.”⁵⁶

Created in the 1990s, the monograph and the documentary archive a communal ritual practice that proceeds the final production. Torres explains:

Originally, these morality plays were religious in tone and subject matter until they were taken up by the people who injected them with humor and sexual innuendo. In the 1700s,

Los Pastores was denounced as scandalous and banned by the church, but it was too late. It had already become folklore and would not die.⁵⁷

Torres and the *Sangre de Cristo* production at the center of the Chaikin documentary continues the tradition of interjecting humor and sexual innuendo into the performance, but the humor always maintains a reverence for the fact that this production is performed for parishioners inside of a church. As a strategy for community engagement and cultural preservation within their parish, humor in this production functions in service to the church. However, this late twentieth-century devil is different from previous devils; he is a father. The production adds a devil spawn, a *diablito* (little devil), to give “a dimension of tenderness.” In the *Sangre De Cristo* production, the devil is no longer a fulcrum for redemption, a cursed person, or a curse, but an autonomous soul who might also be redeemable to the kingdom of heaven, although he never is because his spawn also functions in the “assistant devil” in the duo.

This new framing does not relieve the potential danger of embodying the devil, as the documentary’s narrator points out, “When Larry Torres takes on the role of Satan, he never fails

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

to protect himself from the power of the devil without sayin' a prayer of safekeeping."⁵⁸ This moment of prayer is different from the disclaimer in ETC's *Carpa* because it is a performance of devotion that he offers to God as a private exchange. Torres's prayer is an earnest act of a faithful man who understands the power of repetitive performance and the spiritual dangers of embodying the devil. The performers in ETC's *Carpa* interject a disclaimer to reassure the audience that the devil is a narrative device in order to make sure their audience will remain engaged and the actors can deliver their political message. In order to do so, the devil character has to be understood as completely divorced from the performer. Torres's prayer acknowledges that this bifurcation is more complicated than putting on or taking off a mask. Torres inviting the devil into his body and then into the church is a testament to his faith in god. He will be protected.

These faith-based productions built strong communal bonds within the networks of people who supported and enjoyed these productions. These productions also help to fortify a strong audience base for secular productions, across the Southwestern United States and in México.

Secular Pastorelas in México

In México, faith-based productions have remained a constant; However, so have secular productions. The same year that ETC's pastorela was being performed as a street pageant in the streets of San Juan Bautista, California, the group Cómicos de la Legua also performed a pastorela on the streets of Querétaro City. Theaters across México produce secular pastorelas to

⁵⁸ Ibid.

this day, and a few years behind Querétaro, a new and very different pastorela tradition emerged in 1980s México City.

According to Mexican actor Javier Yepez, the initial idea for *Pachecas a Belén*, a drag pastorela adaptation that has been running in México City since 1980, was sparked when a group of friends in the México City theatre scene got together at a party one night and decided to put on “a pastorela from the point of view of stoners.”⁵⁹ Yepez prefaces this origin story by emphasizing the importance of tradition:

Many people think that this is a gay pastorela. It has nothing gay. Obviously, we’re not against that. We’re simply men doing roles of women. However, our pastorela is characteristic of all the pastorelas... the important thing about this play, which has been being produced for thirty-two years, it was very important that we could get stoned because we smoke marijuana... This was a play for adults, and we presented it at midnight.”⁶⁰

Pachecas a Belén is still produced yearly in México City as a nightlife extravaganza filled with pot smoke and drag queens. However, as Yepez noted, at its core, the play is still the simple story of a group of people traveling to Bethlehem on the advice of an angel whom the devil tempts along the way.

The Disappearing Devil

So far, the pastorela iterations discussed in this chapter all function dramaturgically within a narrative framework articulated by Chicana literary scholar Maria Herrera-Sobek. The Herrera-Sobek framework traces the plot of the pastorela through a seven-scene narrative

⁵⁹ Momo Montes Producciones. “Conferencia Pachecas a Belén En EL COTO.” YouTube, December 9, 2017. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xs4-v0YPmgs>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

scaffold that unites adaptations across the centuries. Herrera-Sobek offers an outline for the pastorela's "formulaic structure," which I include below:

- (1) Introductory songs, verses, dances, and so on
- (2) The appearance of Archangels Michael or Gabriel and the announcement of the newborn Jesus to the shepherds
- (3) The beginning of the journey to Bethlehem to worship the newborn babe
- (4) The attempt by the devil's (one or several) to distract the shepherds from their journey to Bethlehem. Generally three attempts are enacted. The devil's temptations are structured by utilizing three of the seven capital sins:
 - (a) Temptation through gluttony: food is offered to the hungry Shepherd
 - (b) Temptation through lust: enticing young seductive women to appear to the male
 - (c) Temptation through greed: wealth jewels and riches are offered to the shepherds
- (5) The appearance of the Archangel Michael who saves the shepherds from the clutches of the devil in the nick of time
- (6) The arrival of the shepherds to Bethlehem
- (7) The presentation of gifts, songs, and dancing in front of the Christ child Jesus⁶¹

The early adaptations of Teatro Alebrijes also follow the Herrera-Sobek framework.

However, this scaffolding quickly falls away in their pastorelas, giving way to a distinct

⁶¹ Herrera-Sobek, in Gutiérrez, and Fabre, *Feasts and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities*, 1995.

Christmas tradition. The adaptations of Teatro Alebrijes are parodies. They parody the structure of pastorelas as well as popular songs. Their pastorelas' parodies engage in exaggeration for comedic effect as the word parody suggests. They also engage in what religious studies scholar Melissa M. Wilcox calls serious parody in their critiques of capitalism, US imperialism, and gender roles. Wilcox defines serious parody as “an activist strategy [that] simultaneously critiques and reclaims cultural traditions in the interest of supporting the lives and political objectives of marginalized communities.”⁶²

The cornerstone of the Teatro Alebrijes season since 2011 has been their adaptation of the pastorela, which is now a Christmas story told without the devil. For example, fantasy characters (fairies or warlocks) initially replace the devils in their plays. Eventually, human characters, like a mysterious orphan keeper, take up the antagonist's plot labor, but even this goes away. Teatro Alebrijes produced the first of their parody adaptation of the pastorela titled, *Divas a Belén* in 2011. *Divas* adheres loosely to the Herrera-Sobek structure and even provides a narrated roadmap that identifies the milestones of the narrative formula through an opening monologue derived by a Hermit underscored by “Christmas music.”^{63, 64} After the prologue, the audience follows three shepherds to Bethlehem. The devils draw the shepherds away from the past by tempting them with lust.

⁶² Wilcox, *Queer Nuns*, 2.

⁶³ Badu, Garcia, and Nuñez, *Divas a Belén* (Unpublished Manuscript), 1-2 (page numbers added by me).

⁶⁴ The hermit is a stock character in the pastorela. I can't identify when he first appears, but he is in almost all of the adaptations, especially the faith-based ones I encountered in the archives.

The following year, the company produced *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar*. Again, the devils in this play serve the narrative by providing obstacles and temptations. In 2013, the company produced, *Sucedió en la Revolución*, a post-apocalyptic pastorela that puts a queer love story arc at the heart of the narrative, but ultimately tells the story of the shepherds and the nativity through the same Herrera-Sobeck frame.

In 2014, the company pivoted away from this frame for the first time with its pastorela, *Un Camino Amarillo*. This show is a pastorela parody of the *Wizard of Oz*. As a first attempt at reframing the pastorela, *Un Camino Amarillo* trades Herrera-Sobeck's frame in favor of parodying the MGM musical, *The Wizard of Oz*. In this story, there are no devils or angels. There are, however, preternatural beings with fabulous and potent magic. These beings, all inspired by characters in the works by L. Frank Baum, are: a good warlock named Galindo, a bad witch named Elphaba, and a woman who, like Lena Horne in *The Wiz*, turns into a star.⁶⁵ These fantastical beings are distinct from those in the traditional pastorela. This play echoes traditional pastorelas and the *Wizard of Oz*. *Un Camino Amarillo* tells the story of a small community following a star, but the lessons in this play are not about how to resist Satan. There is no battle for the souls of shepherds. This story is about a sad gay boy named Doroteo who misses home and is secretly in love with his best friend, Toto. He is too sad to celebrate Christmas, but his pity party is interrupted by a tornado that takes them to Oz. As the duo travels, they meet four friends (a scarecrow, a tin man, a lion, and a drag queen named Rubí) and chase after the star that is said to make all their dreams come true. Elphaba tries to throw them off the path, but Galindo throws

⁶⁵ Cohen, et al. *The Wiz*.

a wrench in her plans by helping her reconcile her tendency to bully others. Ultimately, she learns to forgive herself and asks for forgiveness from others. Doroteo finds the courage to tell Toto how he feels, and when they are finally sent back home at the end of the play, they go to a party full of other queer Latinx people to celebrate their chosen family.

In 2015, the ensemble produced *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana (A Land Called Tomorrow)*, a play about a group of orphans who escape to a fantasy world, *Mañana*, a land called Tomorrow. *Mañana* is a magical place where a group of orphans travels to recover their lost dreams. Like the characters in *Un Camino Amarillo*, their journey is not interrupted by devils, but the land of *Mañana* is in the midst of a custody battle. The pirate Barbara Roja wants to take over the land now that kids have stopped dreaming on Earth. However, the fairy queen, Titania (Tita), will not go out without a fight. Hence, the *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana*'s story parallels the pastorelas' heaven and hell battle narrative without using the devil. The parallel is straightforward, but the battle is distinct. When Barbara the pirate comes to take away their dreams, what should follow is a spectacular last-minute rescue. That is not what happens. Instead of being rescued by Tita, the kids defend themselves. The pirate feeds on their fears, but they are no longer scared of him, and he loses his power. Ultimately, Tita helps them return home on Christmas morning, where they find the mean old orphan keeper has changed her ways. *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana* dives even further from using devils as symbols of inexplicable evils and, instead, models for the audience autonomy and self-reliance.

The following year, Teatro Alebrijes produced *Sejirbela*. Again, the story takes the protagonist on a magical journey in the distant and magical land of *Sejirbela* (Alebrijes spelled backward). In *Sejirbela*, the company returns to a narrative framework where the forces of good

and evil battle, this time over the protagonist's soul, Clara. This play frames the forces of good and evil as old friends who spend their days playing Pokémon Go. The evil demon, Chancla, overcomes Clara by feeding into her capacity for hate and anger (one of the deadly sins). While the company reverts to a narrative structure that echoes Herrera-Sobek, this journey does not lead to a manger and a baby. It leads, once more, to a Christmas party.

In their 2017 production, *No es Otro Cuento de Navidad... ó Tal Vez Si* again replaces the devils and angels with fairies and warlocks in a new version of the orphan story they told two years prior. As surrogates, these characters allow Teatro Alebrijes to tell a different story about traveling. These are not faith-fortified pilgrimages to adore a child. Instead, they narrate a forced migration to a foreign land where the protagonists must quickly understand the rules of the world in order to stay safe. In plays where a devil figure returns, we see hints of the ensemble asserting that the devil is imaginary. He belongs to fantasy lands. What becomes clear by 2017 is that devils are unnecessary.

After collaborating on four consecutive pastorelas, ensemble member Ugho Badu takes the sole responsibility for crafting the Teatro Alebrijes pastorela scripts. I identify the plays produced from 2018 to 2022 as the *Villancicos* plays because they all share a variation of the title *Entre Villancicos y* [fill in the blank]. A *villancico* is a Christmas Carol, so these plays are all titled *Of Christmas Carols and* [some word that eludes to that year's approach to the adaptation]. These plays follow the misfortunes of Britani Marisol, a social media-obsessed young woman in her early 30s. What is distinct about the *villancicos* plays is that the devil is no longer present. These plays narrate the struggle of a young woman and her family, trying to connect in a world

full of distractions. Through it all, they work to offer each other grace in a political climate that is increasingly more violent toward queer and Latinx people.

In recasting the devil, Teatro Alebrijes also repaves the path toward the lingering promise of a complete life. The story no longer follows a group of shepherds on their way to bestow gifts upon a family of strangers lauded by an angel's mandate for adoration. Instead, the path leads them back to each other, to their neighbors and community. The creators assert that the diversity of their community is what makes it strong, and that this diversity is also worthy of celebration and adoration.

Chapter 2: Queer Latinx Performance and Activism in San José

Something to Polish

In his theoretical meditation of historical evidence, Thomas Postlewait uses the mystery of English playwright Christopher Marlowe's sudden death in 1593 to interrogate interpretive methods used to produce theatre history. Postlewait's essay is an extended invitation to think through approaches to evidence for the theatre history scholar. In the following, Postlewait articulates the delicate artistry possible through theatre historiography:

Some historians are capable of intuitive leaps of interpretation. They possess a talent, like a spider, for spinning connecting threads. And like a spider they are capable of leaping across the empty spaces, landing gently on the available historical nodes. Weaving the strands across the emptiness, they create a connecting web that transforms the emptiness into a unified design. In this way, the historical imagination connects what is unknown to what is known.⁶⁶

The prospect of producing theatre history through a delicate dance that illuminates a complex “web” of social, political, material, and affective networks in a potentially reparative way is inspiring. However, Postlewait's provocation offers a distinct challenge for historians who work, document, and theorize the work of contemporary theatre makers of the global majority, which is what haunts me.

Christopher Marlowe, Postlewait's sixteenth century subject, left behind a body of work that is still performed today. In order for Marlowe to garner attention as a historical figure, his artistic labor had to be documented while he was alive; it was, given the fact that his works were tied to one of the Elizabethan era's most prolific acting troops, the Admiral's Men. This

⁶⁶ Postlewait, “The Nature of Historical Evidence,” 241.

association puts Marlowe at the nexus of a web of religion, nationalism, and art in the Elizabethan period. His association with the Admiral's Men also ensured that ephemera about his life and work were documented for centuries to come. This abundant archive and complicated history makes his mysterious death an intriguing site of inquiry about the life and legacy of this writer.

My work is situated in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is a bounty of opportunities to document art and artists in their time. However, artistic labor is still dominantly documented by formal institutions like newspaper reviewers and prize granting committees. This is mediated through a neoliberal, capitalist sieve. Anything worthy of attention is often work that has had mass market impact, which is often measured by metrics (including digital engagement on social media) that translate to a gross total dollar amount for the theaters, or an increase in philanthropic funds raised for foundations. More attention and more money translates to more social impact, because money can be counted.

Teatro Alebrijes does not have this kind of impact in the border field of American Theater or in the growing, formal, Latinx Theater field across the US. Still, I am committed to documenting their work because I believe that their impact on the community of Spanish-speaking audiences in San José makes them an important historical subject. I am committed to making less work for scholars who come after me by documenting artists of my time. I want to minimize the void that someone will have to leap over in the future to connect nodes like a Postlewait spider. In the prospect of this absence, I reflect on the foundational work of Chicano theatre historian Jorge Huerta, who decided to document his contemporaries as they made art and fought for social justice during the Chicano movement.

In the essay “The Politics of History and Memory,” Huerta attributes the birth of the Chicano movement to “anger” and “frustration,” and following photographer Sally Mann, Huerta describes memory as “polished lies” which keep him safe.⁶⁷ Huerta identifies the Chicano movement’s goal as the “unraveling the Chicanos’ history, their mythos, the *his*-tory of polished lies, burnished so carefully that we believed them.”⁶⁸ Huerta’s assessment emerges from a life spent documenting, theorizing, and participating in the Chicano movement. An archive of documents coupled with Huerta’s embodied experience during the Chicano movement inform his scholarship. I did not grow up in the Chicano movement. The timeframe of major events considered part of this historical period happened from 1960 to 1970. I was born at the tail end of the movement in 1979. My scholarship will never benefit from my lived experience of this period, so I have had to rely on the work of scholars and artists who came before. For example, I first learned about the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots by experiencing Luis Valdez’s 1981 film *Zoot Suit* and later by reading historical accounts by historians a generation before me. Huerta uses the narrative frame of a “polished lie” to discuss the way that his family protected him from the “realities of racism and anti-Mexican fervor that have always existed wherever there are Mexicans or people of Mexican descent in this country.”⁶⁹ They did so by not telling him about the Zoot Suit Riots, which his parents and older siblings were alive to experience.⁷⁰ The polished lie requires a core memory, an event, or an object to be polished over. Something that you know

⁶⁷ Huerta, “The Politics of History and Memory,” 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

happened but whose details are distorted or polished over by the miraculous inaccuracy of memory. So, to polish a lie, there has to be something to polish; memory has to be an accessible resource. Growing up in the aftermath of the Chicano movement makes me pause to consider Huerta's use of the polished lie and its resonance in the archives. Huerta's "polished lie" motivates my approach to archival research where instead of polishing a lie, because my own memory was not a resource, I had to rely on boxes of ephemera in the archive, cataloged and preserved to spin connecting threads.

Unlike Huerta's polished lie about the Zoot Suit Riots, which exist as an important precursor to the Chicano movement that lived in a generational legacy of lived experience, the work of Casa de San José, a queer support network started by Latinx drag queens, has largely remained buried in archives. Their existence is documented by photographer and reporter Ted Sahal, and it consists of a few photos and a page in his book *From the Closet to the Community*.

Unlike the Zoot Suit Riots, the embodied memory that could have carried something to polish was largely lost to a wave of deaths from AIDS across the 1980s and 1990s. The archive is sparse. There is very little for memory to polish and even fewer people left who hold those polished memories. This sudden loss of archival and embodied knowledge has left me as queer performance historian unable to polish. My approach to the archives has required me to explore findings for signs of life, so I palpitate this absence in hopes that I can find a pulse. Casa de San José and Ray Aguilar are part of a network of organs under the surface of the history of San José; this is where I first found a pulse. Casa de San José sets a foundation for now defunct groups like ProLatino, a Latinx affinity support network, who also used performance to engage the community through the 1990s and into the early 2000s and who are subject to the same erasure. I

begin this chapter by looking at Casa de San José and tracing the legacy of its founder to offer any queer, Chicanx, or Mexicanx kin who might be reading something to polish some evidence that affirms we were here.

A False Pulse: Explosions in Public: Building Casa de San José

In 1969, someone, maybe a trans woman, maybe a sex worker, maybe Sylvia Rivera, or Marsha P. Johnson, or maybe nobody at all threw the first brick —or maybe it was a shot glass— and ignited the Stonewall uprising at StoneWall Inn.⁷¹ The story of this flying brick and the subsequent uprising galvanized the queer community across the United States—and as the tagline from the 2015 film *Stonewall* boasts, it turns this bar into the place “where pride began.” This was not the first time queer people had to defend themselves from police in public spaces. Three years before Stonewall, responding to police harassment, a trans woman in San Francisco threw a cup of coffee in an officer’s face. This cup sparked a frenzy where fists and food flew across the dining area of a local chain restaurant, Compton’s Cafeteria. This pair of examples is part of an archive of performance and spectacle, which historian Amy Hughes has called “spectacles of reform,” acts that Hughes categorizes as a “crucial component of the reforming apparatus and a defining characteristic of American activism.”⁷² It does not matter which came first or which event has enjoyed more box-office appeal. I believe that acts like this happened and were happening in small ways across the United States at this time. Compton’s Cafeteria and

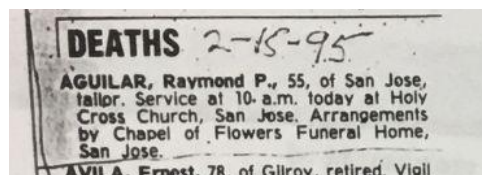
⁷¹ The lore about what was thrown and by whom at StoneWall is highly contested, but it makes for a great story.

⁷² Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform*, 4.

the Stonewall Inn could have just as quickly been any nightlife spaces where queers stood up for themselves. These are just two of the most well-documented examples.

With Hughes's revelation in mind and my own bias as a playwright, trained to think about moments that set a story into motion, I arrived at the LGBTQ archives of San José State University in the Fall of 2021, ready to find archival documentation of a similar inciting incident. In the archive, I fully expected to unbox a clear, dynamic moment that sparked the queer organizing in the 1960s and 1970s gay and lesbian spaces across San José. I have not found this single moment. At least, not yet. Instead, via his public death notice (likely published in the *San José Mercury News*), I was introduced to Raymond P. Aguilar, who died on February 15th, 1995. The limited information about this man was that he was a fifty-five-year-old tailor.

Evidence of Aguilar's life led me to Rachel, Aguilar's drag persona. In the 1960s, Rachel



Death Notice: Raymond Aguilar, 2/15/1995, Series IV, Box 39, Folder 22, Ted Sahl Archives, San José State University LGBTQ Archives, San José, CA.

could be found, not in a folder in a box, but at a club, Mac's Club, this is where she began a legacy of advocacy and care work that did not begin with a brick or a cup of coffee, but more likely with a rooster feather boa and a gray metal cash box. Mac's Club is a local gay bar on Post Street in San José, which has since been designated the city's LGBTQ district.

In the early 1960s, this small bar was where an “informal association” of drag queens would gather in drag and spend their evenings.⁷³ This informal network of drag queens would by 1976 become Casa de San José (CSJ), the first San José chapter of the International Imperial Court System.⁷⁴

The International Imperial Court System is an all-volunteer organization that raises money for a variety of causes, from educational scholarship to AIDS research.⁷⁵ The organization raises funds by inviting would-be title holders to produce public-facing, nightlife-centered events for the community. As they produce events, they amass both social and financial capital. These resources support a would-be Emperor or Empress in their campaign for the crown. Campaigns culminate with a vote to determine who wins the election and gain admission into that year’s court. The winners then participate in a coronation ceremony. The new court reigns for a year while a new class of hopeful royals fundraises for next year’s crown. Ted Sahl amassed an extensive material archive documenting many of these proceedings in and around San José. Sahl’s archives comprise much of San José State’s extensive LGBTQ+ History collection. In his book, *From the Closet to the Community*, Sahl notes that “Casa de San José of Santa Clara County Inc., registered with the state of California as a non-profit corporation in 1976 and

⁷³ Ted Sahl spent decades documenting queer social life and activism in San José, and this is how he characterizes these queens in the book *From Closet to Community: A Quest for Gay & Lesbian Liberation in San José & Santa Clara County*.

⁷⁴ Queer Silicon Valley Team. 2020. “Casa de San José.” September 30, 2020. <https://www.queersiliconvalley.org/casa-de-san-jose/>.

⁷⁵ The International Imperial Court system was founded by José Sarria, a queer Latinx activist. Sarria holds the title of Absolute Empress and was known by his drag persona, The Widow Norton. For more about the Imperial Courts or the Life of Sarria see: www.glbthistory.org/primary-source-set-sarria or in *The Empress Is a Man: Stories from the Life of José Sarria* by Michael R. Gorman (1998).

flourished in the South Bay.”^{76,77} In this same year, the all-volunteer staff at San José’s Lambda Association reported that police, using CA penal code 647 A—the statute that addresses lewd conduct—to “harass, entrap, and arrest gay men.”⁷⁸ I point this out to assert that the emergence of Casa de San José was in concert with the anti-gay sentiment that manifested in formal acts of structural state violence and to acknowledge that Casa de San José was part of a single fiber in a larger network of care that had emerged in San José in the 1970s.⁷⁹

This flourish lasted until 1983 when the court disbanded, but Ray Aguilar, through his drag persona Rachel, persisted. In 1986, Aguilar co-founded a second organization, the Imperial Grand Golden Lion Court (IGLC). This second iteration lasted until 1988 when it was formally unrecognized by San Francisco’s Absolute Empress I, The Widow Norton José Sarria, because it was not a non-profit organization. Two years after the IGLC disbanded, the Imperial Royal Lion Monarchy (RLM) emerged, produced events, and raised local funds for LGBTQ causes until 2018.

The Imperial Courts of both San Francisco and their iterations in San José gave queer people somewhere to direct their energies and target a growing, collective economic power. Nightlife philanthropy generates, concentrates, and provides a performance framework to exercise this power through nightlife philanthropy. This model enlivened beer busts, leather and

⁷⁶ Sahl, *Closet to Community*, 52.

⁷⁷ South Bay is a colloquial term used in Santa Clara County to describe cities within that county that are part of the greater San Francisco Bay Area by virtue of the fact that they share a shoreline with the southernmost shores of the San Francisco bay. These cities include (from west to east) Mountain View, Sunnyvale and San José.

⁷⁸ James in Sahl, 8.

⁷⁹ Lambda News was established by Dan Relic the same year as Casa de San José.

drag contests, bingo and wet clothing contests, auctions, drink specials, or food sales to transform into a lifeline of resources for vulnerable communities.

Several queer organizations engaged in this mode of fundraising for their cause. ProLatino is one such organization. The Imperial Royal Lion Monarchy organized fundraising events in the San José clubs and bars. These events fortified the Latinx community through activism and performance. These and various other organizations shared a community whose pleasure, leisure, and activism intersected. These organizations supported each other. ProLatino, as an organization, supported the Royal Lion Monarchy by purchasing a table at their annual RLM coronation in 2001. One of the people seated at the ProLatino table was Rafael Pérez, also known locally by his drag persona, “Betsy”. Betsy was one of the first members crowned Miss ProLatino. Participating in these events was part of her reign as a title holder. Pérez no longer performs, but he is very much alive. I had the privilege of spending hours with him going through old photos and documenting his oral history for this chapter.

In *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, David Roman archives and analyzes the emergence and social trajectory of queer theatre across the East Coast, but primarily in 1980s New York. Roman notes that “fundraisers, the social ritual of gathering people into the space of performance to raise money, were, along with memorial services, the first acts of intervention in the fight against AIDS.”⁸⁰ Evidence in the LGBTQ Archives at San José State confirms that this was also the case with organizations like Casa de San José. However, their emergence predates the 1981 emergence of AIDS. Casa de San José is an example of

⁸⁰ Roman, *Acts of Intervention*, 10.

philanthropy and nightlife performance that predates the AIDS activism that Roman chronicles in the book. In the 1960s and 1970s, Casa raised money for research and emergency, direct relief efforts by supporting the Red Cross and the American Cancer Society. Because AIDS was twenty years down the line, people like Ray Augilar (Rachel) and the queens of Casa de San José, the Royal Lion Monarchy, and the Imperial Court built a legacy that would, by early 1980 with the emergence of AIDS, create multifaceted support to the community through a framework for performance and philanthropy. This work advanced through multiple groups in the area, including ProLatino.

Posadas, Pastorelas, and ProLatino

In February 1992, ProLatino became the first social affinity group to serve the Latino/a/x community in San José at the Billy DeFrank Center. The center, named in honor of the drag persona of local, black, gay activist William Price, offers San José's LGBT+ community a myriad of services, including HIV testing and access to social affinity group meeting space. Activist and ProLatino co-founder Omar Nuñez talked about the casual emergence of ProLatino in an interview. When asked about the purpose of these early meetings, Nuñez admits that "I didn't know. I just went to the meeting, and I realized that nobody knew...". However, even without an early, formal purpose, Nuñez notes that the platform was necessary to foster social exchanges within the community that moved beyond the bar and club space:

There's no social media, there are no computers, come on, so the only way to meet people was at the clubs, and that was to *cojer* [fuck] only... I mean, you could hook up [at ProLatino meetings], but it was in a more decent way, like *las tías mayores* [the older aunts], '*Mira te presento a mi hija*' [Look, I want to introduce you to my daughter], I mean, come on, you know you're not gonna stop *las locas* [the gay men] to do that, but it was a different story.

After the first few meetings, however, ProLatino's purpose became very clear. "This was the early nineties," Nuñez explains, "and the AIDS shit was hitting the fan, so we decided the —HIV— prevention part was a big thing." The group also grew in size with each meeting, from seven at the first meeting to eleven at the next, and soon it hosted a group of forty to fifty people plus in the room for their meetings at the Billy De Frank Center. One of the early things that ProLatino did was make space for men who wanted to learn and dance *Ballet Folklórico* with other queer men. Grupo Folklórico ProLatino, the first gay Mexican Folklórico group in the United States, embraced men with men partnering and, eventually, dancers in drag. The group produced a few recurring events to promote themselves as a community resource for HIV prevention and a place to find community among Spanish-speaking LGBT people. Their signature events included a BBQ, Halloween, and Christmas party.

The annual Halloween party was a signature event for the group because of the costume contest. Each year, the contest winner would be awarded the title of quinceañera and receive the privilege of organizing ProLatino's social events for the next 12 months. Typically, these events would serve as community outreach and fundraising platforms for ProLatino. Rafael Pérez González won the Halloween contest in 2001 competing as his drag persona "Betsy". For Pérez González, the annual Christmas party was an important revenue stream and a gathering that simultaneously reminded people of home. In Pérez González's hometown of Atotonilco El Alto,

Jalisco, México, the *posada* is a long-standing Christmas tradition; he wanted to honor that, but in a way that was, in his words, “more fun, because we’re gay.”⁸¹

Posadas, like *pastorelas*, are typically performed during the Christmas holiday season. These traditionally Catholic, participatory, processional performance events invite the community to gather for a reenactment of the holy family’s search for shelter on the eve of the birth of Christ. The processions can happen as a single-day event, or gatherings can repeat for multiple days between December 16 and December 24. During the procession, people either dress up as the holy family or carry statues of them from house to house. When the group arrives at a house, two groups of singers begin an exchange, one from inside the house and the other from outside. The holy family leads the singing outside. Once the group reaches the procession’s last house (or door), they can come in for the evening, where the group has a party that usually involves food, activities, and more singing, prayer, and fellowship. The ProLatino *posadas* adhered loosely to this event structure. The objective was both an experience and a revenue stream.

These events take up what Chicana scholar Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez has called the “‘sacrophane,’ wherein the spiritual and political dimensions of struggle were united.”⁸² Broyles-Gonzalez uses this concept of the sacrophane to describe the aesthetic and performance strategies taken up by the United Farm Workers union and *El Teatro Campesino*. However, in thinking through the work of ProLatino, the sacrophane is deployed in service of the fight against AIDS in the Latinx community. *Posadas*, even in a non-queer context, function

⁸¹ Rafael Pérez González (ProLatino Member/Miss ProLatino, Betsy) in discussion with the author, December 2021.

⁸² Broyles-Gonzalez, *El Teatro Campesino*, 59.

as the prelude to the party. In ProLatino's case, a collective of members, including Pérez González and Nuñez, decided to add an element of performance to the posadas to give partygoers a more engaging experience. What emerged was an unrehearsed pastorela floorshow that quickly became the centerpiece of the party.

The production of pastorelas by ProLatino reflects a political, social, and cultural departure. This departure is central to the ethos of the Mexican pastorela. Adaptations of the pastorela, while they may intervene in dominant systems of power, are not in and of themselves a revolt but a continuation of the tradition of adaptation that defines the pastorela in the Americas. However, these implications were far from anyone's mind in 2002. To Nuñez, the performance was a twenty-minute comedy sketch that was fun despite its impromptu disorganized rasquachismo. These early sketches, written by Nuñez in rhyming couplets, tell a queer version of the shepherds' journey. These texts privilege the banter between members in pastorela drag that renders the plot a critical framework for the story and an afterthought. In an early, untitled script written by Nuñez, three *pastores*: Jotita, Macha, and Pacheca, undertake the journey to Bethlehem. These three shepherdesses are on their way to pay their respects to baby Jesus when confronted by the devil, Luzbel (Lucifer), who wants to throw them off the path to Bethlehem. Ángel (an angel) comes to their defense, but as he prepares for battle with Luzbel, the two discover that they would much rather fuck, than fight.

Angel:	no se hable más del asunto	speak no further of this affair
	Y máteme de placer	And kill me with pleasure
	Pero tengo una pregunta	But I have one question
	¿traes dinero pal hotel?	Do you have money for the hotel?

Luzbel:	que angelito comodo Ya no diga disparates Que pa'lo que voy hacerte Está muy bien el zacate. ⁸³	What a comfortable little angel Do not say any more nonsense What I am going to do to you The grass will be just fine.
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In the final exchange of the play, Ángel asks Luzbel to pay for a hotel, but Luzbel reassures him that for what he plans to do to Ángel, the grass will suffice. This structure, however unconventional, still follows a traditional *pastorela* narrative arc. By distracting Luzbel with a romp in the grass, Ángel saves Jotita, Macha, and Pacheca from the devil's temptations. The play stops after the exchange about the hotel and the grass, so we will never know what happens. Maybe the *pastoras* find their way to Bethlehem, maybe Ángel and Luzbel have mind-blowing sex, maybe, maybe, maybe. The play ends on a maybe, a promise, a horizon. The play does not aspire to mirror the complete story of the shepherds' journey. Instead, it asserts that laughing, fucking, and being with the community is enough. Through this adaptation, the ProLatino *pastorelas* affirm that the collection of queers gathered in a backyard on a starry December night, who might leave the party and find their own Ángel, or Luzbel, are in fact worthy of the same complete life that the *pastorela* has for centuries promised to heterosexual people who produce children.

Rodrigo Garcia, the current Managing Artistic Director for Teatro Alebrijes, remembers watching two or three of these improvised floor shows before joining ProLatino's Board of Directors. As a board member, Garcia took the initiative to direct "something" for their annual *posada* in 2008. Garcia's involvement in the *posada* marked another major moment in the

⁸³ Nuñez, Untitled, Undated Manuscript.

performance's evolution at ProLatino. Garcia migrated to the US after a short but prolific career as a professional dancer in México, which included experience performing in the Querétaro *pastorela*. Once Garcia settled in San José, he began to amass professional acting credits throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. His professional experience shaped his approach to producing and directing the *pastorela*. Under his guidance, the ProLatino *pastorela* was reimagined and assumed a more formal shape. The *pastorelas* in Queretaro and the *Pachecas Belén* adaptations produced in México served as blueprints for Garcia to reimagine the backyard *pastorelas* of ProLatino.

With Garcia now at the helm, the *pastorela* became more formal. “I was like, ‘we need to rehearse,’” Garcia remembers, “‘No, I’m not gonna do improv... we need to do this, we need to do that, we need to do *vestuario* [costumes],’ you know, the girl [referring to himself], she [again] was ambitious.”⁸⁴ This ambitious spirit guided Garcia’s vision as he mounted the *pastorela* floor shows at the annual ProLatino posada events from 2008 to 2010.

ProLatino disbanded in 2010. Their formal archives are nonexistent, and the members I spoke to about it were reluctant to discuss its end in clear terms openly. However, despite the sudden demise of the organization, the community-centered social events lived on, and with them, the desire to keep making theatre. Garcia and Nuñez realized that their community of “non-hetero conforming Latinos and Latinas who speak Spanish”⁸⁵ still needed a place to come

⁸⁴ It was not uncommon for my interlocutors to speak Spanglish (a blend of English and Spanish) when responding to interview questions. Translated text that was originally spoken in Spanish appears in brackets.

⁸⁵ “Esto Es ALA / About | Colectivoala.” n.d. Colectivoala. <https://colectivoala.wixsite.com/colectivoala/about>.

together for services, support, and socializing. They founded a new organization, Colectivo ALA (*Acción Latina de Ambiente*), in 2010.⁸⁶

You Can Also Smile Here: Teatro Alebrijes

Alebrijes are fictional creatures that grew into one of the most iconic craft practices in México. Alebrije is a nonsense word that came to artist Pedro Linares López in a fever dream, as his son, Felipe Linares Mendoza, explains:

In his dream, well, he would tell us that he saw many monsters that has appeared in the firmament, in the clouds. In between the clouds, he said there was a cloud, and the monster appeared to him. So there were very strange animals because they had the head of a rooster and the body of a frog, very ugly, no? He said they made noise. He heard that they were saying ‘Alebrije.’ My father used to tell me that, well, alebrije, ‘for me, is a word that does not exist, like the animals don’t exist.’⁸⁷

Linares López was a highly skilled sculptor, and after the dream, he created a single alebrije out of paper-mâché to see if he could sell it. The animal he created had large ears, the face of a monkey, and feet like a rooster, all fused on the body of a frog. Linares López sold it to the National Museum of Popular Arts and Industries director. He was visiting Linares López to purchase statues of Saint Judas, but he purchased the alebrije and sold it in the gift shop of the museum. This single iteration spawned a demand and with that the sculpture practice of making alebrijes was born. Like their namesake, Teatro Alebrijes produces work that plays with the

⁸⁶ Colectivo Acción Latina de Ambiente translation: Collective Action Latina of the Ambience. However, in English the equivalent of “*de ambiente*” might be “friend of Dorothy,” a gay slang term used by gay men to self identify as queer.

⁸⁷ Felipe Linares Mendoza in “La Pesadilla de Alebrijes,” Video file. 00:19. YouTube posted by ADN Opinión, April 14, 2016. www.youtube.com/watch?v=17izbPcFgTw&feature=emb_title.

boundaries of form, fantasy, and biological reality, and their origin story follows a similarly unexpected trajectory.

With this new organization came a new structure, a new mission, and new members, including Ugho Badu, who has since become the resident playwright with Teatro Alebrijes. Teatro Alebrijes became Colectivo ALA's in-house theatre ensemble. After establishing the organization and participating in various community events like San José's Pride festival, Colectivo ALA was ready to celebrate the Christmas season for the first time. *Divas A Belén* was the first show produced under Colectivo ALA and also marked the emergence of Teatro Alebrijes as a formal ensemble. As Badu recalls, *Divas A Belén* was a short play that Nuñez, Garcia, and Badu wrote collaboratively. *Divas A Belén* is a pastorela that follows the Mexican actress María Félix, singer Paquita la del Barrio, and painter Frida Kahlo as the community of "shepherds" on their way to adore the Christ child. In 2011, Teatro Alebrijes produced *Divas a Belén*, marking the group's most formally produced pastorela adaptation. As Garcia describes it, "Using what we did in the last year with ProLatino, we created *Divas A Belén* with *luces* and *vestuario* and rehearsal, and people loved it." *Divas A Belén* shifted away from the ProLatino house party floorshow format by foregrounding the play as the main event with a party to follow hosted at the Billy De Frank Center. After the first year's success, Badu realized that Colectivo ALA is a place for people to share their stories. The stories shared between community members of Colectivo ALA resonated with Badu. Informed by these stories, Badu wrote *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar* (A Dream in Whatever Place). He also wanted his plays to provide a respite from the shared trauma of migration experienced by so many group members. In Badu's own words:

Many people did not know what they were going to do for Christmas, many were alone, they did not have family, so we said, ‘Why don’t we do something... with a good message that transforms into a question of tragedy?’ It is okay to be alone. It is okay to be far from your family. It is okay to be far from your land, but you have a new home here, and you can also smile here.⁸⁸

Since their inception, the Teatro Alebrijes adaptations have always included characters in drag. The performance of Christmas plays, the non-traditional pastorelas, quickly became as important an event for Teatro Alebrijes and Colectivo ALA as the posada house parties were for ProLatino. After *Diva a Belén*, Badu would continue to write for the emerging company.⁸⁹

Teatro Alebrijes is a space where Spanish-speaking LGBTQ+ people in San José can feel safe to express themselves. However, as Garcia articulates below, serving an exclusively LGBTQ+ audience who spoke Spanish, he might have been setting up his work to serve a small niche audience. His vision was to use these plays to spark cross-cultural dialogues in the community. Garcia worried that the Spanish-speaking LGBTQ+ community would be the only ones to see them if he kept making work that was only speaking to the membership of Colectivo ALA. Garcia worked to make sure the plays he staged resonated with a wider audience. As the plays shifted, so did the audience. The age demographic began to span from young children to elders and queer people and allies who existed on a spectrum of gender identities and Spanish and English language fluency. Garcia recalls:

⁸⁸ Ugho Badu, Interview by Author, Medford, MA, November 23, 2019.

⁸⁹ Badu wrote nine other plays for Teatro Alebrijes, including *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar* [A Dream in Whatever Place], *Sucedio en la Revolucio* [It happened in the Revolution], *Un Camino Amarillo* [A Yellow Road], *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana* [A Land Called Tomorrow], *Sejirbela* (which is Alebrijes spelled backwards). In 2017, *No Es Otro Cuento de Navidad... o Tal Vez Si* [Not Another Christmas Story or Maybe It Is]. *Entre Villancicos y Onomastikos* [Of Christmas Carols and Saints Days] and *Entre Villancicos y Enredhijos* [Of Christmas Carols and Entanglements].

Our audience was becoming more diverse and... well, that, for me, gave me that feeling of like, you know what? We're not in silos anymore. You know, we are bigger than our own community and we need to start using this tool that we have to create those bridges with the other community and use it to get closer... For me, it's a validation of, you know what, these people will go and talk about us positively, and that just becomes a ripple effect. That I know that at least in one more home, I'm going to be welcome. That is a sense of safety that I want to have.

The shift Garcia describes echoes how performance studies scholar Tavia Nyong'o explains safe space in his writing about the film *Wildness* (2012):

Safe spaces are fabricated, but we do not fabricate them, at least not with full, conscious intention. We fall into them... in so falling, we become other than who we were, which is why safe space cannot protect or preserve the integrity or individuality of who we were before entering them.⁹⁰

The safe space Garcia aspires to experience is one where his work is legible and resonant beyond the insular confines of the queer Spanish-speaking Latinx community in San José. Initially, the ensemble that used to do backyard parties was fabricated, as Nyong'o notes, without full conscious intention that these plays would plant the seed for the formation of a company in the years to come. The company is something this ensemble fell into after assessing its relationship to the intentional community it built and the one that it interfaces with daily. As a theatre ensemble dependent on ticket sales and grant funds, Teatro Alebrijes could alienate the new, paying, non-queer, non-Spanish speaking audience members or shift to include them. As Nyong'o writes, "No-one enters, leaves, or fabulates a safe space unperturbed; the only violence one can do to such a space is to presume it will leave you unchanged."⁹¹ Our conversations show

⁹⁰ Nyong'o, Tavia, "Wildness: A Fabulation."

⁹¹ Nyong'o takes up the notion of fabulation from Cinema studies. Nyong'o cites Gilles Deleuze theorization of fabulation as "capacity of cinema to *fabricate*, rather than just *document*, the real" in the essay, "Wildness: A Fabulation."

that Garcia's embrace of change was not about acquiescing or abandoning a queer aesthetic or politic. It is about inexorably exposing the humanity of queer Spanish-speaking Latinx people, so that when non-queers and non-Spanish speakers attend performances, they might see beyond these essentialized identities. Educator and legal scholar John Palfrey describes this kind of space as a "brave space." Palfrey writes about the brave classroom instead of safe spaces in his book, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces: Diversity and Free Expression in Education*.

For Palfrey, a brave space is one that "approximates the world outside of academic life" and describes these spaces as "learning environments in which the primary purpose of the interaction is a search for the truth, rather than support for a particular group... even insofar as some of the discussions will be uncomfortable for certain students."⁹² The silos Garcia is trying to avoid are the "safe spaces" Palfrey talks about. For Palfrey, a safe space is one in which people (in his case specifically, students) can "explore ideas and express themselves in a context with well-understood ground rules for the conversation." This kind of safety was integral to the development of *Divas*. However, safety becomes a hindrance when in the interest of protecting from harm; the protective force makes every effort to avoid harm and thereby denies the community it is protecting the ability to build a skill set that would allow it to reduce or eliminate harm. This brave space of safety is the unachieved utopia Garcia is devoted to working towards, something that is to come and that he sees the company making strides to achieve.

Garcia's partner, Ugho Badu, serves the ensemble as the social media manager, an actor, and resident playwright and has recently begun directing and co-directing shows. Badu's

⁹² Palfrey, *Safe Spaces, Brave Spaces*, 22.

investment in the company's Christmas tradition is likewise motivated by a future vision deeply informed by Badu's experience migrating to the United States. As Muñoz reminds us in his writing about queer-of-color art-making, "Comedy does not exist independently of rage."⁹³ Cultural historian and theorist Tomás Ybarra-Frausto writing about Mexican carpa circuses echoes this as he asserts that "within Mexican/Chicano communities, humor has been an indispensable companion of endurance."⁹⁴ Badu talked about this endurance through laughter during an interview in 2020. When asked why he continues to write and perform pastorelas, Badu responds:

When you are far from your families and your customs, your food, your traditions, your everything, we can bring you a little piece of culture or tradition... I don't want people to experience sorrow or suffering because they have already suffered enough in leaving behind their kin and their land. They are suffering to adapt to this new world with new rules, new language, and new everything, so it is important that we can inject some joy, some laughter and say, 'Yes, the world is fucked, and we are fucked, but we are going to laugh together at this fuckery.'

During the interview, Badu did not articulate a world not yet here that he was striving for; instead, he insisted that the pastorelas are devoted to providing his audiences a respite from sorrow, loneliness, and suffering they might be experiencing during the holidays. The respite arrives through the humorous worlds he conjures for the stage.

In 2018, Badu began to write the Villancico plays *Entre Villancicos y Onomastíkos* (Between Christmas Carols and Onomastics), followed up in 2019 with *Entre Villancicos y Enredhijos* (Between Christmas Carols and Tangles). Both plays narrate a festive tongue-in-cheek look at Britani Marisol's family and the humorous way they navigate real trauma together.

⁹³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, xi.

⁹⁴ Ybarra-Frausto, "I Can Still Hear the Applause," 45.

Onomastikos introduces the audience to Britani Marisol (Badu), a social media-obsessed woman, and her family on the eve of Britani's birthday (her onomástico). She is turning thirty, and her parents are throwing her a *treintañera*.⁹⁵ After a series of comedic episodes, including a close-call cancelation of her *treintañera*, a makeover, a pep-talk from a severed pig's head, and her crush coming out of the closet with her, Britani Marisol forgives her parents and shares the lesson learned from the adventure. This speech gets delivered to those in attendance at her party. It affords Badu, as the playwright, a didactic moment where he can—in full drag and surrounded by all gay and trans cast—remind the audience gathered for the show that friendships should be unconditional. The family is always supportive. Family, according to Britani Marisol, is also chosen. She affirms that love between same-sex couples is natural and normal, mistakes should be recognized and learned from, that s/he is not a princess in need of rescuing, and “above all, that dreams can come true,” especially the dream of a world in which all of the above exists as normal.⁹⁶

Enredhijos revisits Britani Marisol and her family. Britani welcomes the audience through a direct address at the show's beginning, as she does in *Onomastikos*. In her speech to the audience, she blames failed attempts at love on a toy oven she did not get when she was a child. Britani shares how her visions of her perfect partner, her third-grade crush, Nicanor Alejandro, vanished in discovering this imperfect gift and then prays (via a song) to find her soulmate. The storyline of Britani's search for a soulmate becomes the secondary storyline to the

⁹⁵ This joke riffs off the Mexican tradition of quinceañeras, however since Britani is turning thirty (*treinta*) she is having a quinceñera multiplied by two in order to make up for the one her parents could not give her when she was fifteen.

⁹⁶ Badu, *Entre Villancicos y Onomastikos*, 60.

storyline of Britani's mother and her sister's long-standing grudge that comes to bear. This occurs when her sister (and Britani's cousins) visit from Los Angeles because the family patriarch is coming to visit for the holidays from México. Like *Onomastikos*, there are a series of comedic mix-ups and songs that accent the mix-ups and misunderstandings that make the play comedic. In the end, everyone, even Britani, finds a partner and can all celebrate a merry Christmas together. As much as *Enredhijos* is about people finding a partner, it is also about a community coming together across borders to share the holiday in a world where no one is alone. The world of *Villancicos* that Badu constructs in these plays echoes his deep desire for everyone to feel connected to a collective kinship that understands and ultimately loves them.

2020 would have marked the tenth-anniversary production of Teatro Alebrijes, but, like many other companies across the United States, it could not produce any Christmas programming due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, the company had to wait until 2021 to celebrate the milestone, but in 2021 and 2022, the company produced two more *Villancicos* plays.

Engaging with the oral histories and archives of the Teatro Alebrijes membership echo what Muñoz's writing about evidence and ephemera. Muñoz writes, "Queer acts, like queer performances and various performances of queerness, stand as evidence of queer lives, powers, and possibilities."⁹⁷ Throughout this chapter's engagement with formal archives and by collecting ethnographic data through my time with Teatro Alebrijes, I have shown how Teatro

⁹⁷ Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 16.

Alebrijes is part of a long legacy of queer performance in San José, CA and how, though their yearly pastorela, they are continuously accessing an archive of the past to reimagine the future.

Chapter 3: Performing Devotion Labor and Embodying The Quotidian Diva

In December 2019, I spent a week with Teatro Alebrijes. On my first night with the company, I arrived at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, a large multipurpose arts and culture complex in the heart of San José's working class and predominantly Latinx Mayfair neighborhood. Tonight is the ensemble's first tech rehearsal before the premiere performance of *Entre Villancicos y Enredhijos*, their yearly pastorela. Teatro Alebrijes has performed its pastorelas at the Mexican Heritage Plaza since 2015. The ensemble is as focused as they are precise while they work to transform the rented gallery space at the plaza into their performance space for the weekend. The endeavor is all hands on deck, so I helped unload vehicles full of props, costumes, and set pieces. After I contributed to the construction of the portable stage and audience seating, I took a break to interview veteran ensemble member Josef Martinez. This was my first interview and I wanted to understand the amount of labor and obstacles, as well as the motivations that are part of their life for members of the ensemble. "Tell me what a typical day is like for you," I asked Martinez. His response shifted my framework for thinking about labor and the trajectory of this chapter:

I grew up to be angry with God. I wanted to find him and personally ask certain things, one of which is: 'Why did you pick me to be gay?' You know? It's like 'what, we are eleven in this family, honey.' You know, it's like, 'why?' It made me take on an adventurous life... I had so much communication with God, through my anger-driven search for him. I remained connected to him.

I did not anticipate that Martinez would elaborate at length about his relationship to God, prayer, and meditation as an answer to how he approaches life and his roles with Teatro Alebrijes.

Martinez's "anger-driven search" resonated for days after the interview. Martinez's deep anger motivated his search for God, leading him to Teatro Alebrijes. Through interviews, it became clear that the ensemble's labor is always physical, affective, and pedagogical. Devotion, worship, and spirituality echoed in interviews, scripts, and archival videos. Beyond reimagining the formulaic structure of this play, Teatro Alebrijes is also reimagining their place in the world and their relationships to who/what they consider the divine.

Framing Devotional Labor and Performance

Benedict of Nursia, founder of the Benedictine order of monks, crafted a set of rules which scripts the labor expectations of members of the order. In *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, the early monastic leader urges monks of the order to embrace "the labor of obedience" as a guide back to God, "whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience."⁹⁸ In this framing, Benedict invokes one of the cardinal sins of the church to point to a failure in performance. Sloth is about not wanting to work; for the benedictine order, labor is the act of performing physical, mental and spiritual tasks. *The Rule* also provides explicit guidelines for the performance of communal labor by brothers within the monastery, which includes: sharing in the reading of John Cassian's *The Conferences*, an early Christian text that scripts dialogues between the author and a traveling companion named Germanis in Bethlehem. One day, they are joined by an older man named Pinufius who shares stories with John and Germanis about the monks in Egypt. Cassian scholar Niki Kasumi Clements argues that Cassian's project invests in what she terms "ethical

⁹⁸ Benedict. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, 9.

agency”; she describes Cassian’s text as “rich in resources for adopting a pragmatic ethics as opposed to rule-based morality.”⁹⁹ By coupling their reading of Cassian’s text with a rigorous performance practice of daily labor, including prayer, Benedictine monks develop a rule-based morality.

“Prayer,” as theologian and scholar Amy Hollywood observes, “lies at the heart of mystical life.”¹⁰⁰ For monastic orders, prayer is an essential part of the pious life. The labor of prayer is a rote practice that, through repetition, allows those who perform it to achieve more profound self-examination. With training, a monk could more easily guide fellow monks to a deeper connection with God. For the Benedictine monastic order, prayer involved chanting the *Opus Dei*.¹⁰¹ Benedict’s *Rule* required daily prayer hours for all members of the order. This practice is part of their labor, it facilitates the transformation necessary to achieve a pure heart or spirit.

In her reading of John Cassian’s *Conferences*, specifically those about the practice of prayer, Hollywood describes prayer as the labor that early monastic devotees took up to train themselves for a life of obedience, chastity, and poverty to attain a “fullness” promised to them in heaven.¹⁰² This training is parallel to memorizing lines, devising dialogue, or embodying choreography in the theater. Both practices use physical, verbal, and emotive vocabulary to tell a

⁹⁹ Clements, *The Site of Ascetic Self*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Hollywood, “Introduction”, 15.

¹⁰¹ The *Opus Dei* is also known as the “liturgy of the hours,” a set of prayers that happen at five different times throughout the day.

¹⁰² John Cassian’s *Conferences* is a record of interviews that Cassian conducted with desert monks from A.D. 400. The text is an early model for monastic life and is cited by St. Benedict in his *Rule* as required reading for a monastic life.

story. Both practices are performance. Prayer is a script for early Christian monks that encouraged devotion through repetition. They could devote their time and energy to rehearsing this durational performance for one audience: God, who could fulfill the promise of heaven that these early monks anticipated, if the performance was worthy of such a deed.

In *Conferences*, the earth is something to be “endured” before gaining access to the kingdom of heaven, a place where life is whole.¹⁰³ In the Cassian promise of fullness, I see space for a queer reading through the work of Jose Muñoz. Muñoz begins *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* by asserting that “Queerness is not yet here.”¹⁰⁴ In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz looks to the visual and performance work of queer artists of color who have left the ephemera he reads as evidence. Still, throughout his provocative and astute observations, Muñoz is steadfast in his assessment that these things only tell us what queerness was and never what it will be. The promise of what it will be, like heaven, is something we must devote constant labor toward; in a later chapter, he urges readers to consider failed revolutions, “blueprints to a better world that queer utopian aesthetics supply... a route that should lead us to heaven or, better yet, to something like it.”¹⁰⁵

For the artists Muñoz engages, art is devotional labor toward the “not yet here.” For Benedict, this labor manifests as prayer. Historian Rachel Fulton Brown describes prayer “for early and medieval Christians... [as an ask] beginning in reason, but also an offering ending in

¹⁰³ Cassian, John, and Boniface Ramsey. “Chapter III” In *The Conferences of John Cassian* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1997), 5.

¹⁰⁴ Muñoz. *Utopia*. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Muñoz, *Utopia*. 146.

love.” Brown also categorizes prayer as an act of confession, an appeal for help, and, following Augustinian mystic Walter Hilton, labor which “might take a lifetime to accomplish.”¹⁰⁶ Prayer, in short, is a way to articulate desires and examine one’s life that builds a life-long practice that ultimately achieves proximity to the perfection of God. For Muñoz, part of his writing about the drive of artist’s labor, specifically, in service of arrival at a utopian queerness, is articulated in ways that mirror the early Christian mystic pursuit of “heaven,” which never ceases. One form of labor Muñoz champions throughout *Cruising Utopia* is social critique through art. For Muñoz, art can be the map to heaven. Still, he is clear from his first words that heaven, utopia, and queerness are not things to achieve in one’s lifetime but, like prayer, a practice to maintain that might get oneself and one’s community closer to it.

Benedictine monks commit to a single monastery and devote their labor to the place where they worship and work in seclusion. In contrast, mendicant friars, like those who traveled to México during the conquest, gravitated toward the city so that their work could immediately impact the community. As historian Walter Simmons notes, mendicant friars “mobilized enormous resources and disseminated their images widely” by multiple means, including what Simmons identifies as “exempla (stories ready-made for preaching).”¹⁰⁷ One such story central to the Franciscan ministry is the story of Christ’s Nativity. Bonaventure credits Francis of Assisi as the first to construct a nativity scene in the winter of 1223. In *The Life of Saint Francis of Assisi*, Bonaventure details how Francis acquired permission from Pope Honorius III to celebrate a Mass in honor of the birth of Christ. This mass was celebrated in front of a crib placed on top of

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Fulton Brown, “Oratio/Prayer”, 176.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 101.

hay, and added an ox and a donkey.¹⁰⁸ As Bonaventure describes, “The man of God stands before the crib, filled with affection, bathed in tears and overflowing with joy.”¹⁰⁹ In this early nativity, Assisi constructs an immersive experience for his audience, where they, like he, can perform his deep devotion to Christ by reciting the Mass and praying for humanity to remember “the poor King.”¹¹⁰ While Assisi’s manger installation performance was not a formally scripted play, his Mass in front of the manger gave parishioners a ritualized spectacle that would fuse itself to Christmas-time performances for centuries.

As I note in Chapter One, a Catholic presence in the Americas predates the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519. However, it was not until the arrival of twelve Franciscan friars in 1524 that liturgical drama began proliferating in México. The earliest mention of liturgical drama performed in México is in *Historia de los Indios de Nueva España* (1541). In *Historia*, Friar Toribio of Benavente documents four auto sacramentales and a play titled *The Conquest of Jerusalem*.¹¹¹ Central to this play, as Latinx theater historian and performance studies scholar Patricia Ybarra notes, is the Catholic rehearsed and enacted sacrament of baptism.¹¹² The pastorela tradition is of this ilk, a play that offers audiences models for the rehearsal of faith. It shares two pivotal Bible stories with audiences, uplifting Catholic ideologies. However, the

¹⁰⁸ Bonaventure, 278.

¹⁰⁹ Bonaventure, 278.

¹¹⁰ Bonaventure 278.

¹¹¹ Toribio of Benavente was one of twelve of the earliest Franciscan Friars to arrive in México. His book, *History of the Indians of New Spain*, is a largely firsthand account of the conquest in the states of México, Tlaxcala, and Puebla. In the book, he documents Mexica daily life and spiritual practice as he observed them.

¹¹² Ybarra, *Performing Conquest*, 44.

Franciscans who came to México did not do so solely at the direct behest of God. They were summoned by Cortés in order to evangelize and convert the native population. While a vow of personal poverty and a devotional practice built around studying, reciting, interpreting, and acting on Christ's teaching guided them, the work of the clergy in México had the robust, monied support of the Spanish crown; it was both a deep love of God and explicit obedience to the state that motivated the labor of these clergymen.

As members of Teatro Alebrijes articulated through interviews, the ensemble's efforts to produce a pastorela every Christmas season is labor guided by love. Some members understand their participation as an act of love embodied for their community. Some company members perform the pastorelas hoping audiences come away from the play with a renewed understanding that they are loved. The mandate to do "with love" for Monastics is about embodying/performing/modeling a way of being in the world that matches the church's doctrine, the intermediary for the word of God. Christian devotion is about loving something so profoundly that your love compels you to share it. In some cases, like the mendicant friars, they share it with the world in ways that reverberate across generations.

The devotion to Christ, which motivates intimate, private, labor acts like prayer, and more spectacular performances like delivering a mass in front of a manger or the pastorela, are all inspired by love, a love directed at and in service of seeking the love of Christ. Love motivates devotional labor. Cassian, Benedict, Francis of Assisi, the Franciscans who arrived in México with Hernán Cortés, and the pastorela puppets are all scripting devotional practices in one way or another devotional labor through their various dramatizations.

Cassian dramatizes the impact of daily labor and prayer for Benedict, the labor of service to the monastery, Francis of Assisi's nativity, and the early pastorelas pilgrimage are dramatic interpretations that reinforce devotion to God. After talking to members of Teatro Alebrijes, I am starting to see echoes of this same motivation to dramatize exchanges foundational to their worldview and belief systems. While John Cassian, Francis of Assisi, and Teatro Alebrijes use different means to achieve their goal, they are all three invested in staging opportunities for contemplation in their works. However, the end goal for Alebrijes is the promise of a world where Latinx LGBTQ+ people can live and thrive.

Devotion to God motivated the emergence of the pastorela in unique ways after the conquest. The queer approach to liturgical dramas by companies like Teatro Alebrijes yields different results. Teatro Alebrijes is not trying to save the world from Satan or shape history with their adaptations; they are trying to archive memory through creative reflections of community. Pastorelas carry the vestiges of these monastic and mendicant mandates; even today, as Teatro Alebrijes actively dismantles the narrative scaffold and expands a stock company of characters, devotion is still a significant part of the ethos and method of their work.

Leading with Love: A Path to the "Not Yet Here"

Love is a central tenet of Benedict's *Rule*. In the preface, the author ties labor, faith and utopia by promising readers "hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."¹¹³ For Benedict, love is the objective and method, and he puts forward an extensive list of concrete

¹¹³ Benedict, *Rule*, 19.

things one should and should not do or love in order to express love. A devotion to service guided by love also drives production manager Janvier Berber-Acosta. Although Teatro Alebrijes members spend their late fall and early winter months devoted to mounting their adaptation of a pastorela, this practice is not always motivated by an allegiance to the Catholic Church or the nostalgia of recuperating or embodying childhood memories and aspirations. Berber-Acosta, for example, describes his upbringing as “open.” He was free to skip worship services as a child but was also not discouraged from building a relationship with the church. In an interview, Berber-Acosta echoed the same love-led approach to his work with Teatro Alebrijes. Part of the labor he performs on behalf of the group is organizing, storing, and maintaining the group’s growing archive of props, costumes, and production documentation in the garage of his family’s home. Berber-Acosta’s garage also serves as a gathering space for rehearsals and celebrations for the ensemble:

I do it with love, so I feel like a little part of me is put into the job... It feels like such a release inside me, and it makes me feel like somebody cares for me, so I want to do the same thing with people regardless if they see it or not. It makes me feel good about myself too. All the work that I do is for the same reason, to give it to the actors so that we can give it to the audience... I guess all the work that the Alebrijes do, we deliver with love for the audience. I think we all have the same values, and we deserve the same respect because... you know, all of the work you do and how hard it is to have a full-time job and come home and work on something else that you are not even getting paid for and for me, that is a proof of love.¹¹⁴

Berber-Acosta also made evident that his work is future-guided by a vision on the horizon. What drives him to devote his time and resources is the faith that something is next.

¹¹⁴ Interview with Janvier Berber-Acosta, October 2022.

Explicitly, Berber-Acosta expressed hope that Teatro Alebrijes might tour their works to other markets, both across the state and nationally.

Throughout the company's history, Teatro Alebrijes has slowly taken on an informal structure where certain members take on administrative duties like Managing Artistic Director, Resident Playwright, Production Manager, or Archivist.¹¹⁵ Except for Rodrigo Garcia, who usually directs, all members take on these roles in addition to acting. None of this labor is full or even part-time employment. Managing Artistic Director Rodrigo Garcia rarely acknowledges this bifurcation of administrator and company members when he delivers the curtain speech at the beginning of the Teatro Alebrijes productions. Garcia introduces himself as a "member of the group." Most members, including Garcia, volunteer resources to mount the yearly pastorela. Payment rendered for any labor is usually a modest stipend that members all acknowledge is primarily what Garcia describes as a "symbolic" gesture after the company can cover all expenses. This monetary gesture does not sustain a member's investment in the ensemble. Garcia oversees logistics like grants management and reporting. He is also the central artistic leader who directs all performances. Outside of the group, he serves in the formal capacity of Artistic Director for Teatro Visión in San José.¹¹⁶ As the closest connection to funding streams and expenses, he clearly articulated his approach to compensating performers. Although he does not

¹¹⁵ These are titles I am using to describe the work that they do in order to make clear who is doing what in the company, but for the most part, everyone uses language like "part of" or "member of" to describe their relationship to the company and the work they do.

¹¹⁶ Teatro Visión is a theatre company that emerged during the Chicano Movement and has a long history in San José. Teatro Visión was founded and led for thirty-three years by Elisa Marina Alvarado, Garcia's mentor. Garcia was appointed as the new Artistic Director by the company's Board of Directors in 2017. The structure of Teatro Visión is more formal. In some ways, it mirrors theaters of similar size and legacies like Su Teatro (Denver, CO), Cara Mia (Austin, TX), Milagro Theatre (Portland OR), or Latino Theatre Company (Los Angeles, CA).

earn a salary for his work with Teatro Alebrijes, Garcia plans for a line item to pay ensemble members who participate. “I always try to look at the bulk of the project and divide the gains proportionally.” Garcia told me, “Sometimes we get good chunks of money; sometimes we don’t.” Garcia, for example, invests his time, energy, and resources into the ensemble because he is committed to cultivating and expanding a safety network for LGBTQ+ Latinx people across Santa Clara County. Part of the labor exerted by the company is logistical support like transporting props, loading and unloading trucks, and producing content to promote ticket sales.

Alebrijes also exert labor in rehearsal, preparing their bodies, voices, and minds to embody their characters. This labor comes with the added layer of contemplation as ensemble members embody the cast of a given story. Each play allows the cast to reevaluate their understanding of gender and parody as they tell stories in drag. The following section considers what devotion to the practice of drag offers the members of Teatro Alebrijes in their gender journey, and how performing in drag reframes these stories to normalize queerness.

Gender: An Endless Possibility of Feeling and Knowing

When an artist repeatedly reaches into the same repositories for material, it becomes style; it shapes their artistic “voice.” I interpret a love for, loyalty to, or repeated interrogations of history, or hip-hop or drag, or anything else an artist engages over and again in their art as a manifestation of devotion.

Each artist in the ensemble makes a unique contribution to the company, but collectively, the Teatro Alebrijes’ “voice” is most evident through its use of drag. This consistent investment in drag first drew me to their work. Drag is a pedagogical tool that allows the ensemble to build

more expansive notions of gender for themselves and their audiences. Drag makes evident a mode of inquiry about gender that is constant for the group. The company is devoted to exploring the permeability of gender borders. The ensemble members I interviewed were not interested in using performance as an intervention for the audience. Instead, they were devoted to exploring gender elasticity motivated by the constructions of gender that they inherited.

Carolina Perez is an actress, founding company member, and a butch lesbian, who also performs in the femme drag tradition when participating in the Teatro Alebrijes pastorelas. During my interview with Perez, she articulated how her participation in the yearly pastorelas has shaped her relationship with gender and performance through her relationship with the men in the group. “I was learning to be feminine by men,” Perez remarked, “so that just makes me think, like, ‘Oh, my God! This is like an endless possibility of like, feeling and knowing.’” Perez’s observation echoes what Jill Dolan asserts, about gender’s utopic potential. Dolan writes, “Male desire is not at all a factor in representations created by lesbians. As a result, the area lesbian subjectivity seems a place to begin to envision new possibilities for representation.”¹¹⁷ Perez’s drag femmes complicate the binary for her and her audience in ways that are nuanced and hilarious. Through her performance, Perez reframes what it means to be a Latina pushing the definition of Latinx femininity outside of the bounds of *marianismo*.¹¹⁸

Although, Perez admits that the femme roles are a stretch outside her butch comfort zone, Perez leans into the lessons from the male-bodied actors who take on the female roles watching

¹¹⁷ Dolan, *Presence & Desire*, 129.

¹¹⁸ *Marianismo* is a term that describes a woman’s position in society through a proximity to the Virgin Mary, who was young, pure, and self-sacrificing. For more see: Stevens, Evelyn P. “Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America.” In *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays*, edited by Ann Pescatello, pp. 90–101. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973.

them perform gestures or vocal inflections that extend these woman into a different archetype, that I describe as the quotidian diva, a woman who does not fall into one or the other side of a virgin/whore dichotomy, but instead, one who vacillates within and beyond this binary with fluidity and flourish.

One actor Perez culls her lessons on femininity from is Josef Martinez. Martinez, who has built a signature character Antonia Rosas Celeste, walked me through his process for crafting the women he plays.¹¹⁹ His process begins, similar to the influential German-American actress, Uta Hagen's object exercises, with a series of questions.¹²⁰ Once he has answered as many questions as he can from the script, Martinez spends time with the women in his life *chismiando*, or engaging in the exchange of *chisme*, gossip. While *chismiando*, the women Martinez engages with model posture, gesture, inflections and self fashioning choices that help him build a female character in service of the parody plays by Teatro Alebrijes, without constructing a parody of womanhood in the process. Finally, he gets dressed. For Martinez, the drag element in his performance is serious work.¹²¹

This seriousness is rooted in his relationship to Mexican actress, María Félix.¹²² Martinez spoke at length about his first experience with Teatro Alebrijes where he played María Félix for

¹¹⁹ Antonia Rosas Celeste is the mother of Britani Marisol, the protagonist of the *Entre Villancicos* plays. She appears in all but one of the plays in this series.

¹²⁰ Hagen, *Respect for Acting*, 82.

¹²¹ Script is written with the parenthetical plural because Martinez originated the role of *Doña Antonia* beginning in 2019, and has developed the role in subsequent productions through 2022.

¹²² María Félix is a Mexican actress who acted in films across México and Europe between 1943-2002. She is often cast in roles where her characters have dynamic moments on screen where they fight back against patriarchal, interpersonal and systemic violence.

Divas A Belén. Martinez idolized Mexican film diva María Félix because, as he states, “she pulled me through.”¹²³ Martinez described how even before he was cast in *Divas*, María Félix held a very high status as a figure in his life because she offered him an alternate version of femininity than the model that he experienced at home. Martinez told me that from a young age, he felt a deep connection to the “feminine energy in his spirit.”¹²⁴ However, the women in his home performed subservient and docile roles that always acquiesced to the whims of his father’s violent alcoholism. He followed the model offered to the women in his family, in order to survive his father’s violence. However, he recounted finding an escape in Félix’s oeuvre and would often make decisions by asking himself, “What Would María Félix do?”¹²⁵

In 2011, Martinez asked himself this question after getting a phone call from ProLatino co-founder Omar Nuñez. Martinez sought something to fill a void left over from a breakup. Martinez recalls, “I’m like ‘Oh, my god, I’m so bored, no one’s calling me’... and I’m like, ‘well, whoever calls me, whatever happens, and whatever they ask me to do, I will do it right now’... and [Nuñez] called, and he gave me the news.”¹²⁶ In the beginning, however, Martinez was reluctant to accept the role because dressing in drag would give mixed messages to his same-sex sexual partners about his relationship to masculinity vis-à-vis his role as the active sexual partner, the “top.” “[I do not like to dress like a woman because] I play the top role, [the

¹²³ Josef Martinez, Interview by Author, Medford, MA, July 8, 2020.

¹²⁴ Josef Martines, Personal Communication with the Author, Fort Collins, CO, October 30, 2023.

¹²⁵ Josef Martines, Personal Communication with the Author, Fort Collins, CO, October 30, 2023.

¹²⁶ Josef Martinez, Interview by Author, Medford, MA, July 8, 2020.

jotas are going to say, there goes the one who fucks me, dressed like a woman]...”¹²⁷ Martinez was also reluctant to take on the role because of his deep respect for María Félix. Martinez felt pressured to approximate or impersonate a highly legible version of Félix, a woman with whom his audience would be very familiar and with whom they (like he) had built a strong affinity through her long, accomplished, and storied career. However, ultimately, Martinez believed that he is prepared for whatever role he plays because there is something in his life experience that can always connect him to any role, so the women he performs as are already “inside” of him.

Perez also alludes to a similar repository of embodied knowledge when she talked about playing men or butches in the plays:

I love my butch characters... someone put it so nicely to me, [that I was in a fight] with my femininity and as an actor, I ended up making peace with that part of me. And at Teatro Alebrijes, I feel it’s just so, so good that I can be a butch, I can be a boy, I can be feminine, and I like each of those... I feel like that’s so powerful in [the group]. You can be as gay as you want, as feminine as you want, as butch as you want, you know?¹²⁸

For Perez, the femininity that she “learned” from the men in the group is simultaneously about navigating the technology of producing womanhood, like learning how to apply eye shadow and embracing gestures that get interpreted as feminine and make her uncomfortable. Ultimately, Perez acknowledges that Butch, femme, and boy are repositories with resources for excitement, joy, and liberation from the rigid binary that have shaped her life from a young age. As she explains, “I did not define myself. I hated that; that bothered me... I couldn’t understand

¹²⁷ Josef Martinez, Interview by Author, Medford, MA, July 8, 2020. Bracketed sections are translated from Spanish to English.

¹²⁸ Carolina Perez, Interview by Author, Medford, MA, September 2022.

how different I was... I can be whatever I want; I'm not defined." Perez also recognized that while she can now access, experiment, and reorient gender; these reorientations are permanently informed by her experience as a cisgender woman, a subjectivity she embraces, albeit at times reluctantly.

In gender studies scholar Meredith Heller's book *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Drag*, Heller crafts an excellent discussion of the evolution of drag discourse.¹²⁹ Early in the book, Heller scrutinizes the definition in the 2004 anthology, *The Drag Queen Anthology*, edited by Schacht and Underwood. Heller notes that the definition used by Stephen Schacht and Lisa Underwood rests on the assumption of stability of the performers' "stable cisgender identity in contrast to the gender seen onstage."¹³⁰ Heller further notes that "[d]rag discourse has the power to affect the people doing the act, watching the action and learning about the activities remotely."¹³¹ The discourses of drag that circulated for group members varied because of the context through which different members encountered drag.

"Drag is about many things" Roger Baker asserts in *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, a book about the art of drag, published in the early 1990s. Baker goes on to say, "It is about role-playing and questions the meaning of both gender and sexual identity," and finally, Baker adds, "It is about men's fear of women as much as men's love of women."¹³² In Baker's formation, women are positioned as abject subjects, which, as Latinx

¹²⁹ Heller, *Queering Drag*.

¹³⁰ Heller, *Queering Drag*, 4-5.

¹³¹ Heller, *Queering Drag*, 5.

¹³² Baker, *Drag*, 18.

performance studies scholar Leticia Alvarado describes by engaging with African American Literature Scholar Darien Scott's work on abjections, is a "relationship with the abject of simultaneous 'attraction and repulsion'"¹³³ My experience as a performer and audience member for drag performances in various live and digital settings, coupled with my time spent with the members of Teatro Alebrijes, reaffirms the first of Baker's claims about questioning gender and sexuality. However, Baker's investment in a men/women binary is an unproductive framework for unpacking the kinds of performances crafted by this group of actors whose relationship to gender is much more nuanced. Discourses emerge from a desire to gain a nuanced understanding of replicated acts, events, or spectacles.

Some Alebrijes who spoke directly about their experience getting in drag engaged Baker's love/fear binary, but the fear was different. Playwright Ugho Badu spoke about his gender-bending performances in pastorelas as moments that carried great responsibility: "I was scared to do it badly, and again to do it badly would imply that my work was to ridicule, and I did not want that."¹³⁴ In Baker, the fear he is speaking about is rooted in the notion that by performing as a "woman" that somehow his performance might have consequences for the man you are or are perceived to be by society. This is not the case for Badu, whose fear is rooted in a power differential, where he acknowledges that as a cisgender male, his body holds a certain amount of social power and influence. His fear is about his male body's potential to inflict harm, by delivering a performance that can be interpreted as ridicule. Badu also spoke to the liberatory potential of performing in drag for both the audience and the performer. "When you do drag," he

¹³³ Alvarado, *Abject Performance*, 8.

¹³⁴ Badu, Interview with Author, January 2020.

said, “[i]t’s like you’re tearing down these barriers, these chains... to scream at the world that you are here. This is who I am; this is my life.” For Badu, drag is a means to an end in a larger pedagogical project for his audiences which aligns with Heller’s assertion that “[g]ender-bending encompasses a generative and rich potential in that it can build community, create safer spaces, and, over time, lead to more possibilities for queer lives.” Badu echoed this sentiment in an interview:

I don’t consider myself a drag queen because I am very lazy to do makeup, and I am very inept at walking in heels. But when I do, I really enjoy it with all my heart. And I already know that I am representing a woman, and that if a woman or a queer person identifies with this character is very nice; but not only that, it is the power to break stereotypes. Children come, adults come, and our grandparents, old men and women, and that it can be normalized for the two hours that they are there... and they know that they are seeing a gay person, or they know that they are seeing a lesbian, or a trans [person], or that they are seeing a drag queen... capable of loving, laughing, crying, and that the audience can see that human side.¹³⁵

I read Badu’s quote through what Jill Dolan has called the “utopian performative,” or the:

...small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense.”¹³⁶

The utopia that both Badu and Dolan cite above, however, often remains aspirational because accessing the act of performing in drag remains a precarious embodiment that puts a body at risk at each performance. This precarity stems from how specific modes of performing masculinity have become fixed constants for both performers and audience members, and transgressing these norms is dangerous. Many of the company members I interviewed spoke explicitly about how

¹³⁵ Badu, Interview with Author, January 2020.

¹³⁶ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 5.

masculinity is constructed for them at a young age and how this construct was only understood to have two reactions: you could only embrace or reject, but what you were embracing or rejecting was femininity.

I want to return to my assessment of Baker's articulation of drag as loving and hating a woman. I think the aim at women is what misguides his assessment as a productive framework for contemporary conversations. Drag is not about loving or hating (or doing both simultaneously) women, but it is about exploring and expressing your masculinity and femininity at different, often spectacular registers (sometimes simultaneously).

Through the repeated use of gender play in their work, Teatro Alebrijes is not doing a drag show, but instead engaging in a repetition of gender play to undo the misogyny that informs their relationships to their bodies. Ultimately, I interpret the members of Teatro Alebrijes' devotion to drag and gender play as a form of prayer. The practice brings them closer to the utopia to come, to the queerness on the horizon within themselves, and to the social world they see manifesting in the future. This chapter's final section explores instances of performances where actors embody a character that reoccurs in their yearly *pastorelas*, the quotidian diva.

I'm Every Woman: Quotidian Diva Worship

For Teatro Alebrijes, drag is a central aesthetic intervention which, as I discuss in Chapter Two, dates back for the company to the early 1990s impromptu *pastorelas* and floor shows at the annual ProLatino posada and proliferates as a strategy for activism thereafter. This chapter frames devotional labor and drag performance conversation. In what follows, I explore how Teatro Alebrijes models new relationships to gender through their *pastorelas*. The ensemble

exalts women in their everyday lives to the status of a diva by placing them in the same category of pop divas through performance. I argue that these embodiments are an exercise of a gesture of homage and devotion in service of adding to a Chicana/Méicana pantheon of stock characters that offer a more capacious renderings of women.

A Teatro Alebrijes pastorela is full of music. As I highlight in earlier chapters, the company makes intentional and significant deviations from the Herrera-Sobek scaffold. One thing that does carry over from this narrative frame is the insistence on opening the performance with an introductory song. Sometimes parody songs wink at divas from an archive that vacillates between borders. Sometimes it is outright lip sync. Teatro Alebrijes is steadfast in its devotional practice of diva worship onstage. The female characters they create embody these divas; in so doing, Teatro Alebrijes creates what I describe as the “quotidian diva,” a female character who can command the world they inhabit to give them the attention they deserve. This section explores how, through the pastorelas of Teatro Alebrijes, diva worship takes a turn to elevate the people in the company’s quotidian sphere to “diva” status, and how their worship of these quotidian divas manifests in front of audiences and in their life.

Teatro Alebrijes’ engagement with the figure of the quotidian diva adds the discourse around divas as nightlife scholar and performance ethnographer Kareem Khubchandani points out in his analysis of “Divas on Screen,” which traces a legacy of scholarship on divas that centers heavily on musicians.¹³⁷ Khubchandani also lists the multiple kinds of artists who have marginally been considered in scholarship on diva worship which include people in “acting,

¹³⁷ Khubchandani, *Ishtyle*, 141.

fashion, and hairstyles” before a close reading of diva performance that centers dancers.¹³⁸ The aforementioned diva labor all revolved around the production of artistic labor and a relationship to fans that, as musical theatre scholar Stacy Wolf points out, “are necessary for the diva to exist.”¹³⁹ In this section, I am suggesting that, as witness to the women in their lives, the membership of Teatro Alebrijes provides that necessary audience for the quotidian diva.

Through their work, Teatro Alebrijes redirects the devotional labor which the *pastorelas* historically perform in service of Catholic edicts. However, the company does not eschew the compulsory and heteronormative logic entrenched in the *pastorela*. Instead of undoing this indoctrination, they offer their audiences new parallel worlds to devote themselves to, where new relationships to gender are possible and where divas emerge from everyday and every night life. However, the vestiges of the Catholic tradition that they draw from remain in the rearticulated worlds they share with their audiences. As I have shown in earlier chapters, *pastorelas* have a long history of being weaponized in service of colonization, a trend that is still legible in many contemporary iterations of the *pastorela*.

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the *pastorela* of Teatro Alebrijes is a *relajo* event. It is a moment where seriousness is suspended. However, in the context of the ensemble’s acts of diva worship, I think it is important to articulate the complexities of suspension. In the work of Teatro Alebrijes, what is evident is that their suspensions of seriousness do not mean that all seriousness disappears completely (even if it is only temporarily). What I have observed

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Wolf, “Wicked Divas”, 54.

instead is that the seriousness shifts away from an investment in the complex matrix of interlocking oppressive systems, and towards queer models of devotional labor.

Religious studies scholar Kris Trujillo uses the term “queer melancholia” to interpret the emergence and impact of the academic publication *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*. Trujillo’s articulation of queer melancholia is productive on multiple registers; namely, it allows him to “show how the practice of queer theorizing is inseparable from the rituals of caring for the dead.”¹⁴⁰ In the rehearsal rooms and stage productions of Teatro Alebrijes, I have also seen the company engage in a unique manifestation of this melancholia, this ritualized care work. However, the living is the target of their labor. The pastorelas of Teatro Alebrijes have ritualized and devotional practice to celebrate an archetypal character in their plays that I identify as the quotidian diva. This celebration is also memorializing and mourning not for the dead, but for the distant. The women crafted onstage in the pastorelas of Teatro Alebrijes are amalgamations of memory and longing for an imagined mother who is missing. Sometimes, these divas are young girls; sometimes, they are unmarried adult women. For the ensemble, this mother is often physically missing because of distance made and enforced by immigration laws or the image of an imagined mother who was unavailable to support their queer child because of her homophobia.

As staged by Teatro Alebrijes, quotidian diva worship celebrates these women’s ability to care for their queer kin and themselves in fierce, fabulous, and funny ways. As author Michael Montlack writes in *Divining Divas*, “Perhaps in loving our divas, we have found a way in this

¹⁴⁰ Trujillo, “Queer Melancholia”, 107.

world to love ourselves.”¹⁴¹ I frame this labor through devotion because devotion is a set of practices that people whose aim is reverence undertake; in order to revere, that thing is often exalted. In my experience watching and participating in pastorelas with Teatro Alebrijes, the archetype of the quotidian diva is exalted in the same ways that historically the Chicano theatre has exalted other archetypes, like the *pelado*, and congealed these identities into a coherent set of performance practices in hopes that these embodiments humanize Latinx people through performance. The divas that Teatro Alebrijes stages come in three forms, but given this project’s limited scope and timeline, I will focus on two of those forms in this dissertation. This chapter will discuss *chicas* (young women) and *mamás* (mothers). The third category of quotidian diva, *las comadres*, will be considered at length in the book.

Opera scholar Terry Castle writes about “the nourishing power of admiration.”¹⁴² Writer and editor Michael Montlack further observes that “we owe [divas] a great debt, which we seem to happily pay with our unending devotion and fierce love.”¹⁴³ Writing about Lesbian devotion to female opera singers, Castle’s essay frames the diva as the person being nourished by her admirers, while Montlack’s collection compiles reflections by gay men about the divas on the theatrical, musical, world, and soundstage that affirms their existence in various ways. In both cases, the diva has already been made a spectacle by how their image or oeuvre has entered the zeitgeist. The quotidian diva does not share the same notoriety, so the opportunity for mythology to be constructed around them has a much more limited scope and is informed by actual acts of

¹⁴¹ Montlack, *Divining Divas*, 9.

¹⁴² Castle, “In Praise of Brigitte Fassbaender,” 49.

¹⁴³ Montlack, *Divining Divas*, 9.

material nourishment in the forms of socio-emotional care, acts of service, or physical resources like food and drink that the quotidian diva might provide or be provided by their admirer.

Khubchandani uses the term “reanimations” from linguistic anthropologist Constantine V. Nakassis to discuss the embodiments of Hindi cinema, which Khubchandani describes as gestures that become “repositories of affect.” Both Castle and Khubchandani are interested in finding ways that diva worship can be either a productive optic for critique or something more liberating. Khubchandani writes, “The labor of diva worship provides something more than the world wants us to have, including life.”¹⁴⁴ Using Khubchandani’s framework, the following section close reads a moment of performance by Alebrijes ensemble member Sergio Davila, in which gesture becomes a repository of affect. In this corporeal repository, a comingling of subjectivities that Wolf describes as a collision between “the diva as character and the diva as actor” occurs.¹⁴⁵

Chicas:

In *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana*, actor Sergio Davila plays a young orphan girl named Pimienta who dreams of becoming a glamorous actress. Her role mirrors the character of Gila in other pastorelas, in so far as Pimienta is visited by an otherworldly being and told to go on a journey. However, unlike Gila, Pimienta’s journey will not end at the manger, delivering a song for baby Jesus. Instead, Pimienta helps the other orphans cross into a land called Tomorrow, or *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana*, to help them believe in their dreams. She is given this responsibility by a fairy named Glamorina. Pimienta is not the protagonist. This story is about

¹⁴⁴ Khubchandani, *Ishtyle*, 150.

¹⁴⁵ Wolf, “Wicked Divas,” 49.

Badu's character Piedrita; but from the onset of the play, Pimenta encourages her fellow orphans to keep their spirits up despite their dire circumstances in the orphanage. She is the Christmas spirit, a spirit of endurance and hope. This is another way that she is like Gila.

This young group of orphans embarks on an adventure. Piedrita is separated from his friends and left vulnerable to spells and other trickery in the land of Tomorrow. Piedrita eventually reunites with his friends, but when he does, he is under a spell that does not allow him to recognize the friends he has right before him. The orphans sing until the spell is broken, and Piedrita's spell breaks when he offers a solo verse of the song before the ensemble sings the final refrain together. During the song's triumphant crescendo, Davila as Pimienta moves to the front of the group. She is swept up in the glory of song and is overcome with the spirit, not the spirit of Christmas, but of Whitney Houston. The young girl takes over the song, belting and screeching out a comedic version of the climax to Whitney Houston's 1992 cover of Dolly Parton's 1973 ballad, "I Will Always Love You." The moment entices giggles from young audience members. It also invites the audience (especially the children) to reimagine who gets to embody divas or have what I would describe as a "diva moment," a brief expression of a full-out performance where a performer is invited to pull focus from the activity in progress to remind people: "I also exist at this moment. I will take the space I deserve away from the boy." In the above exchange, the "diva moment" belongs to Pimenta, the youngest character in the group. This comedic feature stands out because it is a moment where Davila as Pimienta is given all the attention. This moment unites the performer (Davila), character (Pimienta), and diva (Houston), allowing them to share this diva status and for Davila to release what he has called "the drag queen inside of me." These embodied moments of spectacle require the performer to simultaneously embody

the kinds of relations that Portilla identifies that one can have with *relajo*. Portilla writes at length about the *relajento*, the agent of *relajo*, the one who enacts the suspension of seriousness, and the *apretado*, or those “afflicted with the spirit of seriousness.”¹⁴⁶ I revisit this Portillan binary to argue that the polarities set up are more porous and to highlight how the *apretado* that Portilla writes about is also a diva. Portilla describes the *apretados* as “[p]eople [who] need the admiring gazes of others in order for the sweet certainty of their elegance to rush through their veins.”¹⁴⁷ By his own account, the *apretado* is someone who understands and works to portray themselves as someone whose life force is elegance. The *apretado* aspires to be seen as elegant and they work tirelessly to embody their interpretation of elegance.

Returning to Davila’s homage to Whitney Houston via the young orphan character Pimienta, the moment his voice overtakes the song his castmates are singing offers a unique example of how *relajo* is layered through his performance that suspends seriousness on both sides of the fourth wall. On one level, this moment of playmaking disrupts the seriousness and sacred position of the script as master document for the story, and instead reframes its function so that the pages operate closer to its Spanish name, the *guión*, which can also be translated to the guide book. This is so because, in talking to Davila, he recounted to me that the moment emerged from a moment of *relajo* in the rehearsal room. In his words, he “took over [and] stole the spotlight from Badu”¹⁴⁸ who was following the script that Badu has written. When it happened, Garcia, the director, decided to keep it in. Davila’s engagement with *relajo* is an

¹⁴⁶ Sanchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 190.

¹⁴⁷ Sanchez, *Suspension of Seriousness*, 193.

¹⁴⁸ Personal Communication with Sergio Davila, November 2023.

example of the ensemble's egalitarian structure, where the collective voices in the room are responsible for the product created for performance.

The moment of *relajo* Davila creates with the rest of the ensemble in rehearsal simultaneously provides an intervention on behalf of his character Pimenta, who is part of the ensemble of orphans. This intervention gives her a moment to relish in the attention of the group as well as the attention of the audience, which elevates her status even temporarily to diva. Finally, this is a moment of personal diva worship for Davila as a performer who takes his "diva moment" to show that he does not have to impersonate Whitney Houston to command attention with his voice as she does. At this moment, Davila, Pimienta, and Houston make a pact with their fellow ensemble members, the orphans in the play, and the audience, as while they sing with atonal abandon to the audience, they remind them that they "will always love you."

Mamás:

On February 9, 2021, I asked the members of Teatro Alebrijes to join me via Zoom to discuss music, divas, and drag. I asked them to talk about divas who inspire them as they layer affective and aesthetic markers to create the drag personas they embody onstage and in their daily lives. María Félix, one of México's most prolific and iconic performers, is a name that kept coming up for group members. Rodrigo Garcia, who decorated his elementary school book covers with pictures of Félix, told the group:

I loved that she didn't have fear, and I admired her for that. She was like a role model for me. I wanted to be like her. I don't know, I thought she was so wise, I mean... she is completely unapologetic, but she's not arrogant. She is conscious of who she is and understands that there are people who are not in sync with that because they have a

different experience, which is not her problem.¹⁴⁹

The members present all articulated an admiration for the divas of pop culture who, in one way or another, inspired them through their craft or their journey in life.

Through our conversations, I learned how members performed gestures of devotion for their divas, from covering their school notebooks in their likeness to purchasing their music on cassette or compact disc instead of pirating it from the internet. During the meeting, members recounted the ways that through their music and public personas Donna Summer, Selena, Grace Jones, Rocio Durcal, and Eydie Gormé were either a fulcrum or foundation that helped them make sense of the world. Just as I was about to end the meeting, I asked if anyone had any final thoughts or stories to share, and this is where the interview took an interesting turn. Ensemble member, America Bautista noted that the divas she most resonated with and took examples from were the divas in her family, especially her mother. I was struck by how they discussed the divas with whom they shared a biological bond. Carolina Perez followed up:

For me, [personally] the biggest diva will always be Betsy, my brother. The best performer. The best, passionate man. I have never met another one like him. [For me,] every time that I want to write something, every time that I want to do something, every time I suggest something, the go-to is him. I've never met anyone like him again.¹⁵⁰

The dynamic between diva and devotee is off balance by design. Divas, especially those who emerge from pop culture, are a product crafted via content and public scandals. What emerged was a relationship with divas that was less distant. I reflected on my own act of devotion to my Tía Lori's fun-loving, boisterous spirit that inspired my own performance work as Perra Pumps.

¹⁴⁹ Zoom Interview with Teatro Alebrijes, February 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Zoom Interview with Teatro Alebrijes, February 2021.

Sergio followed up:

My mother is an iron wall, a tree that can protect her. She is a woman who is strong, a strong, strong woman who dominates her emotions and I admire that so much about her. The strength that my mother showed me, by example, all of my family, she's who I most admire. Not because she is my mother, but because of the person she is, how strong she is.¹⁵¹

Other members told stories about their mother's tenacity, strength, dedication to family, perseverance under challenging circumstances, and unwavering love. After the family conversations, what became clear was that while we experience these relationships between ourselves, our divas, and the divine through skewed power dynamics, these relationships are not always mediated through these secondary filters of a polished product like a song or movie, social media, or the tabloids.

Many members cited drag performance when asked how their admiration manifests for their pop divas. Badu sang a song for the group that his mother would sing (she was a professional singer) and talked about his plans to incorporate it into one of his plays in homage to his mom, who is his "most crucial diva." I read these ensemble members' embodiment of the quotidian divas as an act of devotion, and an engagement with the "project of recovery and survival" that Amber Jamilla Musser calls "brown jouissance."¹⁵² In response to Kristeva and Lacan, who have figured the mother as a void, Musser argues that mother is a "place."¹⁵³ In

¹⁵¹ Zoom Interview with Teatro Alebrijes, February 2021.

¹⁵² Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 172.

¹⁵³ Musser, *Sensual Excess*, 172.

concert with Musser, the quotidian divas Teatro Alebrijes honors in performance are a place where they can build a relationship with the feminine, the powerful, and the divine.

Taking Stock of Devotion: A Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I argue for devotion as a framework to interpret a series of performances. These performances are constructed of embodiments and gestures that require a performer to interpret with a sense of faith. The monastic devotional acts were rooted in the faith that there was a heaven, and their acts would give them access to this place. For the queer ensemble, it is the faith that through performance, they might be able to help their audiences imagine a world that is yet to come where they are seen as whole and human. The labor of their performance is directed toward that horizon. To end this chapter, I suggest that these acts of devotion performed by Teatro Alebrijes do something else. They also expand the collection of stock characters in the archive of Chicano theater. Through their actos which have roots in both Commedia dell'Arte and carpa performance traditions, ETC has built a roster of stock characters that Chicano/a/x theater makers continually access, to this day. These characters include the Devil, La Muerte (usually a skeleton), the Church, the Boss, the Enforcer, the Scab, the Pelado, the Wife or Mother, and the Spirit Guide (often the Virgen de Guadalupe). These characters have empowered Chicano theater practitioners to tell stories that aided in the manifestations of Muñozian not-yet-here by working toward better conditions in the field and access to education. Teatro Alebrijes has taken on the labor of expanding the final two categories to build gender-expansive definitions of these final three categories. The Quotidian Divas' contribution to this roster has likewise allowed Teatro Alebrijes to labor toward a world on the horizon where gender

binaries are engaged within their full complexity; they make theater that honors the labor of divas as people who allow us to glimpse a new world through their music or their care work.

Chapter 4: *Pastorelas Distintas*: Staging Queer Lives, Loves, Multiplicity, and Desire

In its contemporary context, *jotería* is a term that celebrates queer life, archives its contributions, and examines its complexities. *Jotería* is linguistically tethered to a legacy of same-sex desire, and desire bound to a Latinx subjectivity. In this chapter, *jotería* invites us to understand desire through this queer and racialized lens and extends the archive of queer Latinx desire and history in San José. To support this claim, this chapter examines the way that *pastorelas* of Teatro Alebrijes stage desire across the first decade of their production history. In order to focus my argument, I will discuss their plays in three distinct groupings. The first set of plays is from the earliest productions staged by the company. These shows deviate minimally from the conventional Herrera-Sobek *pastorela* narrative arc, often including devils, angels, and shepherds or their stand-ins. I refer to these plays as their “traditional *pastorelas*.”¹⁵⁴ The second is a set of plays I describe as the “TYA *Pastorelas*.” This set of plays tells stories for a mixed audience, adults and young people. These plays are often reimagined fantasy adaptations of popular stories that would be familiar to younger audiences. These *pastorelas* frame the *pastorela* as a travel or adventure narrative.¹⁵⁵ Finally, this chapter examines their most recent works, the *Villancicos* series.¹⁵⁶ In these plays, the *pastorelas* narrative framework only minimally supports

¹⁵⁴ The Teatro Alebrijes *pastorelas* include: *Divas a Belén* (2011) *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar* (2012) and *Sucedió en la Revolución* (2013).

¹⁵⁵ The Teatro Alebrijes TYA *Pastorelas* include: *Un Camino Amario* (2014), *Una tierra llamada Mañana* (2015) *Sejirbela* (2016), and *No es otro Cuento de navidad... o tal vez si* (2017).

¹⁵⁶ The *Villancicos* series is: *Entre Villancicos y Onomastikos* (2018), *Entre Villancicos y Enredhijos* (2019), *Entre Villancicos y Cuentikos* (year?), and *Entere Villancicos y Conventikos* (2021).

the story. However, the narratives are still replete with themes of religion, family, acceptance, tradition, and reverence found in pastorelas over the centuries.

The early plays of Teatro Alebrijes, *Divas a Belén* (Divas to Bethlehem) (2011), *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar* (A Dream in Whatever Place) (2012), and *Sucedió en la Revolución* (It Happened in the Revolution) (2013) were crafted for a predominantly queer Latinx audience. However, these plays rarely have intimate exchanges staged between same-sex characters. They were written and performed by active members of ALA, the social/support groups at the Billy De Frank Center that emerged after Grupo ProLatino's disbandment.

In these early pastorelas, same-sex desire is a central part of the narrative as Grupo ALA maintained fidelity to the mission of safer-sex advocacy for the audiences of gay men. As a set of cultural products, these plays extend the trajectory of queer theater that theater historians Robin Bernstein, Jorge Huerta, and Patricia Ybarra examine in three different theater history projects germane to this dissertation. In *Cast Out: Queer Lives in Theater, a collection of essays by theater makers at the end of the 20th century*, Bernstein deftly chronicles the development of queer theater in the United States across the twentieth century as a way to preface a collection of essays that evidence "queer cultures and communities crystallizing around theater."¹⁵⁷ This impetus for gathering and fortifying the community that theater provides is what Jorge Huerta documents and historicizes in *Chicano Drama Society and Myth*. Like Bernstein, Huerta engages with the theatre-making that circulated at the end of the twentieth century. Huerta includes a chapter on homosexual characters in Chicano theatre and the work of queer, Mexican and/or

¹⁵⁷ Bernstein, *Cast Out*, 11.

Chicano, which Huerta names as *Mechicano*, theatre makers at the end of the twentieth century, whom Huerta describes as pioneers who are laying the foundation for the next generation.¹⁵⁸ Huerta ends the chapter with a hopeful gesture toward a future where artists (like Teatro Alebrijes) are making theater that is “bolder, braver... as they deal with their myth, mysteries, redemption and damnation.”¹⁵⁹

Both Bernstein and Huerta offer an essential foundation through which to frame the work of Teatro Alebrijes and its engagement with queer theatre, AIDS activism, and Mechicano identity formation.¹⁶⁰ The final text I want to cite for its foundational frameworks before discussing the early pastorelas of Teatro Alebrijes is Patricia Ybarra’s *Latinx Theater in the Time of Neoliberalism*. This text “[c]oncentrates on how Latinx playwrights critique contemporary geopolitics by making theater that reveals neoliberal violence as a systemic condition.”¹⁶¹ Ybarra does this by closely reading a collection of plays that emerged in the late twentieth century alongside the neoliberal politics that impact these plays. Ybarra begins by interrogating plays from the early 1980s and quickly moves into the millennium. Ybarra’s book explores how Latinx playwrights responded to neoliberal violence over forty-plus years from 1970 to 2013. Throughout the book, Ybarra shows multiple examples of playwrights enacting these strategies for their audiences. Teatro Alebrijes also does both.

¹⁵⁸ The pioneer artists Huerta writes about include the following mix of queer and non-queer as well as Chicana/o and non Chicana/o identifying theatre artists: Cherrie Moraga, Guillermo Reyes, Estella Portillo-Trambley, Josefina Lopez, Edgar Poma, and Oliver Meyer.

¹⁵⁹ Huerta, *Chicano Drama*, 182.

¹⁶⁰ Huerta uses the word Mechicano to describe theater made for and by Mexicans and Chicanos.

¹⁶¹ Ybarra, *Latinx theater in the times of neoliberalism*, p.x.

Ybarra argues that Latinx playwrights, who respond to the neoliberal moment by writing and staging theatre “illuminate how the times of neoliberalism feel... including the experiences of immobility, anxiety, and terror.”¹⁶² Extending Ybarra’s argument, I suggest that queer playwrights teach us how desire feels, is understood, and framed in the neoliberal moment. They used the Herrea-Sobek frame to make bold statements about desire, citizenship, and labor.

Like many traditional pastorelas, the play *Divas A Belén* begins with a prologue.¹⁶³ Instead of recounting the action of *Divas*, the Hermit’s prologue tells the audience that what they are about to see is a queer take on temptation (and therefore, desire), which is traditional of the pastorela:

Aunque el d’esta historia es	Although the one in this story is
Un poquitito jotito.	A little bit queer.
Nuestras pastoras también	Our shepherdesses also
Son un poquito distintas	are a bit distinct
Ya las reconocerán	You will recognize them
No voy a dar muchas pistas	I won’t give many clues
...	...
la tentación y los diablos	temptation and the devils
también son de tradición	are also part of this tradition
en esta ocasión verán	on this occasion you’ll see
nuestra bonita versión	our beautiful version.

¹⁶² Ybarra, *Latinx theater in the times of neoliberalism*, 197.

¹⁶³ A prologue or song is cited by Herrera-Sobek and evidenced in multiple pastorelas iterations across the Americas, most notably as documented by Lilly Litvak and Juan B. Rael. They don’t always start with the hermit, sometimes the devil, or Gila or an angel, but often one or another character begins with a prologue when the story does not start with a song.

The hermit does not reappear after offering this framing to the audience; instead, the action begins with a flourish of introductory music. As noted in the prologue, temptation is tradition, and in this queer retelling, this temptation is not only a state of longing, but also a site of longing. Temptation is a character named Tentacion (sic), a young, muscular day laborer who finds himself waiting for work in the Home Depot parking lot after being tempted by the allure of the United States. He now has to endure the uncertainty of life as an undocumented migrant. In having Lucifer conjure this desired object, the audience is reminded that desire functions simultaneously as a tool for subjugation and exploitation as well as a path to pleasure and liberation. Instead of crafting a generic, desirable subject that can be treated like an object without a history attached, like Frankenfurter creates Rocky in Richard O'Brien's *Rocky Horror Show*, Nuñez's devil crafts a complex object of desire. In doing so, the audience understands that while desire is a resource for comedic escape and fantasy, these narratives tether themselves to complex, politically bound circumstances.

As Tentacion comes into view of the trio of divas, they suddenly have a list of home improvement projects for the muscular, handsome worker. María Félix needs to hire help for a painting job, Frida needs help changing a lightbulb, and Paquita needs a spout checked. As the women are led by their attraction to this handsome, muscular man, the trio gets increasingly distracted from their journey. Their manager, Gringo tries to mitigate a situation, his clients are spending too much money as they try to hire Tentacion for work. Gringo tries to get Tentacion to sign a contract. Tentacion asks the divas where they are going, and when he hears they are going

to Belén, he tempts them with an evening out for coffee and clubbing. Gringo is skeptical, but Tentacion puts his mind to rest by telling him that if he can act with more discretion, “*a usted también lo hago rico*.” In the context of their exchange, one way to read Tentacion’s offer is, “I will make you rich.” A stage direction where Gringo “is stuck thinking about money” supports this reading.¹⁶⁴ With this offer, now everyone’s attention is on Tentacion. The divas fight over him, eventually tearing off his clothes. Because this short play follows the Herrera-Sobek frame, this moment of chaotic entanglement with one of the deadly sins is when the Angel interjects. However, the Angel is also not immune to the pull of Tentacion. After saving the women from his spell, the Angel confesses that he wants to marry Tentacion.

Tentacion has other plans with Gringo. Seeing the lustful chaos he has created, the devil has completed his mission to distract from the journey to Belén. He leaves the divas, their manager, the Angel, and Tentacion alone to sort themselves out. Before ending the show, the devil encourages everyone in the audience to enjoy the party that will begin shortly and reminds the audience that if they are going to have sex, to wear a condom. After this reminder, the show ends with a musical triptych of sounds—first, a sound cue playing Georg Händel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” as the cast lip syncs. The music stops abruptly, and the cast begins to sing the Mexican Christmas carol, “Pastores a Belén” (Shepherds to Bethlehem). Rhythmic clapping, initiated by the cast and then taken up by the audience, underscores Händel’s fugue. The audience keeps the rhythm, and the cast exits the stage as the backstage darkness swallows up the characters’ bodies.

¹⁶⁴ I want to footnote Badu’s use of double entendre because later in the script, Gringo returns to this moment asking Tentacion about “making him rich” with Tentacion clarifying that he was not talking about money, instead his offer, “*a usted también lo hago rico*” was about the rich experience Tentacion was going to give Gringo as a penetrative partner for anal sex.

The rhythmic guitar riffs of the Weather Girls' disco anthem, "It's Raining Men," overtakes the clapping, the audience gets out of their seats, and the party that the devil mentioned can begin.

I start with *Divas* and work chronologically through this chapter because the work of Teatro Alebrijes is iterative. Each adaptation builds on the one that precedes it. *Divas* shows us where the company was in 2011 and how they were responding to national events; this includes the Supreme Court decision in the Chamber of Commerce v. Whiting, which upheld a law that made hiring undocumented workers subject to the suspension or revocation of their business licenses, and President Barack Obama passing comprehensive immigration reform. *Divas* also offers evidence of the relationship between desire and representation that Nuñez is attuned to when he writes this campy farce. In many ways, *Divas* is the future of queer characters onstage that Huerta gestures toward in the early 2000s and a part of the Latinx ether circulating when Ybarra writes about the work of Victor Casarez and Octavio Solis, who are remapping relationships to a neoliberal existence in their work.

Following *Divas*, the writing team of Rodrigo Garcia, Omar Nuñez, and Ugho Badu collaborated on a longer, one-act version of the pastorela titled *Una Noche En Cualquier Lugar* (A Night in Anyplace).¹⁶⁵ Again, this play relies on the traditional pastorela journey narrative about a group of people who are on their way to adore the newborn baby Jesus. The play parallels other adaptations in its reliance on angels and devils. However, it deviates from the legacy of previous adaptations by casting a same-sex couple as the central role. Joel and David are members of the traveling clan, who spend most of the 25 pages of the script trying to

¹⁶⁵ This is the title on the script, however, the show that gets promoted that year is *Un Sueño En Cualquier Lugar* (A Dream in Whatever Place).

reconcile their feelings for each other. In the play, David keeps his feelings towards Joel a secret. David does not fear being shunned by the community, but out of fear that these feelings would be unrequited.

In this play, the writing trio (Garcia, Nuñez, and Badu) tells a story about queer desire for companionship instead of a need to fulfill a sexual drive. The writers also advocate for a more capacious understanding of the term “holy family” by adhering to modes of queer nightlife performance familiar to their audience. Performance theorists have debated the function of repetition in performance and in queer performance; scholars engage this debate extensively by exploring camp performance and drag. For example, in writing about the work of drag queen Lipsinka, film and media scholar Alex Evans pushes back on the notion that queer theorist Judith Butler puts forth about laughter, camp, and queer performance. Butler writes that “the loss of the sense of ‘the normal’ ... can be its own occasion for laughter, especially when ‘the normal,’ ‘the original,’ is revealed to be a copy, and an inevitably failed one.”¹⁶⁶ Evans argues that the work of Lipsinka is not about making a copy to sit alongside the original, as some sort of queer parody, a campy wink that might inspire those who understand the original reference to laugh. Evans argues that “the goal is that the copy should replace the original—and finally so...” and posits that “perhaps camp is intended as the last word—not the first in an endless series of repetitions.”¹⁶⁷

Thinking with Evans, I turn to the final scene in *Una Noche*, a tableau vivant that recalls Francis of Assisi’s manger mass. However, this scene is different because Marina, one of the

¹⁶⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

¹⁶⁷ Evans, “How Homo Can Hollywood Be?”, 50.

community members on this journey, is pregnant and her pregnancy is difficult. While she is in labor, she entrusts the care of her child to Joel and David, who are at the center of the stage picture, holding Marina's baby. Marina died giving birth, and now Joel and David have stepped into the role of caretakers for the child; this is a sacred responsibility that they take quite seriously. The moment is staged in earnest and does not elicit the laughter at a copy as Butler suggests camp might, but following Evans, has replaced the "holy" heterosexual family with a queer one. As the play's ending image, Garcia, Nuñez, and Badu's intention is clear: this is a final statement. The narrative desire for Joel and David to be together has been satisfied. As have the writer's desires to make a political statement at a time when the coupling of two gay men was becoming the homo-norm through legislative actions, like the 9th Circuit court ruling in California, which found the state's Proposition 8, a proposition that eliminated the rights of same-sex couples to marry, was found unconstitutional.

Queer desire is the fulcrum upon which Teatro Alebrijes pivots their community's attention through laughter and investment in the ruptured seriousness of *relajo*. In *Divas*, same-sex desire allows the company to remind their community that, collectively, our sex practices are complex and worthy of attention. *Divas* also highlights a commitment to foregrounding the safe sex messaging which motivated so much of the work of ProLatino from years prior. In staging desire through *Una Noche*, Teatro Alebrijes highlights an investment in monogamous partnering, which may be read as a desire to replicate heterosexual coupling, which Lisa Duggan has called "homonormative." However, I want to push back against a reading of same-sex coupling in the work of Teatro Alebrijes as homonormative. The aspirations of homonormativity are white; they are about gaining. These subjects are not white, they are not rich. They are coupling to survive in

a nation that would rather they did not.

On the page, Teatro Alebrijes' next production, 2013's *Sucedió en la Revolución* looks like it gives into what Ybarra articulates as the "desire to write ourselves into an older [history], which gives us the veneer of a national belonging at the expense of transnational truths."¹⁶⁸ However, the engagement with history that Teatro Alebrijes makes in *Sucedió* instead follows the more utopian trajectory of Jose Muñoz, who "turn(s) to the past in order to imagine the future."¹⁶⁹ Their engagement with the past and their investment in the future yields a "post-apocalyptic fantasy" that holds echoes of the past by using the song "La Rielera" as a travel refrain and as a subtle frame for the action of the play.¹⁷⁰ While the echoes of the Mexican Revolution ghost this play, *Sucedió* is about a queer community in the bleak and fragile present who look to the past for a respite from the stress of their present lives.

The community in *Sucedió* also looks to performance to find a way to identify their self-worth. In the play, like in the many pastorela adaptations following the Herrera-Sobek frame, heaven and hell compete for humanity's soul. At the center of this fight is a bet between good and evil that humans cannot find hope. However, in the end, they do find hope. Everything turns out okay, and everyone gets to experience a "happily ever after." Structurally, this play invites its audience to think beyond the pastorela's Herrera-Sobek frame. Badu, Nunez, and Garcia's use of "La Rielera" is one way the trio is starting to explore the capacious multiplicity of what a

¹⁶⁸ Ybarra, *Latinx theater in the times of neoliberalism*, 199.

¹⁶⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5.

¹⁷⁰ "La Rielera" is a popular song from the Mexican revolution about a female rail worker, a rielera (a play on the word "rail" with the feminine suffix -a). The song has been recorded by many notable Mexican/Mexican-American artists, including Lola Beltran, Lydia Mendoza, and Linda Ronstadt.

pastorela can be. The choice to invite this narrative thread into the conversation shows an investment in what Jill Dolan calls the utopian performative. One way to achieve this theatrically is by deploying affective spectacle like songs and dance numbers, and these are abundant in the text. The end of the play rushes into the direct address where all parties' fates quickly wrap up in service of a happily ever after ending. Instead of reading this move as hasty dramaturgy or a "weak" play structure (whatever that means), I want to offer what I think is an obvious interjection: words on a page are intentional. Playwrights do not write plays by accident.

Words on a page are deliberate choices. Instead of judging the merits of this play script as a piece of literature, I want to illuminate the ways that it leans into Dolan's utopian performative, which Dolan describes as a process that is "the humble, messy attempt to seek out human connectedness."¹⁷¹ These plays are doing just that. Using the play as the central object, Teatro Alebrijes works to fulfill a desire in the community to be connected, to see each other, and to hold space to dream that even for one evening, everything will be okay. In so doing, these plays also embrace queerness through Dolan's definition. "*Queer*, if it means anything at all," Dolan writes, "especially as an adjective for theater... means multiplicity."¹⁷²

Over the next four years, Teatro Alebrijes explored this queer multiplicity using TYA as a framing device. The plays I group under the umbrella of TYA pastorelas by Teatro Alebrijes include *Un Camino Amarillo* (A Yellow Pathway) (2014), *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana* (A Land Called Tomorrow) (2015), *Sejirbela* (2016) and *No Es Otro Cuento de Navidad... ó Tal Ves Si* (It's Not Another Christmas Story... Or Maybe It Is) (2017).

¹⁷¹ Dolan, *Utopian Performance*, 136.

¹⁷² Dolan in Bernstein, *Casting Out*, 7.

Chapter Two highlights absences in the archive and connects those absences to the HIV/AIDS crisis. AIDS killed a lot of people and it is no surprise that many of the lost lives were queer people of color from whom intervention and treatment was inaccessible. This loss of life left the void in the formal archive that I talk about palpitating in Chapter Two, where ephemera is missing. However, it also left a generation of gay men without a community of gay male elders to learn from. This generational absence also shaped a generation of pessimistic scholars, and important scholarship that revolved around the figure of the child. One example is Queer theorist Lee Edelman, queer engagement with Lacan and the death drive in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. In this book, Edelman argues that “[the] child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” and goes on to assert that “queerness names a side of those not ‘fighting for the children.’”

Throughout the dissertation, I also highlight Muñoz who argues that “complete life” is unavailable to people who do not produce children.¹⁷³ In tandem, the work of these two theorists puts queers and children in antagonists’ opposition. Either you sell out and have kids in order to access your complete life, or you embrace queerness and labor toward a queer existence without a future. I cite both of these examples to acknowledge two pieces of foundational queer scholarship and to assert that this is not the place that we are in anymore.

The children whose mentor generation was stolen from them by the AIDS infection, or cancer from pesticides used in farm labor, are grown up now. They are no longer kids, they are

¹⁷³ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 5.

the generations (Generation X and Millennial) who are now aging into a position where they are becoming the role models that we did not have as young queer kids who grew up in the 1980 and 1990s; as Whitney Houston points out in her 1985 cover of Geroge Bensons's "The Greatest Love of All," the children after all "are our future." As theatre historian Robin Bernstein points out, children also "do not passively receive culture. Rather, children expertly field the co-scripts of narratives and material culture."¹⁷⁴ Following Bernstein, and thinking about the time I have spent in conversation and collaboration with Teatro Alebrijes, I argue that Teatro Alebrijes, through their TYA pastorelas, is taking up the charge to shift the narrative from no future to a "yes" future, where they have embraced the labor of providing models for a queer life with a future.

Latinx theater historian Jorge Huerta uplifts the production and raising of children as central to the legacy of Latinx theater, describing it as a "family affair... across centuries." After the biological, heterosexual imperative, an explicit part of the history of Latinx theater in the United States, Huerta gestures toward a present and future that is more capacious. Huerta writes, "Today's theater workers know and value the importance of the next generation and have always encouraged younger generations to create their artistic, musical and theatrical expressions," before asserting that for makers of Latinx theater for young audiences, "*familia* always comes first."¹⁷⁵ In the pastorela adaptations of Teatro Alebrijes, beginning with their TYA pastorelas, familia is at the forefront of the narrative. However, the kinship bonds that fortify these families often result from a shared positionality that has hindered or removed access to their biological

¹⁷⁴ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 29.

¹⁷⁵ Huerta in Casas, *Palabras del Cielo*, 8.

kin. These bonds are severed through migration, economic necessity, or homophobic exile from religious families. Through their TYA pastorelas, Teatro Alebrijes contributes to the multiplicity of family narratives Huerta asserts are central to Latinx TYA.

For the TYA plays in this group, a focus on young protagonists is generative to the company's investment in expanding narratives about Latinx families. For Teatro Alebrijes, children are such a productive site for queer world-making. This engagement with children as central characters aligns with how queer theorist and media scholar Jack Halberstam characterizes children as an audience category in the book, *The Queer Art of Failure*. Halberstam writes, "Children do not invest the same things that adults invest in. Children are not coupled. They are not romantic. They do not have a religious morality. They are not afraid of death or failure. They are collective creatures."¹⁷⁶ By flipping the word to highlight children's stories, Teatro Alebrijes recasts the focus of the pastorelas, which often involves a secondary narrative that is a commentary on the precarity of the sacred bond of life-long monogamy between coupled pairs, or the influence the father or mother has over the lives of children. In casting these plays with queer adults and coding the dialogue with double entendres, Teatro Alebrijes pushes against a theatrical and social legacy of casting "homosexuality and homosexuals... as scapegoats for the impossibilities of desire."¹⁷⁷ The desire to belong, make autonomous choices, or build toward a future play out through adaptations of fantasy narratives because "[f]airytales have always occupied the ambiguous territory between childhood and adulthood, home and

¹⁷⁶ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 47.

¹⁷⁷ Love, Heather *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Harvard University Press, 2009. Quoted in Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 94.

away. Harm and safety.”¹⁷⁸

Un Camino Amarillo represents a conscious turn for Teatro Alebrijes toward their audience. In years prior, the pastorelas that ProLatino and then Teatro Alebrijes produced were full of quippy biting comedy rooted in highlighting each other’s flaws and offering biting critiques, what Dorian Corey in *Paris is Burning* identifies as the “real form of insult,” or throwing shade.¹⁷⁹ This banter is often performed “*en confianza*” or “in trust” that the community is harmlessly engaged in these exchanges. Shade is a critique of failure, the failure to achieve a performance of normativity that, when performed within the community, is often not about achieving for acceptance, but achievement as critique and or ridicule of that norm. Shade does not happen from the outside into queer community. That is called hate speech. When experienced out of the community, these insults and quips are weaponized against the community. As the audiences began to include supporters outside the immediate membership of what used to be ProLatino, the company decided to tell stories that spoke to a more capacious audience pool, which also meant stepping away from being shady. However, Teatro Alebrijes maintained an investment in telling queer stories to the Latinx community.

In a conversation with *Un Camino Amarillo*’s writer Ugho Badu, he acknowledged that, at the moment, the ensemble saw this set of pastorelas as an opportunity to share a part of themselves with the Latinx community. In addition, Badu communicated a sense of duty to queer youth to show a multiplicity of queer intimacies, which made the staging of a gay kiss in *Un Camino Amarillo* an important part for the writers, who recalled that “when we got to that

¹⁷⁸ Halberstram, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 44.

¹⁷⁹ Dorian Cory in Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, 1992.

moment, you felt how connected the audience was to this story, they wanted the characters (Doroteo and Toto) to kiss, not for the spectacle of the kiss, but because they wanted to celebrate and affirm this relationship with the characters, and that was important for our audience too.”¹⁸⁰

Teatro Alebrijes performed *Un Camino Amarillo*, years before Disney and Pixar moved from queer-coded characters like Jafar in *Aladdin* to explicitly queer characters like the lesbian couple featured in the 2016 animated film, *Finding Dory*. For Badu, this was significant. The playwright spoke during one of our conversations about the lack of queer and Latinx representation and how he saw this play and the subsequent TYA pastorelas as an intervention, an opportunity to add explicitly queer and Latinx characters to familiar stories like *The Wizard of Oz*; this is so that any queer youth who might be in the audience could see what he and the rest of the Alebrijes longed for in their youth: stories about queer love in all its complicated, tender honesty.

Una Tierra Llamada Mañana followed after *Un Camino Amarillo*. In this adaptation, Badu and the Alebrijes ensemble invest boldly in their young audiences by writing a play about a group of young orphans, a queer take informed by Harold Grey’s *Little Orphan Annie* comics. When I asked Badu what prompted a story highlighting a group of orphan children, he talked about how ruptures shape foundational attitudes when experienced at a young age. “These kids are experiencing a moment of rupture of love,” Badu told me. “In these moments of rupture, there are opportunities to build a new relationship to love. To desire a new family.”¹⁸¹ Through their TYA pastorelas, Teatro Alebrijes add to the multiplicity of gay stories and invests in Dolan’s

¹⁸⁰ Ugho Badu (playwright) in discussion with the author, June 2023.

¹⁸¹ Ugho Badu (playwright) in discussion with the author, June 2023.

definition understand of multiplicity by adding to what in the early 2010s was a limited archive of queer Latinx characters, and an even more limited archive of queer TYA.

The plays that follow *Un Camino Amarillo* and *Una Tierra Llamada Mañana* both offer their audience opportunities to recognize the importance of queer (following Dolan, a multiplicity of) family and desire. The following year, the company produced *Sajerbela*, a play with music that follows two women, although never explicitly labeled as lesbian, who share an intimate, same-sex bond that compels these women to work through their petty dramas to find a way to continue to love each other. While there is no lesbian kiss in *Sajerbela*, the play stresses the importance of care and communication in this female same-sex bond. This ambiguity leaves the relationship open to interpretation, which Badu insisted was the intention: “We wanted to tell this story that gets to be interpreted in multiple ways between women as lovers, sisters, without borders or labels.”¹⁸²

As I have shown, the stories of Teatro Alebrijes invest in reframing a theatrical landscape where same-sex desire and gender non-conformity are rendered unremarkable; it is another path to go down, one of many of life’s paths. In the next section, I discuss how the company stages compulsory heterosexuality through its *Villancicos* plays.

The *Villancicos* series includes the ensemble’s most recent productions and follows the adventures of a young woman we first meet on the edge of 30. Britani Marisol, the protagonist in the series, is a woman who loves the idea of being loved. She pines for love on a macro- and microscale. Most of the stories in the series chronicle her adventures in pursuit of the love of a

¹⁸² Ibid.

heterosexual partner and the love of her adoring public. Britani Marisol connects with her live audience through direct address in the theatre and through vignettes where she engages an audience of unknown size on the internet.

In *Entre Villancicos y Onomastikos*, the first pastorela in this series, we meet Britani Marisol on the eve of her *treintañera*, an invented name referencing her thirtieth birthday that she is celebrating as one would a *quinceañera*, a traditional coming-of-age party celebrated by pan-Latinx families to mark a transition out of girlhood after turning fifteen. The quinceañera tradition is full of pomp and circumstance. One tradition central to the celebration is the *vals*, a dance performed by the birthday girl and her *chambelanes*, the male members of her entourage. The bulk of the action in *Onomastikos* revolves around the preparation for Britani's birthday party. Her friends trick two young men, Yustin and Bryan, into being chambelanes for the party. The acquisition of these two unsuspecting recruits is excellent news for Britani, who has a crush on Bryan.

After Britani and Bryan find themselves alone in a room together. Britani has decided to reveal her feelings for Bryan, but before she can say anything, Bryan reveals his feelings for Yustin. Britani's *comadres* have been eavesdropping. After his revelation, Bryan exits, and Britani's comadres tumble into the scene, ready to support their friend. In her discussion of the comadres—female networks where the bonds of friendship expand into something beyond a friend, into lifelong kin—queer Chicana literary scholar Catrióna Rueda Esquibel makes clear the paradoxical nature of these intimate networks, where women are both central and marginal to each other's lives. Esquibel writes:

They are central because their friendship and intimacy will outlast the passion, trauma,

infidelity, or demise of heterosexual relationships. And yet they are marginal because these friendships function as a constant prop to the heterosexual structure—maintaining and always yielding precedence to heterosexuality or, in effect, to the male.¹⁸³

If what plays out next follows Esquibel's articulation of the comadre dynamic, then maybe Britani's comadres, upon entering, would console her past the trauma of unrequited heterosexual desire. Instead, Britani does not leave room for such an intervention. This exchange has shifted her thinking, and she delivers the following monologue, amplifying queer love instead of her own desire for a partner:

We deserve to be happy with whomever we want. I wish all the best to Bryan and Yustin, and you know I have learned that I do not need to be rescued by a valorous prince because I have you all [her girlfriends and an audience], and beyond all else, I have myself.¹⁸⁴

The moment becomes a revelation of the sacredness of queer same-gender bonds. Her comadres, and ultimately Britani, are worthy of a whole serving of love, the kind she already gives to herself and receives from her comadres and, by extension, the audience. Teatro Alebrjes stages these moments of queer affect with a nod to the complex ways various generations of Mexicans understand and encounter queer desire.

In *Entre Villancicos y Enredhijos*, the second series installment, the audience gets a broader view of family dynamics through a story that centers on Britani Marisol's love life. This show introduces the audience to a cast of characters, including Britani Marisol's aunt, Hilaria, and grandfather, Olegario. The play is a comedy of errors. After a family feud gets out of hand, Olegario, the family patriarch, is convinced to fake his death, but the ruse is undone thanks to his

¹⁸³ Esquibel, *With Her Machete in Her Hand*, 119.

¹⁸⁴ Badu, *Villancicos y Onomastikos*, 55 (unpublished manuscript, translation mine).

distinct farts, which his daughters notice. Once the jig is up, Olegario, his son-in-law Genaro and Britani's friends, a queer couple, Yustin and Nick, meet up to debrief the events that have just transpired. In this conversation, the older generation gives unsolicited and useless advice to Yustin and Nick about dealing with women. The lesson, however, is not staged through some trite oral tradition where heterosexual men pass down misogynistic wisdom to a younger generation over beers, which is the scene that plays out between this quartet of dudes. The lesson comes at the end of the conversation when Yustin and Nick leave Genaro and Olegario alone. Once the young men are out of earshot, Olegario, curious about Yostin, asks Genaro if Yostin likes "*arroz con popote*" (rice with a straw). Olegario's euphemism is really asking if Yostin likes sucking dick. The turn of phrase elicits laughter from the audience because it is simultaneously scandalous and family friendly. Through the filter of a euphemism, the sex acts are openly discussed, even in front of a mixed audience of children, elders, and the variety of queer and straight patrons whose age falls within that spectrum. Euphemisms also allow the playwright to double down for the queer gay Latinx audience by staging humor about explicit man-on-man action. It also highlights the quotidian ubiquity of queer sex.

Olegario acts surprised when Genaro confirms his suspicion. However, Genaro quickly and casually calls out Olegario's feigned surprise by reminding him, "Remember when I found you in the cornfields with my godfather Estuvio," Genaro reminds him. The scene ends with Genaro singing, "*y la milpa se movia, se movia, se movia*" (and the cornfield moved, it moved, it moved). The jingle is lighthearted and nostalgic. The song reimagines the 1984 single "*Y La Hierba Se Movia*" (And the Grass Moved) album, *Regreso La Medallita* (Return of the Medallion) by the cumbia group Tropicalísimo Apache, who was most popular in the 1980s and

1990s. The song recounts an afternoon spent by two people in the grass. The chorus chronicles an afternoon spent with a lover and the friction between bodies and blades of grass repeating the refrain “y la hierba se movía” which Genaro parodies by singing “y la milpa se movía.”

In *Enredhijos*, Genaro references a time when a rigid binary between gay and straight was malleable and where two people (who happened to be men) could acknowledge attraction and act on desire without fear. In *Enredhijos*, the trilogy not only clarifies that same-sex desire is normal, but it affirms the norm by citing its generational ubiquity which does not place someone on one or another side of a binary, but along a spectrum of desire. So the lesson modeled about the desire for the audience is not one about generations at opposing ends who intervene to “fix” the other, but one in which peers gently and playfully remind each other that the world and their desires did not always exist on a binary and that the world has not exploded because of it.

The tenth-anniversary show happened in 2021, with a cast of fully vaccinated performers, in front of a masked and limited live audience between COVID-19 variant spikes. *Entre Villancicos y Cuentikos* is a COVID fever dream set in 2020, which again follows the protagonist, Britani Marisol. After a confrontational conversation with a friend, she finds herself in a Narnia of Badu’s design. However, this version is a rasquache grab bag of fairytale story arcs. There is a bachelor prince who does not want to marry. His mother, the queen, insists on a wedding. Britani Marisol travels through the world and meets a drunkard king, an elf serving probation, a potion seller, a snake, a talking fly named after COVID, and a yoga-obsessed witch. As the story unfolds, it is easy to misread it as one in which heterosexuals’ desire is integral to the fabric of this community, especially given the centrality that marriage plays in the protagonist’s actions. However, that is not what is happening here. Because it becomes the

central obsession in this play, heterosexuality is rendered hysterical. Something that reduces a set of characters to engage with others in their community as their most competitive and violent selves. Through the *Villancicos* series, we see heterosexual desire as something that makes you crazy. In contrast, queer desire makes you whole and fulfills your heart, it is something shared between two people that allows them to navigate a world already set up to isolate and crush queer people's spirits. Queer coupling is something to find and share. Like Britani Marisol, the characters who experience heterosexual desire also experience these desires as fleeting or unremarkable.

In contrast, heterosexuality is something you compete for—it is something to acquire for acquisition's sake. It is a capitalist endeavor. The *Villancicos* series shows Britani failing at love repeatedly. However, these plays also show how the pursuit of love, driven by external forces like compulsory heterosexuality and capitalism, are endeavors doomed to fail in the first place, and maybe they should. If, like Britani Marisol, we constantly compete for attention, does that mean we have succeeded at finding love once we capture it? That is not the case for her or anyone else.

In addition to these failed attempts, a love that often results in comedic opportunities for romance to blossom between other people, Britani Marisol's more critical pursuit of love happens on a microscale. While she bubbles through life trying to get her friends, family, potential lovers, digital and live audiences to adore her, she is simultaneously on a journey to build the most minor and most important sphere of love. As I have noted in other parts of this dissertation, the pastorela is a play that follows a journey, often a literal one, where a community moves from one place to another. However, the *Villancicos* series offers a different journey, a

pilgrimage of one woman on an honest, sometimes confusing, and humorous journey toward loving and desiring herself. The final chapter tracks this final show and the function of humor for Teatro Alebrijes more closely.

Chapter 5: An Advil for Your Sorrows: Humor, Care, and Critical Inquiry

In his writing about the early twentieth-century Mexican carpa tradition, Latinx folklorist and cultural theorist Tomás Ybarra-Frauso describes humor as an “indispensable companion of endurance” for Chicano communities whose “constant confrontations with the most depressing realities have allowed the Chicano to poke fun at adversity, to ridicule and laugh at his social condition and thus to spiritually surmount his circumstances.”¹⁸⁵

This chapter focuses on the Teatro Alebrijes 2021 pastorela, *Entre Villancicos y Cuentikos*. This chapter engages interviews, embodied practice, humor, and affect theory to argue that for Teatro Alebrijes, rehearsal and performance spaces are sites of care and critical inquiry for performers and audiences. Relying on humor studies and phenomenology, I argue that Teatro Alebrijes reorients bodies, histories, and communities through laughter and joy and, as Ybarra-Frausto suggests above, help each other and their audiences “spiritually surmount” the pandemic by offering audiences what one ensemble member refers to as “an Advil for your sorrows.”

A Dramaturgy of Lost Life

The headline “Coronavirus hotspots: East San José ranks No. 1 in the number of cases per capita in the county” calls me to an article written in November 2020 by reporter Sonya Herrera tells the story of East Side San José residents struggling to survive the most stringent and contagious

¹⁸⁵ Ybarra-Frausto, “I Can Still Hear the Applause” in Kanelos, *Hispanic Theater in the United States*, 1984.

months of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. In the article, Albert Camarena, a resident of the area, tells Herrera, “Everybody’s scared.”¹⁸⁶ And with good reason: according to the California Department of Public Health, Latinx people make up 46.7% of COVID deaths. The tragedies, hardships, and anxieties detailed in this and countless other news articles printed across the United States in the early stages of the US COVID-19 pandemic lockdown chronicle a dramaturgy of lost life.

I use the phrase dramaturgy of lost life to describe the stories that archive a mode of audience-dependent information transmission predicated on Aristotelian notions that pity and fear are the paramount emotions that resonate with every audience, and thus make them the framework to theatricalize loss. These kinds of stories provoke the reader to either pity the people living in neighborhoods like San José’s East Side, further alienating connection to real suffering in exchange for the ability to craft affective binds to these communities, without material risk to the reader or audience member’s status of safety. Pity’s partner in the Aristotelian binary, fear, is also strategic. Stories like this appeal to readers’ or audience members’ fear that this virus might get them next if it has not already.¹⁸⁷ This journalistic trend is clear in stories about other under-resourced “hot spot” communities, from rural Texas to the south side of Chicago.

In Eastside San José’s Mayfair neighborhood, christened a hotspot early in the pandemic, the lockdown restricted movement. Only people performing “essential” labor for the cogs of capitalism to turn, however slowly, would be permitted out of their homes. For some members,

¹⁸⁶ Herrera, Sonya, “Coronavirus Hotspots.”

¹⁸⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*.

whose work has them interfacing with clients in healthcare, social service, or educational settings, the stay-at-home orders meant that they shifted everything to Zoom and approached the face-to-face client and student interaction with more caution and more PPE. They gave more of their time to their jobs. For other members of the ensemble who supported themselves performing domestic or manual labor or service work, the pandemic was a time of less work, less money for bills, and less security. For the first two months of the lockdown, members' conversations ceased.

At the end of April 2020, Resident Playwright Ugho Badu organized a Zoom call that led to a series of Alebrijes ensemble Zoom meetings where we could see each other twice a week. In an interview with Badu, we laughed over the phone as we shared memories of the often silly conversations or scandalous things shared over these Zoom calls. The mood shifts when I ask Badu about what led to the decision to begin the Zoom meetings. He went silent mid-laugh. We stayed with each other on the phone and held this silence together for a long time. At one point, I thought our phone connection failed until I heard him breathing on the other end of the phone. He was crying. As a member of the Alebrijes ensemble, I have enjoyed celebrating with my community and sharing moments of levity and joy. We also support each other through difficult moments like these tears. I listen to my friend and artistic collaborator on the other end of the phone from across the continent. The call becomes a space for grief. We need these spaces too. Badu composes himself. He takes a deep breath, and all he can say is, "We needed it, girl." It was all he needed to say, and soon again, we are laughing and joking as we talk about the power of laughter and joking.

In an interview, founding ensemble member Carolina Perez said she was excited to join the Zoom calls because she missed “the laughing, the hugging, the dancing, [and] the *jotería*.” In *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*, authors Peter McGraw and Joel Warner characterize laughter as “basic, primal signals, designed to alert, to communicate, to connect and to disseminate.” When Perez describes what she missed, she acknowledges a lack of interpersonal communication signals that she looks toward to assess how safe a space is for herself and the community.

The COVID-19 lockdown shifted how everyone engaged in person; too little was known about the virus, and assessing safety was arduous and complicated. The Alebrijes Zoom meetings often began with a check-in where people shared their experiences and anxieties as COVID impacted the lives of group members. Some got sick. Others were left to care for or grieve the death of friends or family who contracted the virus. The early months of the pandemic were not easy to laugh at, but as much as we were there to listen to each other process the trauma of the pandemic, we were also there to try and lift each other’s spirits. We checked in with one another on social media or via a group text chain to ensure that people needed resources in isolation. The company organized food deliveries and other essential drop-offs. We were collectively there to lend an ear when illness found its way closer and closer to our lives.

Nevertheless, now via Zoom, we can see each other regularly and try to find levity under these unprecedented circumstances. While COVID-19 loomed heavy in the literal and figurative air, and it was scary, sometimes it was also funny. Early in the pandemic, we laughed at the strange obsession with toilet paper and the subsequent shortage as we ensured ensemble members had the supplies they needed to survive day-by-day. We laughed at the proliferation of

conspiracy theories linking the 5G cellular network to COVID, and we laughed as parody songs about hand-washing or being bored in the house went viral on social media. My field notes reflect a steady stream of jokes that filled the digital room with laughter.

This digital space stewarded by Badu was central to facilitating laughter, which at its core is a series of breaths punctuated by sound and imbued with affective resonance. The ability to breathe is core to the production of laughter. Early in the pandemic lockdown, breath exchanges were precarious because of the respiratory transmission of COVID-19. In the Zoom room, we breathed together without worrying if we would get each other sick.

Religious studies scholar Ashon Crawley writes about breath at length in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, where he describes breath as “an intentionally aesthetic production, a mode of life,”¹⁸⁸ and “a reciprocity... which animates the flesh and makes it move.”¹⁸⁹ Crawley describes breath as “holy,” and as generative of what he describes as a “radical sociality,” where breath and air are shared.¹⁹⁰ During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, this radical sociality was difficult to access, but via Zoom, we were able to commune in the holy and animating practice of breathing that is the root of laughter.

On July 9, 2020, I joined the Zoom call, and only Rodrigo Garcia, the company’s Managing Artistic Director, was on the call. This moment alone allowed us to check in with one another before Maria Teresa and her daughter America joined the call. The discussion shifted to mental health, anxiety, and depression as other ensemble members joined this solemn and tender

¹⁸⁸ Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 37.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, 38.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 41.

conversation. Ensemble member Alexa Diaz joined the call. She was not feeling well. She had a fever. COVID tests were not readily available at this point in the pandemic—the call went silent as attention in the Zoom room turned to her. Someone on the call cracked a joke. The room paused. Alexa laughed. The rest of the room laughed. Other ensemble members asked her if she needed anything, and she replied, “What I need now is laughter, joy, to take my mind off this [fever].” Everyone responded with jokes; the room’s objective was clear: make Alexa laugh, let her experience that familiar sonic resonance that—even momentarily—told her that things were okay. Teatro Alebrijes uses humor and laughter to combat this dramaturgy of lost life by nurturing an intentional community of joy and laughter. As part of my research, I talked to several company members who shared how laughter has shaped their lives in and outside of rehearsal.

Badu shared that “laughter during rehearsals is important because something that Alebrijes is known for is our sense of humor.” He describes the rehearsal process as a very disciplined one in which lots of focused work takes place; however, he states, “If we get it wrong, we are not going to judge, it is fine to get it wrong, nothing will happen—it makes us stronger.” Badu describes laughter as “a metric used to measure how much trust is in the room.” For ensemble members Janvier Berber, Sergio Davila, Carolina Perez, and Oli Alvarez, laughter is also a metric.

During an interview, production manager Janvier Berber-Acosta spoke at length about being “a serious person,” which he tells me he has been since an early age. Seriousness serves Berber-Acosta in his role as the production manager for the ensemble. Berber-Acosta is responsible for many rehearsal and production process logistics. Seriousness emerged out of

necessity for Berber-Acosta, who has provided for his family since he was sixteen: “For me, being an adult means being serious about life and being serious about what you are doing... I have been serious my whole life.” Berber-Acosta was raised by his grandfather, and described him as a “serious man” who did not prioritize or understand play as a productive activity for his grandson. Instead, Berber-Acosta’s grandfather insisted that he stay focused on his studies and work—those things that would help him build resources and networks for a productive future.

For Mexican philosopher Jorge Portilla, seriousness exists at the opposite end of a spectrum counterweighted by *relajo* or a suspension of seriousness. Portilla articulates this tension in his text, the *Phenomenology of Relajo*—in which the author interrogates the crisis of *relajo* and its potential impacts on Mexican modernity. In the first English translation of this text, philosophy scholar Carlos Alberto Sanchez highlights that part of what Portilla is arguing is that “*relajo* destroys the future.”¹⁹¹ Berber-Acosta’s grandfather’s understanding that what you do in the present should always be an investment in the future echoes Portilla’s discomfort with *relajo* as an act (or series of acts) so rooted in the present that the future does not matter. In his book, *The Suspension of Seriousness: On the Phenomenology of Jorge Portilla*, Sanchez argues for a different reading of *relajo*. Sanchez writes, “I nonetheless see it as life-affirming, a valuation that inverts that which is other to the status quo... an expression of surrender and expression of resistance.”¹⁹² Through my fieldwork with the company, *relajo* has become easy to identify in rehearsal. The manifestations of *relajo* that erupts in the rehearsal room following Sanchez is life affirming and productive. Through his work with the Alebrijes, Berber-Acosta has found a space

¹⁹¹ Sánchez, *The Suspension of Seriousness*, 108.

¹⁹²Ibid, 111.

of liberation from a legacy of seriousness, where joy and laughter is productive. “I am learning how to be a kid again and take my enjoyment back,” Berber-Acosta told me before acknowledging that laughter in rehearsals is central to maintaining a relaxed atmosphere. He sees the creation of this atmosphere as part of his job as the production manager, which he executes with joyful seriousness.

For ensemble member Sergio Davila, laughter is an act of rupture. Davila understands this rupture as an integral part of the rehearsal process. He described how laughter could be an intervention for moments of tension. Davila talked about laughter as a force that allows the group to be vulnerable and share the same experience. He says, “Sometimes, when you’re nervous or tense, laughter breaks that tension. Laughter breaks any situation, any other emotion or feeling that you’re having, it breaks it, so it puts me at ease...”. Davila further described this rupture as one that happens between the performer and their ego. These ruptures, as Davila described them, were integral parts of the process of building an ensemble where members can detach themselves from the individual pressures and anxieties they carry with them into the space to create what Davila describes as an “octopus with only one brain and many tentacles—we are all part of one thing.”

Carolina Perez also spoke about laughter as a signal of vulnerability, recounting a story where she laughed so hard, she peed her pants, but on the other side of the Zoom call, her voice beamed with pride. “How funny that I pee my pants, that was some fucking funny shit, and I wish everybody would see it... If you’re in Alebrijes, you’re gonna constantly laugh,” she tells me. “Alebrijes is like [an Advil for your sorrows]. You allow yourself to be silly and [stupid],

and I feel like that is a superpower that you can feel that vulnerable, but, you know, you are in a safe place.”

Perez assesses safety through a rubric that echoes Bakhtin’s articulation of the grotesque body, which is always in an ambivalent relation to itself. For Bakhtin, the body and bodily functions are sites where people assert power.¹⁹³ For Perez, losing control of her bodily functions did not signal a loss of power or status. It signaled recognition of safety; if you hear laughter in rehearsal, as Badu noted earlier, you can gauge the level of trust in the room. For Perez, laughing so hard that she peed speaks to her trust in the space. Perez further described the laughter in rehearsal “like little mini orgasms” that were important for her mental health. This classification of laughter as an orgasm is a sentiment shared by TV writer Norman Lear, who in 1975 described comedy writing as a process where “[e]verything is gushing, everything is just gushing.”¹⁹⁴

The body and the memory it makes in performance shape ensemble member Oli Alvarez’s relationship to laughter as a site of excess. Over Zoom, Alvarez recounts:

I was told by my family that that’s not how I should laugh; I laughed very feminine. My pitch was very high, and I would most of the time clap and be like *ha ha ha*, and apparently, I wasn’t supposed to do that. So all of my childhood, and all of my adolescence, I pretty much avoided laughing and all that stuff. I think it affected a lot in the way that I grew up.

For Alvarez, Alebrijes rehearsals are a place to reorient and reconnect with their non-binary body and honor the feminine energy alive in their laughter. For both Alvarez and Perez,

¹⁹³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

¹⁹⁴ In *The Humor Code*, Lear is quoted as describing comedy writing as, “[e]verything is gushing, everything is just gushing” in a 1975 interview for *Make 'em Laugh: Life Studies of Comedy Writers*.

these positionalities of excess are “tinged with failure,” they both spoke about how their bodies fail them, and of the rehearsals they engaged in to approximate an acceptable way of being in the world. Still, as Badu notes above, rehearsal is a place to embrace failure.¹⁹⁵

After meeting on Zoom for a year and a half, the FDA approved a vaccine, and as we could, members of the ensemble were vaccinated. With the vaccine came the possibility of meeting in person again. In November of 2021, the company started planning an in-person pastorela; armed with an arsenal of jokes and stories shared via Zoom, Badu started writing, and I got on a plane.

On November 11, 2021, I walked into the garage of a wood frame, single-family home in San José’s Mayfair Neighborhood. The home belongs to the Berber family, where Janvier Berber, the ensemble’s serious production manager, lives. The garage is part storage for Berber’s day job as the regional manager of a cleaning company and prop/costume storage for Teatro Alebrijes. Two large folding tables and recording equipment were in the middle of the garage. Carolina Perez wanted to record the first read-through to try out her newly acquired podcasting equipment.

After everyone had said their hellos, given their hugs, and exchanged laughs, Rodrigo took the reins of rehearsal. The company began a read-through. It is our first time hearing the play. The atmosphere is thick with joyful and tentative energy. As a member of the ensemble and a cast member for their 2021 production, which performed a live, limited run just as the Omicron variant was gaining a foothold in California, I experienced the impact that the laughter and levity

¹⁹⁵ In her book, *Aesthetics of Excess: the Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*, Jillian Hernandez describes a survey taken in the Miami community about “chongas” that yielded responses that Hernandez notes were “tinged with failure.”

in their pastorela had on the lives of the audience and on this small ensemble of performers. We leaned into the absurd to make ourselves and our audiences laugh at and laugh through the catastrophic toll the pandemic has had on the Latinx community in California.

The play that emerged, *Entre Villancicos y Cuentikos (Of Christmas Carols and Tiny Tales)*, is the third in a series of pastorelas that I collectively refer to these plays as the *Villancicos* plays. They all share a variation of the title *Entre Villancicos y _____*. A *Villancico* is a Christmas Carol, so these plays are all entitled *Of Christmas Carols and _____*. In 2021, it was *Christmas Carols and Tiny Fairytales*. These plays follow the misfortunes of Britani Marisol, a social media-obsessed young woman in her early 30s. *Entre Villancicos y Cuentikos* followed Britani Marisol as she tried to survive a fever dream during the lockdown. In their *Villancicos* pastorela plays, it is common for these characters to have a brush with realms of magic, but for the most part, they are all set in East Side San José. What was different in *Villancicos y Cuentikos* is that this story begins in San José, but quickly moves to a fantasy elsewhere when the play's protagonist bumps her head on a dresser which transports her to a Narnia of Badu's design.

Britani Marisol's concussed alternate reality allowed Britani to reflect on the precarious state of the world as well as engage in humor through what McGraw and Warner call the "benign violation," a term coined by McGraw to articulate his theory about the structure of humor, namely that, "humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling, or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously, seems okay, acceptable, or safe (benign)."¹⁹⁶ San José, in this

¹⁹⁶ McGraw and Warner, *The Humor Code*, 10.

post-COVID-19 lockdown moment, was a community full of pain, fear, and trauma. Badu felt he needed to give the audience an escape, so that is what he did.

The play opens, like most of their other pastorela plays, with the smooth baritone voiceover curtain speech by the director, Rodrigo Garcia. After announcing the cast alphabetically, Garcia asks the audience who take pictures during the show to do so in moderation, as it will “distract the actors and might unleash the apocalypse.” The joke elicits a light chuckle from a few audience members before his tone shifts to remind everyone gathered to watch the production that they must comply with the County of Santa Clara’s health ordinance and wear their masks over their mouths and nose for the duration of the performance. He assures the audience that the cast and crew have been fully vaccinated and encourages them to clap, laugh and enjoy the show because, as he reminds them, “our purpose in life is to be happy.” The music underscoring his speech swells as Garcia adopts a more formal narrator’s tone. Garcia’s disembodied baritone voice proceeds to frame the play’s action by telling the audience that the play that is about to begin took place in 2020 when the lockdowns in California were in full force, but a vaccine was on the horizon. Setting the stage for the action, Garcia tells the audience that the play takes place when “[w]e wanted to escape to another reality to feel free again, to feel the sun’s rays, to be in contact with other people, and give ourselves the impression that none of this had been true.”¹⁹⁷

After the curtain speech and Star Wars-like prologue, Britani Marisol enters in a powder blue nightdress, singing a truncated parody of the popular Kathrine Kennicott Davis Christmas

¹⁹⁷ Badu, *Enter Villancicos y Cuentikos*, (Unpublished manuscript, translation mine).

carol, “Little Drummer Boy.” Through Britani’s adapted lyrics, she tells the audience that the lockdown does not suit her. She misses being able to romp about in the streets. She wants to get off her butt and wander around the city with friends with whom she can criticize everything and everybody.

After the song, Britani Marisol shifts into a direct-address monologue where she commiserates with the crowd. For the audiences, it is clear that they are watching a play, but their attendance also intimately connects them to the actors as co-performers. I borrow the language of co-performing from D. Soyini Madison, who uses this term to describe moments when actors are “speaking with” instead of “speaking to.” This approach implicates the audience in action and fuses the performer and audience as mutual stakeholders in the outcome. There are moments where spectators co-perform.¹⁹⁸ We are all in this together and for the next hour, and by inviting the audience into the world of Britani Marisol, Teatro Alebrijes gives the audience a new way to relate to the pandemic.

Throughout the play, the audience is invited into our pandemic Zoom room as the jokes and stories we share with each are scripted and dramatized for our extended community. During our time together over Zoom, members of Teatro Alebrijes often used humor to remind each other that laughter is a form of disarming the power we gave the pandemic. Yes, the pandemic during lockdown was dangerous and should be taken seriously, we felt the gravity of its seriousness every day. However, over Zoom, we reminded and encouraged each other to

¹⁹⁸ Madison, “CO-PERFORMATIVE WITNESSING,” 828.

experience a full range of affective responses to the pandemic, including the use of laughter as a way to relieve tension, and now we share this reminder with our audiences.

Villancicos y Cuentikos gives the audience permission to laugh at the pandemic by giving Britani Marisol a sidekick with whom she can trade condescending quips. This sidekick is a magical fly, which she has accidentally bound to her after she stabs it with a magic sword. Since the pest will be with her throughout the adventure and she did not invite it, she names the fly COVIS— A variation of COVID, because, to her, this attachment is both “ill-fated and inopportune.”¹⁹⁹

Like the rest of the plays that are part of the *Villancicos* series of plays, we follow Britani Marisol as she fumbles her way through the world, chasing the person she has decided is the love of her life. In this magical fairytale world, Britani Marisol has convinced herself that she was transported to this magical land to fulfill her destiny and marry the prince. During the play, the audience joins Britani and COVIS as they bump heads, learn to give each other space, and finally find a way to coexist on this quest peacefully. This relationship invites chaotic, slapstick humor, and as is the case in the rest of the plays in the *Villancicos* series, Britani Marisol does not get her prince. In the other shows, the failure that Britani Marisol experiences in her pursuit of love often opens the doors for a queer relationship to bloom elsewhere within the cast of characters, but not in this play. In this play, after the prince ends up with the evil, beautiful witch, Malvina, Britani Marisol can no longer control herself. Her waking life is full of anxiety and uncertainty, and her fantasy life has proven to be equally disappointing. She goes on a campy killing spree akin to what you might see in a Quentin Tarantino film.

¹⁹⁹ Badu, *Villancicos y Cuentikos* (unpublished manuscript).

Throughout her adventures in this other world, Panchita, the keeper of potions and medicine, has been protecting Britani Marisol. Incidentally, Panchita is the only person whom she does not murder. After Britani's murderous rampage, Panchita emerges and asks her, "Do you feel better?" She does not. After Britani kills COVIS, Panchita reminds her that she cannot escape her problems and may run into romantic disappointment and COVIS again. Panchita encourages her to embrace her life's new reality in order to thrive. Panchita sends Britani Marisol back to the real world, where it is Christmas Eve. She receives a letter confirming her appointment for her first vaccine and ends the show with another direct address monologue. She begins by telling the audience that this Christmas was different. She is also different. So, the end of the play is also different. Instead of ending with a traditional, cheerful, and humorous monologue, Badu drops his persona, and the cast joins him onstage, with masked faces just like our audience.

One by one, we enter, dropping our personas to express the sincere difficulty of social distancing and the fear that had to be overcome by finding new ways to feel close, self-soothe, and show ourselves and our loved one's grace: to care for each other. At the end of the play, the cast acknowledges that we are all here together, and even if we are together in the face of great loss, it is our duty to take care of each other, to make sure we wear our masks and get vaccinated to protect the most vulnerable. Throughout the production, Teatro Alebrijes, like ProLatino before them, uses the pastorela to aid in the fight against another pandemic; in spreading this message, they deployed humor as the central strategy, as a balm for the ensemble, for the audiences, these plays as Perez states, become an "Advil for your sorrows."

Conclusion: The Future and the Past(orela)

In the Spring of 2023, I received a grant to co-curate “Vistas: A Latinx Speaker Series” at Tufts University. The series hosted three prominent Latina voices in the field of Latinx Studies. Each speaker delivered a public talk and after their public talks, we ended each visit with dinner. At dinner with our second invited scholar, political theorist Dr. Juliet Hooker, she generously inquired about my research. I shared with her the basic ideas I was wrestling with in the project and made it a point to note my strong desire for this project to become my first book after completing this doctoral program. My investment in this as my first book is partially practical, as it will be an important addition to my tenure file when the time comes, but it is also personal. I expressed to Dr. Hooker that I feel a sense of responsibility to Teatro Alebrijes for sharing so generously with me during field site visits. Dr. Hooker made a remark whose general sentiment has stayed with me. To paraphrase, she said something about the “debts we accrue to the communities we write about.” I feel indebted to Teatro Alebrijes and want to make sure their stories, thoughts, history, and art practice approaches are documented and accessible for generations to come. I have also discovered, through the process of writing this dissertation, a clear commitment to documenting performance, both historical and contemporary, of queer and Latinx theater makers who are not shifting the national zeitgeist, but instead who have or who are making small changes through their art, to their own communities.

I want to conclude this project by highlighting some of the ways that I plan to extend this work. Alongside my investment in Teatro Alebrijes, I am invested in San José, CA as a serious site for queer performance historiography. In the next iteration of this project, I plan to extend my work in Chapter Two to craft deeper parallel theatre histories, a queer performance history of

San José that has omitted or has yet to privilege the contributions of Latinx artists. This history will be narrated against the omission of queer performers' voices from in the Chicano Movement. This means that my sections on Ray Aguilar, Casa de San José, as well as my discussion of Jose Sarria's influence on queer performance and culture in California will benefit from further research and writing. This work will begin with an archival visit to The Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscripts library at Yale University to explore their holding in their International Imperial Court Systems Collection.

Scholarships about European traditions of stock characters exist in abundance. I want to make the case for a pantheon of figures that emerge in the Americas and whose legacy, like Muerte and the Devil, are traced to include other instances of these figures on the Latinx stage and document more contemporary examples of Quotidian Divas onstage.

The book project will also expand my work in Chapter Three. I will make a stronger case for the "Quotidian Diva" by tracing the legacy of stock character performance traditions in the Americas. As a scholar and artist, my practice as a playwright, director, and performer shape the projects I take on and the questions I ask, and the interventions I make. As I look forward to the book manuscript, I want to end each chapter by doing including a section that considers how these histories and theoretical frameworks impact the way that Teatro Alebrijes approaches art making, so that this project documents and offers approaches to directing, playwriting and acting *al estilo Alebrije*.

Finally, I want the next iteration of this project to offer an extended consideration of ethnographic methods and strategies I engaged in collecting data for this project. I defended my prospectus on February 12, 2020, and was granted research leave Fall semester 2020. The central

methodologies proposed for the project were archival and ethnographic research. These remain central to my project. However, as it was unsafe to travel in Fall 2020 due to the growing COVID-19 pandemic, my in-person time in the field was limited to a few weeks in the Fall of 2021. However, over the course of the pandemic lockdown, I was able to remain in conversation with my interlocutors via Zoom, text, and social media. The pandemic required a shift to digital ethnographic methods. While I navigated the pandemic and continued to conduct research, I made the choice not to take on the body of scholarship that exists about digital ethnography in order to frame it as my central strategy, but the next iteration of this project will.

Throughout this dissertation, I argue for more visibility for Teatro Alebrijes and Queer Latinx theater, and I want to end by acknowledging that this project is a contribution to conversations that deserve more scholarly engagement. I hope that when I finish the book, that whoever reads it finds it to be a useful tool to discuss queer theatrical archives, community engaged scholarship, and ethnographic methods. I see this book as an extension of projects that have explored Queer and Latinx Performance in the Americas, but Teatro Alebrijes is just one small company in one large hemisphere. I am excited to read about the small queer Latinx ensembles that exist in whatever informal configurations in more cities across the US. I want to know what is happening in the rest of the theatrical markets whose histories, like that of San José, still deserve more attention. Like, I see this project as a link in a chain that traces the history of Latinx theater in the US. This project exists on the shoulders of the theatre historians and performance scholars who have documented and highlighted the complexity of our existence and art making in their times. This project's scope is limited, there are so many stories to tell.

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