

Myths, Gifs and The Trans Body: Some Notes on *Jóse Juana & The Colony*

Being transgendered or genderqueer raises the stakes of the body in a very specific way. The process of asserting one's particular gesticulation in the binary world is challenging, wonderful and horrible. And as global awareness of gender non-conformity increases, so does rude curiosity and gender terror.

I do a lot of troubleshooting at the irrigation store I work at. You could say I'm good at finding problems with things. The problem I have found with the contemporary transgender narrative is as follows: An intensely diverse experience of many individuals is being broadcasted to the mass through a homogenizing and objectifying lens. This lens publicizes the spectacle of physical and social gender transitions, but fails to humanize the potential for cultural, physical and psychological non-conformity associated with a fluid gender spectrum. It's important to remember that there are purposes for this brand of objectification, few of which serve the trans community. This is why I find myself compelled to invent uncertain and troublesome expressions of my own bodily not-heterosexual, not-white, not-cisgendered, only-mostly-American experience.

But how to express the desirable turbulence of identity? New ideas require fresh alchemies of form: I blended the visual languages of popular music videos, gif memes and transition update vlogs to create the imagery for *Jóse Juana*. To tell the story, I borrowed narrative devices from Latin American magical realism, Kafkaesque surrealism and pre-Colombian mythology, producing something that could be an allegory, a myth and a mockumentary. WikiHow was forthcoming with a useful and absurd nine-step how-to that essentialized a female to male transition, the linearity of which plays nicely against the non-linearity of *Jóse Juana's* monologues.

Symbolism is important to the piece: You'll notice *Jóse Juana* is shown wearing his Tejana (Mexican cowboy hat) and crocodile boots during abstract sequences. I didn't want this performance to be about any transman (though it is about *all* transmen). It is about *this particular* transman and his particular culture, his body and gestures, his mestizaje (hybridity) of race, gender and multilingualism.

The text in the video are the words of Stanford biologist Deborah M. Gordon as they appear in her book *Ants at Work: How an Insect Society is Organized* and on "Emergence", the Radiolab episode in which she is featured. I don't think she would approve of my soft uses of her hard science, but after hearing her thesis that ants are leaderless, I felt it was something fascinating to apply to a society obsessed with the ideal of perfected leadership. The word 'colony' applied to people invokes histories of development and genocide. From this perspective, I wanted to pose questions about individual/group/minority/majority, so I tossed the new archetype of the lonely, anguished transguy onto an anthill. Do they swarm, devour him from inside out? Integrate him into the colony? Can the sublime understanding that ants have of their changing roles within the larger organism of their colony serve as metaphor for the innateness of our genders?

Whether you approve of my soft science or prefer a harder science, I hope that this beast of a work elicits some sort of *something* for you. If you have questions or complaints, please write them on the index cards provided and return them to the receptacle. I invite you to include your email address, so if your question is not answered during the Q&A, I can write you an answer in good time.

Thank you very much for attending!

Yours,

Migueltzinta Cah Mai Solis Pino