

MUGUELTZINTA SOLÍS

Embodying the postcolonial perverse: mestizXXX sadomasochist performance methodologies

ABSTRACT: This paper is not intended as either a survey of performance and perversity nor as an argumentation for any particularly new theory of performance. Rather it is me offering my methodologies, influences and thoughts as a trans mestizXXX perverse performance artist living and working in an actively postcolonial moment. It is, in part, an act of resistance toward the move to commodify performance's important ephemerality and ineffability into institutionally digestible historicity and study-ability within academic institutional contexts. This paper will focus on some of my performance work which plays with ideas of power, bondage, land, colony, body and institution. I will also discuss the work of a few contemporary artists whom I identify not as important to notions of "the canon" but to *my* canon, artists whose queer and/or "of colour" perversities have influenced my work and self-formation. A work which combines personal narrative with critical analysis, this paper hopes to contextualize my performance practice from an intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective.

KEYWORDS: visual art; gender studies; performance; perversity; leather; postcolonial; queer studies; bdsm; biopolitics; land; landscape; place; Indigeneity; ritual; imaginaries; FTM; T4T; sexuality.

INTRODUCTION: CREATING RELATION TO LAND THROUGH BDSM

I don't want to begin with a dry summary of this paper, walking you through each section with details about what I am intending to do at every step. I know that is a practice that works for lots of people, but to me, in this context, that seems unerotic. This is not to say I don't have concern for your well-being as a reader. Once, I had sex with another transman, a stranger I had met hours before. In the middle of our fucking his face twisted in a way that alarmed me, prompting me to stop what I was doing and ask, "Are you ok?" He became furious, demanded, "Why would you ask me that?" I often look back on this as a red flag that tried to forewarn me of a relationship that would become fraught with poor communication and abusive habits. So, bearing that in mind, I'd like this paper to unfold organically, with both

of us understanding that we can stop at any time. I consider “BDSM” as a sensory, performative and aesthetic category which claims ideas of power, restriction, dominance and pain beyond our theaters of private desire, into collective, public and politicized erotic imaginaries. I feel it is the transmutative potential of “BDSM” being understood as performance and/or ritual which gives it this power. Much as Foucault’s experience of the gay leather scene informed his analyses of power, so can performative embodiments of the postcolonial perverse serve to bring to the surface our subconscious formations of race, class, gender, ethnicity and their relationships to the state body.

As introduction I will tell you about a performance persona project which I feel serves as an example of the particular tangle of ideas that this paper wants to discuss. While much of my performance work has dealt with notions of the perverse, I want to begin with a look at a body of work I created for my MFA thesis, *Landscape is my Sir* (SOLÍS 2019). I am an artist with underwhelming drafting skills, and so the sketch I brought to my supervisor of a leather daddy bound to a chair on a frozen pond was a poor one. Having spent the first year of my MFA program toying with various materials and concepts, I walked into my advisory meeting equipped with two desires: 1. I wanted to develop a deeper relationship with the Blackfoot territory on which I had arrived to be a guest and student and 2. I wanted to do it while dressed in leather. This would be the beginning of a performance person named Chico California, after a town in Northern California near the rural area in which I grew up. The idea was simple: I, a transmasculine homosexual guest in Blackfoot territory, wanted to develop a closer relationship to land through sensuality. I had started meeting people through Grindr, which had already helped me (un)map the territory beyond the confines of the University. But by pursuing the unanswerable question of *how does a stone, a tree, a hill want to be pleased?* I could point to the absurd, hilarious, horrifying and ecstatic processes of creating relation with place, processes which are often overlooked in non-dominant worldviews. The question of relation to land and the non-human had, for this project, roots in Indigenous ways of knowing, ways in practice since time immemorial but translated into academic language – and often rescinded *from* as an act of resistance to institutionalization – by scholars such as Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Canada Research Chair, Kim TallBear,

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who works from a Nishnaabeg worldview, Vine Deloria Jr. – Sioux – and Leroy Little Bear, working from Blackfoot ways of knowing.

My entry point into leather and BDSM as Chico California was one of imaginary and fantasy before it was one of practice. I was introduced to BDSM as an older teen, and it has been a significant aspect in several of my relationships, but never in an especially social way. I have never been part of any extensive BDSM or leather communities and have little interest in doing so. That being said I might argue that academia is one of the oldest BDSM communities, full of perverse rituals, SM relations, binding contracts and power roles, and I have been deeply embroiled in this community for most of my adult life. During my MFA work, I spent quite a bit of time thinking this over. This led to a slogan of which I have joked with my colleagues about making university t-shirts and hoodies: *the University of Lethbridge is My Sir*. The recipient of grants and scholarships, the “debt” I owe in exchange for my education is one narrativized as repayable only through gratitude, good behavior, productiveness and institutional loyalty, through being a good boy.

Power relationships unequivocally exist between people and place. Painter Kent Monkman, who I’ll talk more about in a bit, talks about the way in which landscape painting flattens colonial history (MONKMAN 2015). Building on Monkman’s reflection on landscape painting having a particular role in the material, visual and spiritual territorialization of the North American “West,” I attached the notion that a frame is a body harness around place, the word *landscape* itself an act of framing a site or place into a stricture: *this* is what is important in this site, *not* that. In *Landscape is my Sir*, the question *how does land want to be pleased?* brought with it other exciting questions that arose out of granting the “inanimate” the same agencies which non-Indigenous worldviews reserve only for humans. Does land have the ability to consent? If a landmark is photographed over and over by people, is it a slut or a porn star? Coloniality is a perverse undertaking. It is driven by theologies which find the conquering of “unused” land to be a moral obligation, where to *save* a person, a place, a commodity does not equate to its ethical treatment. The phrase “land use” itself is worth considering from the vantage of erotics and desire: when I ask a lover to “use me,” I am asking for mutually pleasurable reciprocal relation, not to be violently relieved of my resources or to have my body

irreparably damaged such that neither I nor other lovers can enjoy it again.

Bearing these questions and ideas in mind, *Landscape is my Sir* was challenging as a work of performance creation because I wanted to cast Chico California as both dominant and submissive to landscape. Dominance over territory, as performance, turned out to be a much more legible relation than submitting to it. It was easy enough to invoke this relation through performances of erotically flogging, smut-talking, fisting and spitting on the land, stones, trees, etc. I wanted to find ways to show site-specific dominances that were *sensual*, that demonstrated *a perverse care*, and not just a cavalier using of the land toward dominating gestures, or, for that matter, that carelessly used the land for my own ends as an art student. This included rituals of digging up masses of dirt, wrapping them in leather and then paddling them, fisting the hole the dirt came from, then burying my face in the earth once it had been paddled, and ending with carefully replacing the earth in the hole it came from. Chico California also flogged, spanked and whipped objects, such as a set of children's history textbooks from the 70s that told a glorified history of western expansion and industrialization of the prairies, as well as travelogues written by settler-explorers, punishing them for being "bad little books."

Chico California's *subbing* to land took much subtler forms, and required my surrender to gravity, to the elements, to river currents and to temperatures -15 degrees Celsius. As any good foray into BDSM, this project taught me about the limitations of the body as much as its capacities: I never did do the leather-daddy-on-ice performance because I came to understand how very difficult and dangerous such a performance would be. This *as a work which should not happen* in itself contains meaning, is an acknowledgement that Chico California submits to his limitations as a human, and to the boundaries set by the natural world, to physics, to the force of winter. I find this humbling, this perversity which can only exist in my imaginary, and it is my hope that, having shared it with you, it can exist in your imaginary too.

You ok? This paper will proceed with few citations, though this may change in the editing process. There exists a wealth of writing and thought about performance which has nurtured me, and I will include the occasional nod to these texts. However, I feel the value I have in this conversation is to supply first-person or primary-source-esque insight into performance, rather

than to spend a lot of time expressing a third hand re-view of performance studies, a task I leave to others, or to a me of a different time. The artists I've chosen are not explicitly considered to be BDSM-y artists, rather I highlight the ways in which their unique perversities play in their work. The artist pool I draw from are simply some artists who have mentored me in some way, whom I have met in passing or whom I follow on Instagram, and in those ways influence my day-to-day absorption of creativity. I write longer about some artists than others, though I could happily write a full paper, or better still a very long love letter, to any one of them. I've put a lot of stories in this paper, and it should be underscored that performance as an art form goes hand-in-hand – again not unlike BDSM practice – with storytelling. I feel one of the most effective ways of analysing art is to tell the sensory, relational and affective story of it. And so, in the next section I will narrate a Chico California performance story for you.

1. LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY ARE MY SIR

It's a cool day, windy. I'm hot, sweaty from carrying my materials to the place I've asked my committee to gather. My committee is gathered in a coulee, a small grassy valley that overlooks the river, the modernist concrete building that is the University behind them. I walk down from the building. I'm dressed as Chico California, wearing tall black leather boots over black jeans, a black leather jacket and black leather gloves. I'm carrying a large amateur painting of a landscape I've found in a thrift store, which shows a roughly painted mountain scene, a river of white and blue blots, a forest of green and brown gashes. I set it firmly into the grass near my committee. I face it toward the river and tell the painting it's nothing but a poor imitation. I tell it that that over there, that's a real landscape. I cuss at the painting and then I bind it. I have made a leather harness just for paintings, metal ring fitted at its center. I tell it to watch.

I've set up a little table between my committee and myself. I walk around the area and pickup river stones from between the prairie grass and set them in a row on the table. I serve the stones a glass of whiskey and put cigarettes under them. I welcome the stones and my committee, and give them whiskey, too. I tell them the history of whiskey in Alberta. I put on Lady Gaga's "Heavy Metal Lover" and do a strip tease until I am in just my boots and a pair of black short-shorts I had on under my pants, showing my ass and doing body rolls for the stones watching. When the

song reaches a crescendo, I put handcuffs on myself, hands behind my back, and I run away. I run, as a committee member describes later, away and out of the frame. I run high up the grassy side of the valley and stand for a moment before I dive onto my side and begin to roll downhill. It hurts and also feels exhilarating. I am scarcely in control of the roll, just enough to keep my head up and away from rocks and cacti. I have checked for rattlesnakes before the performance, but one never knows. I trundle through the grass until I come to standstill in the cup of the valley. The earth and sky continue spinning as I try to stand and fall. My sides and wrists are somewhat bruised and small scratches all over my torso are bleeding. I feel drunk and dizzied, my body full of sweet endorphins.

Here is the history of whiskey in the place this performance unfolded: in the mid 1800s American whiskey bootleggers, many of them displaced soldiers and civilians from the American Civil War, came to Alberta and began trading with the Blackfoot Confederacy for buffalo hides. They traded gunpowder, beads, tobacco, whiskey and other goods. The whiskey they traded was often laced with additives such as pepper, gunpowder and strychnine, and the buffalo hides they traded for fetched a far higher resale value than what they gave in exchange. Buffalo hides were wanted by settlers as robes, blankets and to use as driving belts in industrial steam-powered machinery. Members of the Blackfoot Confederacy quickly became addicted to whiskey, and, together with the decimation of the buffalo by American and Canadian military, police and vigilante forces, and various pandemics sweeping the region, the Blackfoot Confederacy had its economic and spiritual sovereignty eroded away on its own territory.

I stumble back to my committee and one of them un-cuffs me. After the performance my committee gathers inside the University for me to present my end of year progress review. I am sore, scratched, winded and slightly drunk. When I get home, I realize I've left the rest of the bottle of Alberta Premium whiskey in the coulee. I leave it there.

2. CONTACT ZONE PORN STARS

I grew up primarily in California, and it has not been until living outside that place for longer than 4 years that a true nostalgia, a simulacral twin which lives in my mind, has solidified into what is a self-identification as a *Californian*. I can now tell you with assuredness that I know what California is, how it smells and how it tastes. I can tell you the particular way in

which California hurts you and exactly how to hurt it back. What's more I have crystalized in my mind the particular kind *wild west* that California is by the simple virtue that it is the kind of *wild west* that California believes itself to be. I think of California as being an example of what Mary Louise Pratt identified as a *contact zone*, though it is possible that when I envision *contact zone* it is far queerer, far more *bad drag make-up* and *broken disco ball* than the blended aesthetic producing historical moment she initially had in mind (PRATT 1991). The contact zone that I, as a perverse performance artist, spend time performing into is atemporal, is a historical period that spans and erupts at any moment between the imaginal of any number of colonial first contacts and the imaginings that inspires my neighbors' bumper stickers: "Ram the Daughter, Dodge the Father," "I AM Alberta Oil," and one my mother saw recently, "I Didn't Own Slaves and You Never Picked Cotton." To this effect, Chico California is a *contact zone porn star*, appearing inwardly as a figment of westward expansion's past/present/future imagination, and expressing outwardly as a stripper for the land.

Early in my material research for Chico California, my supervisor brought two artists to my attention: Kent Monkman and Adrian Stimson. Kent Monkman's paintings have become a popular fixture in Canadian contemporary art, particularly those bringing attention to the history of the Residential School System and its repercussions for Indigenous communities past and present. But while such works bring awareness and voice to critical matters, for me, as a perverse artist, it was Monkman's work with Miss Chief Eagle Testickle which takes colonial history to task by fucking it that really struck me. Wearing a "war bonnet" inspired not so much from colonial photographer Edward Curtis's imaginary – where popular stereotypical imaging of Native people has origins – but from an appropriated headdress which Cher wore in her 1973 video for *Half Breed*. Miss Chief Eagle Testickle appears in paintings styled after classical landscape, historical and religious art, overseeing bears fucking bearded white men in leather gear and fucking unwitting cowboys whose erect cocks betray their enjoyment of the homoerotic coupling.

"Ah yes, Kent," says Blackfoot performance artist Adrian Stimson, when Monkman's name comes up in a lecture's q&a period which I attend. "Buffalo Boy was making the rounds years before Miss Chief was" (Stimson 2019.) This makes me consider the two performance personas created by these two artists, Monkman's Miss Chief as a hi-fi perversity, fucking

and politicking her way into hallowed halls, while Stimson's Buffalo Boy delights in the expanses of southern deserts and northern prairies, horns and pearls shining, speaking prophesies and histories into the whipping wind of the "wild west." Buffalo Boy is fashioned after the "Native" caricatures featured in the wild west shows that created the imaginary of the wild west that we know now, a force of imaging which continues to inform our racialized notions of territory, nation, resource extraction and rights to land use. Stimson's other persona, the Shaman Exterminator, is a performance persona deployed to interrupt instances of fake shamans and other appropriations and dilutions of Indigenous spiritualities (STIMSON 2019).

While the audacity of Monkman's paintings has made an impression on me, it is Stimson's performance and Stimson *himself* who has moved me as a person engaging with perverse decolonial futurities. His pearl, fringe and fur adorned personas have directly influenced me such that I continually catch myself in Buffalo Boy drag without realizing it. Just today I bought a bullwhip for a project on sound and land, and now, as I revisit the landmark black and white photos of Buffalo Boy performing in the Nevada desert, I see a bullwhip there in Stimson's hand. I take this as evidence of Stimson's power to enter and influence the subconscious as an artist.

Stimson, a member of the Siksika Nation, accesses what is recognizable to me from my upbringing on the spiritual borderland between 1980s Californian Native American and Chicano revival spiritualities, as an Indigenous perversity, full of a humor and scared clowning that has a life and purpose beyond the task of toppling colony. In Stimson's paintings and performance lies an important sense of *this is for us* that is very Indigenous and very queer – thought it might be argued that it is 2Spirit, not *queer*. In a recent painting series, *Naked Napi*, Stimson explores and re-queers the erotics of Napi, a wise-fool "trickster" figure from Niitsítapi stories whose antics have made marks on the land and hold important teachings (STIMSON 2019). What I just called "re-queering" is a re-inscription of Indigenous sexualities and sexual knowledge/cosmology/relation in the place where colonial projects to eradicate both the knowledge and the people who carried these ways of life for Niitsítapi society. Stimson engages with this decolonial project from a very personal place, being himself a survivor of the Residential School System, an institution which has worked hard to erase all non-binary, non-Christian notions of gender and sexuality from its Indigenous prisoners. In a recent installation of Stimson's which appeared

in this year's 22nd Sydney Biennale, a table shows a diorama of small 3D printed model, Naked Napi, Buffalo Boy and The Shaman Exterminator appearing together, surrounded by tiny buffalo. Here, Naked Napi's iconic giant dick ejaculates a stream of thick, anticolonial jizz at a speeding miniature train in an act of land-defense against the railroad's mechanized industrial reach (STIMSON 2020).

Dayna Danger is another kickass 2Spirit artist making art toward decolonial Indigenous perver-futurities who has deeply influenced me. Danger, a self-identified hard femme, creates work rooted in an Indigi-queer decolonial feminist community-building. Danger's beaded BDSM masks – masks which they says have design origins in Mexican lucha libre wrestler masks, which I find to be a lovely cultural circularity – are a crystallization of this community, bringing together the world of queer BDSM and Indigenous beading as a tool for sustaining relationships through object-making (DANGER 2018). This perver-futurity is akin to Audre Lorde's erotic, whose distinction between pornography and eros lies in relation-creation and erotic exchanges of knowledge, a departure from production-related carnal satisfaction (LORDE 1978).

Danger's beaded masks are a kind of extended performance, where the process of beading the masks, a task shared among several community members, is as much part of the work as the modeling of the masks. Danger has relationships with the models, specifically picked and posed to express the empowerment of female bodies that are typically underrepresented or othered by mainstream image-making. Danger acknowledges the ways in which photography can be a kind of act of bondage and is conscientious about creating a relationship with the subject that is consensual and mutually pleasurable, recognizing the power dynamics a camera brings into any space. In Danger's portraiture work, they has used conventions of lighting and coloring that invoke the aesthetics of fashion photography and pornography, however the fierce gaze of the models staring back is in bold defiance to being read as consumable bodies. Danger's work proposes BDSM as a relational tool that can dethrone and decenter settler-colonial narratives of not only desire and sexuality, but also gender and power, a reclamation and reprioritization of complexly gendered systems of governance and community organization which the genocidal colonial project has sought to erase and undermine (DANGER 2017).

With these important influences in mind, Chico California has given way

to a new performance persona: Thirstin West. Having scratched the leather daddy itch, I turned to another long-time imaginal fixation of mine, the cowboy. I must emphasize here that I am a fake cowboy. I am afraid of horses and cows, having much preferred my younger-day experiences working with smaller livestock like sheep, goats and alpacas. The cowboy has been an important fantastical embodiment for me since it was an important proto-trans access point for moving from a butch dyke into a butch FTM queen and – in a few more years – daddy. What’s more, it is an important cultural link to a Mexican vaquero or charro imaginal, marked by a coming together of Indigenous and Iberian laboral cultures and technologies, to which I both lay claim to and – when I dare reject it – always seems to reclaim me as its culturally padlocked boy. A family (his)story I’ve been told *many* times by my grandmother brings together all these threads of land, conquest, sex, power and cowboys: My great-grandfather first saw my great-grandmother bathing in a river. One day, when my great-grandmother, the daughter of hacendados (land-owning ranchers,) was riding into town with her brothers, my great-grandfather, a man described derogatorily as being so dark and grizzled his legs appeared to made of wood, leap out from behind a nopalera (a cactus tree) on horseback. He took his knife and cut off my great-grandmother’s virginal hair braid, an act that rendered her unmarriable, sullied and unvirtuous. Told in my grandmother’s manner, this story reads to me as something straight out of a black and white or colorized Mexican western, where the stories of Indigenous/Colonial clashing are re-dramatized as titillating and sexualized encounters unfolding in the mountains, jungles, valleys and deserts of Mexico’s national mythology. Indeed, whether I like it or not, I am made not of the facts in this story but of the imaginaries it invokes.

In my particular take on the “contact zone porn star,” Thirstin West is an actual maker of porn. I’ve had a casual amateur porn practice for just over a year. I refer to this “hobby” as both a *material practice* and as *material research*. I upload my pornographic performances for camera to Pornhub, and in some senses I think of this commercial platform as a perverse contact zone: the boundary between public (free content) and private (premium content) is blurred, one can submit videos for free, but one will never see the return for their labour even as Pornhub makes money off of it. It is often hard to tell who on Pornhub is there as part of their livelihood and who uploads only from a desire to contribute to pornographic discourse and society. Though I’m not directly making money from my content, one

could still argue either way in my case.

An image of pink-red labia pulled open by two hands whose tattooed knuckles read “wild west” revealing a testosterone enlarged clitoris, a nude FTM body in a black cowboy hat bouncing up and down on a dildo strapped to a tooled and patinaed saddle strapped to a sawhorse, hand-painted landscape of mountains and prairie as backdrop: Thirstin West’s pornography is simple, campy and yearning. What I wanted to express with Thirstin West was the outward performative of mestizXXX, an auto-theoretical x-rated outgrowth (SOLÍS 2021) of Gloria Anzaldúa’s Chicana *mestiza* (ANZALDÚA 1987) that focuses on this racially mixed cultural positioning as being one born directly from perverse colonial and postcolonial encounters and experiences. Thirstin West is a kind of Mexican Buffalo Boy. But Thirstin West revels in an ethnic ambiguity which is the cornerstone of the mestizx experience. He is racially mixed beyond easy claim to or claim by any nation or race. He is both a *product* of and *producer* of colonial territorialization. He does not and may never have a *purpose*, other than to wander the atemporal contact zone that is the *imaginary* of the wild west, a denizen of claimed virtual lands such as *Pornhub* and an as-of-yet unnamed virtual “postcolonial theme park” I am currently in the process of designing in the theme park simulator game *Planet Coaster*. If *Pornhub* is an industrial settlement on the colonial frontier of virtual desires, then Thirstin West is neither/both conquered and conqueror, the prospector and the displaced. He, like me, is just passing through. The displaced? Well...

Excuse me here as I interrupt the temporality of this paper: between the initial submitting of the first draft and the subsequent revision process, American legislation known as SISEA, following in the tracks of FOSTA-SESTA which ended the era of both Craigslist personals and the Tumblr porn-verse, prompted *Pornhub* to dramatically reorganize its user base. (See Kelleher and Salonganisa 2021 for an overview of this complex topic which merits its own in-depth essay.) *Pornhub* said it would delete all content by unverified users as part of its compliance with the new law, a move which hugely altered the pornographic landscape for both queer sex-workers and queer porn-consumers. But in December 2020, “Thurston West,” a verified user, had all his videos deleted as well. Thirstin West has since moved to Twitter, but I know this is likely not a permanent solution, and feel deeply for the all the queer and gay sex-workers and performers whose legitimate and important livelihoods have been profoundly impacted. I do not rely

on the dissemination of my amateur pornography to pay my bills, yet my exile from Pornhub was a shocking blow to my erotic life and practice, and served as further proof of the instability, ephemerality and precarity that performance art made in a virtual contact zone experiences.

Recently I returned to the site of one of my Chico California performances, where I tied myself around the torso to tree in the dead of winter and let myself hang. I uncoiled myself and sat on a trunk and cried and cried and cried. I made a video of that performance and made a video, too, of myself returning to the same site one recent sunny, fall day. In the video I say, *I don't know why I came back here. I guess I just wanted some place to return to. I guess that's why I tied myself to that tree. I wanted to have the experience of being bound to a site, to a place.*

3. CONTRABAND PERVERSITIES

Here's another performance story. In mid-January of 2020, I was driving northbound on a prairie highway toward Lethbridge, Alberta, having taken a friend back to the train station in a small Montana town. Never one to be at ease at border crossings despite my American citizenship and Canadian student visa, I was unusually nervous this time around. I'd been detained on the way south, had been questioned by a young, aggressive, red-bearded US border agent who asked me if I "smoked drugs" and, when I said I studied art, mocked me when I said "painting" having misheard me as saying the word "something."

One can guess at why I was singled out to have my car searched: I looked like *someone*, I was wearing the wrong clothes, my car was dirty, I was alone. I collected myself and drove into the metal hanger that two white Canadian agents waved me into. I rolled down the window for a smiling, trim man in his 40s. He introduced himself and his younger colleague, leaning against a row of metal tables nearby. At his request I got out of the car and stood there. I was asked standard questions, was I bringing anything of value into Canada, drugs, firearms? The man was polite, dapper even, with his Québécois accent and tidy, black stubble. He was a sharp contrast to the doughy unkempt US agent who'd yelled and sneered at me. When I told him I studied art, that I was working on a film, this man nodded and said his cousin was an artist filmmaker.

"So!" he said, "Do you know how this works?" The other agent neared.

It was this moment that prickled my neck. While the US agent had made me feel terrible, had made me want to cry, had yelled at me, shamed me in front of my friend and mocked my career, I had not felt like this. It hadn't made me feel like I was in a pornographic film; it hadn't made me feel *perverse*.

It was the casual ordinariness of a ritual that was neither ordinary nor casual that felt perverse. It was the script the men followed and the cleanliness of everything. It was not so much about the men themselves, but my own imaginary of institutional horniness, of power flexed calmly, unexpectedly and without identifiable reason with total assurance of itself. The young US agent had borne the markers of a bad, inexperienced top: unnecessarily cruel and theatrical. But these men were *good* tops, excreting only as much power as they needed to, which was not much: they had trust in the inherent, wide-reaching power of the neo-liberal institution they represented.

I responded that I'd never been searched here. He explained the process, I gave him my keys and the other man showed me into a clean, cold waiting room. I was terrified, and relieved I was not being physically searched beyond a quick pat down. I don't know how long I waited. There wasn't much beyond a vending machine, some chairs and a fire extinguisher in the clean, industrial room. I sat there, containing my emotions about being detained twice in a day for reasons unnamed, wondering what I could have possibly done or said differently to be read as a more-proper citizen/non-citizen. And then I remembered about the pearl.

I had swallowed the pearl the evening before. It was part of a performance for the University of Lethbridge's staff and faculty show – a detail worth noting. I planned to shit out the small river pearl onto a golden decorative platter I had picked out at a thrift store, which depicted a colonial ship bearing a cross on its sails, charging across the sea. The pearl and platter were exhibited with pearl resting on a velvet cushion, platter sanitized and polished on the gallery wall, beside a video of my swallowing and retrieving the pearl in my bathroom at home. But these were just trace artifacts of what I now, in retrospect, consider the heart of the performance.

Sitting in that waiting room, thinking of this contraband pearl inside me, I thrilled at having a small secret, something that the men would not find, something neither legal nor illegal, a parallel, too, to the fact of my reading in appearance and on paper as a man, all while being in possession

of – what I often like to call – my pussy. It was this moment that *made* the performance, which transported the performance from being merely a metaphor for colony as a process of spiritualized resource extraction, to an act of using the body as a vessel for the transportation of a naturally made object of beauty. In a sense the performance unwittingly served to contextualize the terrifying-yet-banal institutional ritual (consider the term, “routine inspection”) as being *part of the performance* of which I was the co-creator, a way in which I, who had little true option to consent to being searched, could reclaim agency. To the pearl in my gut, the border meant nothing.

It’s interesting to think about consent here. Perverse performance frequently foists power relations upon the audience member that they may or may not have consented to. When one decides to attend a performance, this is generally understood. One accepts that one does not know what will happen exactly. And so, it could be asked if the border agents have consented to participating in a performance which involved my pooping out a pearl – certainly they have consented to participating in a performance in which they are searchers and I the searched. Indeed, one might counter-argue that we all are subject to being exposed to performances of power by institutions that we have not consented to. The repercussions for not consenting to any number of institutional requests, i.e. a search of personal property or body, do not really render them as true options. An institution benefits from the participation of the individual well beyond the time that an individual does, but we scarcely consent to that either. None of us consented to being born, socialized and enabled into the systems of inequity in which we find ourselves, yet here we are.

Stop. I need to clarify that I do not mean that performance should be tasked with some moralized responsibility to make *statements* or relate itself prescriptively and didactically toward specific political agendas. Such a logic is the fallacy that performance exists to serve or produce certain results, which erases its pluralistic potentials as being a catalyst, an intervention, a provocation or revelation of what already is. The belief that performance art enters the room fully knowing what it will *do* arrives from and serves only academic models of knowledge production, models which have classically suffered from their colonial inheritance of affectless, Eurocentric perceptive modes. Something that reveals itself here is that perversity in performance is *often* not about the act itself but what

the perverse act elicits, the, if you will, experiential pearls of wisdom that we sift out of the shit. I offer that performance, particularly perverse performance, be acknowledged for being an opportunity for subtext and subconscious to be brought to the surface. I offer that performance is itself the tool for expressing the act of interior becoming exterior, for not only the individual or the smaller one-on-one relation, but for the collective, the performer a provider of clarity and catalysis. I have contextualized or possibly justified my own work in the past by simply saying, *I did it so you didn't have to*.

4. PERVERSITY'S OPPOSITES

What *is* perversity's opposite? A goal, if this paper wanted to have one, might be to express perversity as *not* having an antithesis, an opposite, a binary flip-state. What are some possible opposites of perversity? Normalcy? Painlessness? Being turned off?

Normalcy and the domestic realm are highly perverse. Consider the work of Kat Toronto, whose Miss Meatface thrives in hyper-domestic crocheted-and-floral-print-festooned, animal printed home-scapes. Masked, clad in latex and vinyl clothing and accessories, Miss Meatface dominates *home sweet home*, sometimes sharing the frame with muscular male bodies bent and bound into pretty service, male furniture on whose arms are set delicate doilies or serving platters. Miss Meatface's installation-performances shine with a wetness only achieved by black plastic, that is both a compliment and a contrast to the knitted wooliness of the home-scape that surrounds the perversity in-frame.

Perhaps it would be more useful to think of perversity, and performed perversities, as one of many *on* (being turned on and being turned off, or, being turned on and being *not* turned on?) states that a person can inhabit, just as gender and sexuality have been slowly re-granted range to take any number of forms in any number of contexts. I feel it is important to consider seriously the possibility that the groping for perversity's opposite is a learned habit, a moralistic impulse trained into the mind and body. I suppose I bring up the question of perversity's opposite as a kind of trick question. Perversity has no opposite because perversity is not a fixed point on a moral compass. Rather perversity can be felt as a quality of being whose situation depends entirely on its own relation to any number of shifting realities and *givens*, be they discursive, imaginal or territorial.

5. MESTIZXXX, COLONIAL VOYEURISM AND OTHER SADOMASOCHISMS

mestizXXX, an outgrowth of the Chicana/Chicano *ni de aquí, ni de allá* (neither from here nor from there) mestizx ethos, is an identity matrix fed by both agency, targetship and victimhood in the racial power schemas which vary from nation to nation, continent to continent. mestizXXX must acknowledge the ongoing struggle between Indigenous sovereignty and colonial supremacy – while Gloria Anzaldúa’s work set the stage for important mobilization around a post-Mexico Indigenous reclamation, (ANZALDÚA 1987) the history of power embedded into the word *mestizo* has roots in the *casta* systems of New Spain where *Mestizos* bore rights of which other *castas*, such as *Indios*, were dispossessed. This hierarchy is alive and well today in both Mexican and American racial, economic and gender power structures, where anti-Indigenous and anti-Black discrimination feeds the racial axis upon which Mexican-as-racialized and Mexican-as-white swings.

mestizXXX, as not identity but methodology, hopes to capture the complexity of what is done to us, what we do to ourselves and what we do to others. The perversity which defines it has the potential to possess both an Indigiqueer futurity *and* the potential too fall into patterns of colonial sado-masochisms and voyeurisms. It feels a little *good* to be an exile, to self-position within an identity of racial and sexual targetship, even though one’s life – certainly mine – might be, relatively speaking, pretty damn comfortable.

I have in mind a very particular historical lineage of perverse narrative and power which has produced – and continues to produce – mestizXXX. Carvajal’s *Butterflies Will Burn* traces the political nuances and legal fabric that dictated the prosecution of sodomy in New Spain, a system that was deeply informed by not only sexuality but also race and class. Sigal, Torrici and Whitehead’s edited volume, *Ethno-Pornography* provides various narratives of the ways in which the colonial eye produced the very perversities it would go on to prosecute and use to justify the territorializing and conquest of “heathen” land. Stuart Hall often touches on imaginaries, imaging and the production of the *idea* colonized territory and body. Even if mestizXXX longs for some reclamation of pre-contact, pre-Colombian sexualities, how can history be trusted when so many codices detailing Indigenous life were written by agents of the mission-state?

mestizXXX suggests that these instances of rendering perverse happen within the same body through process of self-territorialization, self-exotification and self-victimization. This is a masochistic process, which, without my precisely qualifying it as either a *good* perversity or a *bad* perversity, formulates a very particular, and very fluid, positioning on the spectrum of colonizer and colonized. But rather than parse this further in theoretical terms I'll turn to some more performance artists who have informed this thought. Because I am more interested in mestizXXX as a methodology than as an identity, I ask that you think of these artists not as *being* mestizXXX but as *embodying* mestizXXX, as incorporating complex sadomasochisms into their work.

Rafa Esparza, possessed of many beautifully crossdisciplinary masteries, has a one particular work which has stuck with me because it is something that my body, too, has wanted. In *Xipe Totec: the flaying of man*, Esparza is tied around the legs and dragged behind a low rider muscle car through the southern California desert, and the leather jackets he wears become hides which tell the story of wounding the flesh would absorb. It has been my desire to do this too, including the wounding of the leather jacket, but I've desired in particular to be dragged behind a pick-up truck by a hot guy down a rural dirt and gravel road. Such a desire is difficult to explain. Is it some mashup of the anti-Mexican sentiments I grew up around, coupled with memories of my first BDSM experience where I was driven up a rural mountain road in a pickup, bent over a tailgate and flogged? The performative impulse lives in my mind as an imaginary of things both desired and feared, of homophobic and racist executions and maimings, and the ever-present question: how could anyone think to kill a person in this way? One desires answers; one desires.

Esparza and myself are not the only ones whose bodies desire to investigate this act which has been used as a form of execution and torture on both otherly-racialized and otherly-sexualized bodies. Another artist who has engaged with this gesture is Jose Villalobos, a Texas based Latinx artist who has taken the textural world of Tejano masculinity, and mercilessly, meticulously, deconstructed it. His installations suspend cowboy boots into fringed chandeliers of leather and rubber, show leather belts and cowboy hats with gay epithets tooled and embroidered into them. But Villalobos, still young in performance artist years – which are not comprised of *years* per se – shows his true vulnerability in his performance:

licking aloe vera spines, sewing/cutting the word *joto* into his hands, getting cowboy boot stich patterns tattooed onto the tops of his feet, being bound and dragged behind a horse, suspending himself from a noose and pulley. Villalobos describes his work as being a confrontation and negation of toxic masculinity, and I would add to that by saying that confrontation is complex, and requires more than saying no. *No* when seeking to unmake, unravel, deconstruct patriarchal-colonial structures, is a multistep process which requires a reconciling with the perversity the pervert has left within us. Villalobos's *no* to toxic masculinity makes homoerotic love to its own artifacts at the same time that it deconstructs them.

My perception of Regina Jose Galindo's smart, intense work is that she does not take masochistic pleasure in her orchestrations of harms done to her own body. She volunteers her body to be injured, tortured and mistreated in the way that the bodies of other Guatemalan and Central American women are treated, but it is the spectator who is the pervert. I suspect this is the thing she as an artist "enjoys," the knowing that an art audience must witness her being waterboarded, receiving a vaginoplasty, being bagged and tossed into a garbage truck. I include her here not because I feel what she does *is* perverse, but because it is the viewer who becomes the pervert for being willing to see her go through with the work without interfering.

Similar is the work of Carlos Martiel, whose performance, *Dark Corner*, I experienced in person. In his performance, Martiel staged himself inside a lightless gallery space, and viewers entered in groups of three holding between them a single flashlight. Those who entered were staged to confront their own fear and titillation over what waited in the dark: a naked black man. Martiel stood in a corner of the room and allowed himself to be found and examined by the beam of the flashlight. Who really held the power in this space? The racialized body "waiting" in the dark? Or the body bearing the light to blind Martiel's eyes and illuminate his bare flesh? Martiel's performance work frequently involves self-alteration, endurance and injury, but, like Galindo's, his presence is there to represent or manifest or embody the pain of others and to draw attention to our *own* attention, to the willingness to be a spectator, a voyeur.

6. TRANS COUNTER-INSTITUTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND T₄T RELATIONS AS MASOCHIST METHODOLOGY

You ok?

It's funny to think that BDSM still organizes itself into play communities, that there are still leather men hierarchies and competitions, when BDSM is so often an undiscussed, unspectacularly inherent part of homosexual sexuality. Choking and slapping seem to be ubiquitous aspects of fucking, and, in a way, I appreciate how these acts escape the formalization that the acronym *BDSM* implies. Is the "rough" in "liking it rough" a formalized sadomasochism or does it escape language, a fugitive desire both liberating and problematic, a place where consent becomes nebulous? Here we see two physical acts, choking and slapping as escaping that formalization, but what about emotional sadomasochism? What about the predator/prey relations that effervesce between queers and their complex relational out-workings? How is this informed by institutional involvement in the personal lives of transsexuals, the complex of pharmaceutical, capitalist, governmental surveillances of and investments in the trans body, what Paul B. Preciado names *pharmacopornography* (PRECIADO 2008).

The pharmacopornographic positioning of transsexuals makes institutional critique a natural place to create trans performance from. Many of my presentations for graduate level classes have included subversive performances that somehow went against my home institution's grain. I have backpacked my dirty dishes to school and washed them outside in a blizzard (Rich's *Politics of Location*), drunk my own pee (Kristeva's *Abjection*), handcuffed myself and performed on the large table of a "Socratic seminar" room (Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*), and invited my classmates to inject testosterone with me (Preciado's *Testo Junkie*) – an offer which one courageous and lovely classmate did indeed accept. Across institutions I've been chased by campus security, have sat in deans' offices and been the subject of intra-departmental debate, events which, while terrifying and rather traumatizing – even though I brought it upon myself – I saw as evidence that my performance work, half-intentional, half-impulsive, was *working*. It means something different for me to do these acts than say a cisgender white male counterpart. My medical and institutional transsexuality is

enmeshed in such a way with bureaucratic systems that sometimes these interventions feel like the only way I can still be a body apart.

Artist Joseph Liatela, who has the words *take care* tattooed onto his knuckles, whose Instagram feed I've been consuming with longing, is an interdisciplinary artist who considers the "somatic effect that institutions have on bodies" as he described in a recent guest artist appearance I attended virtually (LIATELA 2020). His interdisciplinary work, like Villalobos art, blends performance with a manufacturing of material objects, tools, sculptures and installations that are as brutal as they are elegant. Some of these objects are displayed as the performance trace of investigation into the effects of pharmaceuticals and architectural design on the flesh. Liatela has also staged self-suspensions, has made bondage contraptions that tangle performers with each other, their bodies asking questions of both violence and intimacy, and has marked himself. Liatela who creates from a trans experience, has also done kinky things to books, in one piece knotting his own body's weight's worth of DSM manuals in ornate shibari binding. While I have never interacted with Liatela, his work calls out to me, as Villalobos's does, my art twins asking the same questions with the same materials because our embodied experiences, our perversities, somehow mirror each other. In watching Liatela do a live virtual performance, I feel in me a particular perverse hunger for both the love and hate of other transmen, a feeling that makes my hands hurt such that I have at times wanted to cut them off.

I'm getting close.

In this final section I want consider a sadomasochistic methodology that, in metacontext, encapsulates this entire paper and even the process of writing this paper. It is also a methodology which I struggle to articulate because I know it's there and in play, even as I scarcely understand it. I don't even know what to call it. Trans affective sadomasochism? Sad tran theory? Transexual auto-wounding? Transsexuality is not a disease, but it is a temporal and affective dis-ease, an affliction. Transition is not definable, but it is often pursued and desired with the lovesick madness of something that *feels* definite, an ultimate state, a promise.

T4T relations are the coming together of bodies caught up in the momentum of these afflictions, in states of afflicted-ness. These relations can never

escape the promises made by the future and the past, by the pharmaceutical industry, by gender, by other trans. In T4T relations we fuck each other for research, to find out what has happened to the other and what might yet happen to ourselves. We self-afflict and self-inflict wounds into our psychic-bodies and into those of the trans around us because we are all collateral in each other's self-realization, sadomasochistic ouroboros martyrs, witting, unwitting. We do not choose to feel dysphoria, it is simply there. But to self-understand as trans is to invite in that body-state and all its accompanying discourse. And *this* is a masochism to which we are all perverts. It is in this way that masochism is a methodology, because to willfully engage with dysphoria is to feel its pain, and pain is always a series of questions, is the body asking not only *what* and *where* but also asking *why*?

To return to the question of my involvement with BDSM communities, I will underscore that the world of FTM T4T desire is in itself a community in which, while we may not all know each other, we all *know* each other. This homopositioning produces a truly *fucked*, perverted and deeply sadomasochistic sexual community whose dynamic is marked by an environment where it is very easy and pleasurable to hurt each other because we know exactly how to do it. It also means we are uniquely positioned to uplift each other, although I realize that, for me personally, this is less an observation of fact and more a howl into the night which awaits a reply.

Give me a second. Because in writing this last sentence I wound myself. It's not unexpected, it is the masochistic methodology that I committed to in writing this paper. To summon these affective ghosts of relation, to make myself think of sex, love, performance and BDSM now in this moment of physical isolation can only hurt and cause unspeakable longing. A surge in cases in the area where I write this clouds hopes of returning to either physically intimate performance – a thing I had only just been becoming comfortable with – or a life of casual sex with multiple partners – another thing I had only in the past several years started becoming comfortable with as well. Here in my masochistic cocoon, I problem solve. Devise ways to perform and create intimacy that do not need proximity, I reimagine proximity entirely, my body alive with the pain of wanting.

CONCLUSION: THE MARK AS TRACE AND FUTURE

I had the great honour of having Adrian Stimson himself as my external committee member for my MFA thesis defense, during which both he and my supervisor, Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) artist Jackson 2bears, commented on Chico California's relationship to sacrifice, whether that be notions of Christian guilt and martyrdom or Indigenous practices of sacrifice through endurance and sometimes piercing such as the Sun Dance or – to return to suspension – the Voladores de Papantla I often saw as a child in Mexico. The thing I decided in that moment not to bring up, for fear of being misunderstood by others present who may have doubted my wellness, was the scar on my upper arm. Throughout the process of my MFA I made offerings of blood to the sites where I performed. While offering food and water, tobacco, sage or copal are practices I have been shown and taught, I have often offered a small cut's worth of blood as offering for materials taken or places used. I think this is linked to the state of mind the act puts me in, one of focus and intention, of pursuing a bodily bond with the site. Like suspension and binding, the number of cultural practices that include ritualized wounding are immense, and I will not be bothered to justify any of these practices in some anthropological sense.

Just before one of my final, more intense performances, I made a 1-2 inch cut in my upper arm, which has now scarred into a clean, pale, raised line. I wanted to make some offering that day, but also give myself a mark to remember that all the emotional pain I had undergone in the months towards the end of my thesis process carried with it important knowledge, and was a catalyst and energy source for the work I was creating. The scar tells a story of T4T wounding: I chose the location in a mimicry of a tattoo an ex had once shown me on his own upper arm, a single line his ex before me had tattooed onto him while he, my ex, was blindfolded, unknowing what the mark would be. I wanted to make visible that legacy of intra-trans emotional wounding, and how the strange research-relation we engaged in was not without its costs. The real sacrifice had already been offered well before I cut into my skin, this was only a mark, its trace.

The performance I did that day was one where I rapidly dug out a trench in the riverbank, then buried myself in the rocky clay while wearing leather. A burial for Chico California, I lay there for a while before rising and walking into the Old Man River and letting my own body float away. And so, my body bore a mark not unlike the mark the trowel and my body

made into the clay. In the months after completing my thesis work, I would choose to be marked in another way, getting the knuckle tattoos that read “Wild West,” in part for my anticipation of developing the Thirstin West persona, and in part because I wanted to mark myself as being inescapably wedded to that troubled imaginary and, importantly, to have those words as a promise and commitment to a perverse futurity. “Couldn’t you just draw the tattoo on?” asked a friend when I told him about the tattoos. It had not even occurred to me.

Did you come?

I have not until writing this paper, told anyone the truth behind the scar on my arm. It has been something I considered between myself and the place where I received the mark. But I give you the story now, a masochistic methodology that perhaps you can go and use elsewhere, elsetime. I wonder, as I finish this paper if I have made it clear how very much this paper is about BDSM. How, while I feel myself to never have been part of a community either virtually or in-the-flesh, the practice of BDSM is alive and influencing my day to day existence. A performance artist’s materials are time, gravity and the body. These are the same materials at the root of BDSM practices, as are the states that we pursue through them: pain, euphoria and a sense of both containment and expansion of our most perverse selves. They are tools for relation, for meaning-making and meaning-gifting, asking, summoning and bonding. BDSM lives in our institutions and in our national narratives, quotidian, subliminal and overt. BDSM, whether accessed in relation to people, place or the divine, is also a tool to better understand the self and desire toward future or parallel existences outside of institutional and colonial bondage.

Thanks for this. I had a nice time. Did you? I hope we can do it again. I should get going but before I get dressed and leave, let me tell you one more story – one more discursive kiss – a story I neither remembered nor retold until I was well into adulthood. It’s the story of my first perverse performance. In it I was not touched nor caused pain nor did I inflict pain on another, yet I feel strongly that it was the origin of my BDSM relationship to the audience, the camera and the eye. When I was a girl of twelve years or so, my family and I were staying in an odd hotel that had an outdoor

shower with a little courtyard. I was undressing to shower when I heard the unmistakable sound of a camera shutter clicking somewhere close by. I thought I was dreaming or imagining it, but as I continued undressing it came again. I paused and the sound did not come. I bent over and the sound came again. Could someone be taking naked pictures of me? I did not go tell my parents. Instead I did what seemed only logical: I began posing in what I thought would be provocative ways in order to prove that indeed the sound was a camera shutter. I put my ass in the air, spread my legs open, stuck out my chest and threw my hip to one side and, obediently, the camera shutter clicked. I was indeed being photographed by some hidden cameraman. Satisfied – feeling quite good, in fact – that I’d uncovered an important truth, I showered and forgot all about it.

Migueltzinta Solís

mc.solis@uleth.ca

University of Lethbridge

Treaty 7 Territory, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

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