« The Choteadora’s Body in Performance: Carmelita Tropicana and the Intersectional Strategy of Choteo »

by

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Abstract

This dissertation undertakes an analysis of Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance as it enacts “self” across the representational strategy of choteo. Carmelita Tropicana is the performance persona of Cuban-American, queer performer Alina Troyano. Choteo is a representational strategy that irreverently subverts the context and content of its referent. This doctoral study proposes that Carmelita’s work activates choteo in an intersectional and disidentificatory manner that opens up a site of negotiation, wherein the politics of representation are queried, and identity is revealed as an eventness. Specifically, by outlining choteo as an intersectional, disidentificatory strategy, I formulate choteo as an act that mobilizes through and against the complex process of identification across intersectional axes.

Drawing on performance scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s suggestion of applying choteo as an optic for reading Carmelita Tropicana’s performance work, I map out the terms of this practice of “critical Cubanía,” foregrounding the intersectional and disidentificatory potential of this representational strategy. Utilizing this methodological groundwork, the project analyzes two performances—Memorias de la Revolución/ Memories of the Revolution and Milk of Amnesia/ Leche de Amnesia. My analysis of Carmelita’s body in performance and its embodiment of choteo hopes to make visible the problematics of representation and the
alternative modes of self-enactment that this *choteadora*’s body negotiates in theatrical space.

The act of *choteo* subverts site, memory, and identity, as Carmelita’s body in performance enacts stereotypical iconography, and simultaneously resists this reductive process of identification through excessively self-ascribing it. Moreover, the *choteo* within these works finally turns its bite on itself, enacting a *choteo* of *choteo*, which subverts its own framework, reckoning with the limitations of representation.

My application of the intersectional, disidentificatory hermeneutic onto Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance is rooted in a commitment to engaging and elaborating on critical scholarship and spectatorship, and querying its own framework.
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Introduction

Body Temperatures

The body in performance is in a continual process of congelamiento, or “freezing” into representation. The body, at once framed within its socio-political realities and engaging in an embodied navigation of these same, enacts, to borrow from Judith Butler, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender Trouble 33, emphasis my own). This congealment offers an iteration of subjection in a consumable form. The perception of congealed subjection, that is, the politics of its reception, is also—like a lemon icicle—“sticky,” to borrow from Sara Ahmed, with different affective values attributed to its surfaces and boundaries (Cultural Politics of Emotion 10). Specifically, in the case of minority bodies, as Peggy Phelan notes, “[i]n framing more and more images of the hitherto under-represented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other” (2). How might a body in performance navigate across the process of its own congealment and its perceived “stickiness”? How might we read this body as engaging against the grip of these viscosities? Why is this important?

In a context wherein the politics of (in)visibility remain the terms across which justice and equanimity are meted out, identity and its formulations into subjection persist at the core of social movements for progressive change. Artistic practice provides a space that can offer alternative strategies of (self)enactment, and in so doing, bring into being alternative formulations of identity. For me, the theatrical space of performance practice has always been a
liminal one, inviting me to query the relationship of representation to identity. And, as my socio-political consciousness has developed, my formulations of this liminality have moved from the apolitical space of fluidity to the body as a site of political negotiation in and across what it means to be a legally-recognized subject. More specifically, how can we—as critical scholars and spectators—hear, see, acknowledge the congealed subject, while also attending to the body in performance’s simultaneous resistance and rejection of that congealment? How can we resist participating in the process of congealment as critical scholars on and spectators of the body in performance? What if we read the body in performance as enacting self and as a site of derretir (Spanish for melting; from the Latin terere: to rub, wear down)—frictionally rubbing in and against its own congealment?

**Encountering Tropicana**

I first encountered Carmelita Tropicana—the performance persona of artist Alina Troyano—through José Esteban Muñoz’s writing, specifically as part of his “Critical Cubanía” section of *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. In the chapter “Sister Acts,” Muñoz concludes his analysis of Tropicana’s work with the following:

the piece of (cultural) work that is Carmelita [is an instance] in which dominant culture is mimicked, mocked, and finally worked until its raw material can be recycled to ends that are female, Latina, and queer-affirmative. Popular forms are disidentified with, which means parodied with campy extravagance or heckled by this mode of dissidence for majoritarian culture. The spectator is left with a gaudy spectacle that affirms self-subjectivities that are both Latina and queer. These productions […] remind us that identity politics does not need only to be rooted in essentialized notions of the self and simplistic understanding of resistance, but rather that it is essentially a politics of
hybridity that works within and outside the dominant public sphere, and in doing so contests the ascendant racial, sexual and class strictures. (*Disidentifications* 141)

Muñoz’s framing of Carmelita Tropicana as an activation of a complex identity politics that is a “politics of hybridity,” working “within and outside” to “affirm self-subjectivities,” posited for me an exemplary body in performance across which to interrogate the possibilities of self-representation. Particularly, Muñoz offers disidentification as both a strategy of the body in performance and a hermeneutic for reading the body in performance across a disidentificatory politics of production and reception. My project will take up an intersectional, disidentificatory hermeneutic to analyze a complex engagement with representation that resists, through comedic excess and subversion, the violences of fixed identity.

This dissertation will undertake an analysis of Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance as it enacts “self” across the intersectional disidentificatory strategy of *choteo*. *Choteo* is, most generally, a Cuban term for a form of verbal and paraverbal mockery. I engage it as a representational strategy that activates a critical, subversive mockery and comedic disidentification through lowering down context, content and trajectory. In order to set forth on this project, I will first address what Muñoz proposes as disidentification. I will then reformulate his “politics of hybridity” as a more expansive strategy of intersectional disidentification. Thereafter, I will expand the conceptualization of the intersectional subject past the potential constraints of subj ecthood towards identity as an *event*, and a site of negotiation. Finally, I will turn back to applying disidentification as a hermeneutic for reading Tropicana’s body in performance.

1 The particulars of the representational strategy of *choteo* will be discussed in Chapter 2.
Disidentification as a Survival Strategy

Muñoz draws on Michel Pêcheux’s theory of disidentification to posit the particulars of its process as a “third mode.” According to Muñoz, for Pêcheux, disidentification is the third mode of a subject’s dealing with dominant ideology, “one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure [the first mode of the ‘good subject’] nor strictly opposes it [the second mode of the ‘bad subject’]; rather disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology” (*Disidentifications* 11). This negotiation on and against the dominant ideology is particularly one taken up by a minoritarian subject. The subject is, following Louis Althusser, always already “hailed,” or interpellated, by the ideology she inhabits (11). We can then understand the disidentifying subject as one that is caught in a negotiation of an ideology that she has at once been “hailed” by, and which rejects and denies the minoritarian aspects of her identity. Minority subjects are inculcated in the very ideologies that also discriminate against them, forced to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4), while also forced, “to read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to ‘connect’ with the disidentifying subject” (12). For Muñoz, disidentification is a minoritarian subject’s survival strategy. As he elaborates: “disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation” (161). In this way, the potential ² of a

² Muñoz is critically unsparing when he points out the circumscribed potentiality afforded this “third mode” of “working on and against” ideology, at the very onset of his project on disidentifications: “It is also important to note at the beginning of this book that disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for
disidentificatory survival strategy is not in an outright disavowal of the normative, but rather a space of negotiation on and against it, an attempt, “to transform a cultural logic from within” (11). Disidentification becomes the process of surviving by at once interrogating ideological prejudice and engaging with other elements of the ideology as a “still valuable yet mediated identification” (9). As a survival strategy, disidentification is thus a precarious process, “in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates” (6). We can understand the body-in-performance’s engagement in disidentification as the simultaneous taking on and resisting of dominant modes of identity enactment.

The Politics of Hybridity

For Muñoz, disidentification becomes an especially useful paradigm for the fraught process of identification and partial identification, for “those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component” (Disidentifications 8). This multiply minoritarian subject is posited by Muñoz as “hybrid,” a term that at once activates the history of U.S. Latino/a scholarship, but also falls prey to static conceptualizations of the subject.

Muñoz’s use of the term hybrid and its application to Tropicana draws from a lineage of U.S. Latino/a scholarship. The very term Latino/a came to the fore in the late 1970s and early

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3 In Spanish, nouns are gendered as either male or female; with the ending “o” designating male gender, and “a” designating female gender. Currently, the term “Latinx” has entered academic as well as popular discourse as an ungendered term for a person of this background. Reacting to the gendered noun in Spanish, “Latinx is an attempt in Spanish to include non-binary people, those who are neither male nor female. Latinx is practically the only explicitly ungendered term that has gained traction outside of academic circles” (Van Horne). In referring to the artist Troyano, and her performance persona Tropicana, I am choosing to utilize the term Latina because she self-labels as such. I am not aware of her having taken up the term Latinx.
1980s as a means to recognize the hybrid ethnic background of members within the “Hispanic” population. Specifically, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga were instrumental in conceptualizing Latino/a identity as a hybrid, specifically mestiza identity—affect ed not only through Spanish linguistic heritage, but also Indigenous heritages, as well as interacting with U.S. mainstream culture. The ethnic hybridity of the Latino/a subject has been further expanded to also include considerations of race in the last decades. The ethno-racial term “brownness” has become an identifier in contemporary Latino/a community politics, which aims, ideally, not to exclude members according to race, but rather present “brownness” as a “catch-all” term for Latinos/as from across, as well as mixed, racial denominations. Isabel Molina-Guzmán defines it as, “this unstable ethnic and racial space—not white and not black but ambiguously and unsettlingly brown” (Dangerous Curves 7). The hybrid that is “brownness” is constituted as a marker that remains distinct from “white,” and so enables an anti-hegemonic, disidentificatory socio-political positioning. The hybridity of the term “Latino/a”—as with the all gender inclusive term “Latinx”—continually requires a reconceptualization across more components of

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4 The term “Hispanic” was added to the U.S. census’s ethnic categories, and referred to Spanish speakers and persons belonging to a household where Spanish is spoken (Siegel). As explained on the “Hispanic Heritage Month” page of the U.S. census bureau: “It was not until the 1970 census that the concept of reporting on Hispanics as a distinct group existed and then only in a 5 percent sample of the census questionnaires distributed. The 1980 Census was the first to use the ‘Spanish origin or descent’ question on 100 percent of the questionnaires. The 1990 census attempted to provide Hispanics in the United States with a more detailed identity. In the 1990 census, those surveyed were asked to classify themselves as Hispanic if they fit into one of the following categories: Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Other Spanish/Hispanic origin. The category was broken down further by providing a write-in line for subgroups.” In 1997, the U.S. census updated the ethnic category of “Hispanic” to “Hispanic or Latino.”

5 Anzaldúa and Moraga not only highlighted the ethnic hybridity of Latino/a identity, but also posited a mestiza identity that negotiates across ethnic hybridity, gender, sexuality, race and class—what I will soon elaborate as a disidentificatory intersectional identity. From the perspective of Latino scholarship, in positing Latino identity as also gendered and classed, Anzaldúa and Moraga carved out a vocal, non-patriarchal faction in Latino studies. See Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga’s seminal This Bridge Called My Back, as well as its subsequent volume This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation.

6 For more on “brownness,” see also Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez’s José, Can You See? Latinos On and Off Broadway, & Muñoz’s “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.”
its identity—to allow for an expansive minoritarian political subjectivity. Otherwise, hybrid identity, while terminologically underscoring a multiple origin, may also become a moniker for a static, fixed identity.

For the politics of hybridity to be disidentificatory, they must operate through a non-static understanding of a multiple subject positioning. When turning to read the disidentificatory representational strategy of Carmelita Tropicana in performance, Muñoz himself cautions that, “[i]t is important to specify that the mode of hybridity that Carmelita is representative of is a survivalist strain of self-production […] not a celebration of a fixed hybrid identity” (Disidentifications 139). Muñoz elaborates on her hybridity by listing the many axes of identification across which she plays:

Carmelita does not hesitate to remind her audience of her various identity markers: she lists nightclub performer, beauty queen, intellectual, political activist, superintendent, and performance artiste. To this we can add camp queen, diva, choteadora, female impersonator, male impersonator, lesbian, cubana en exilio, off-key songstress, and Carmen Miranda clone. All of these roles, identifications, and routines compose Carmelita Tropicana's hybrid self. (138)

Notably, the hybridity that Tropicana constructs is not only through Latina ethno-racial “brownness,” but also queer engagement, specifically as cross-identification. While queer also includes the axis of sexual orientation, Muñoz highlights Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on cross-identifications as “standard operating procedures for queers” (127). As he further elaborates, “Sedgwick has explained that queer is a moment of perpetual flux, a movement that

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7 Muñoz is referencing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s Tendencies, pp. 5-9.
is eddying and turbulent. The word *queer* itself, in its origins in the German *quer*, means “across”; the concept itself can only be understood as connoting a mode of identifications that is as relational as it is oblique” (127). Tropicana as a hybrid body in performance that is positioned across queer and Latina axes thus complicates and extends across and against identifications. For this reason, I want to suggest that Muñoz’s disidentificatory politics of hybridity can be better understood as a strategy of *intersectional* disidentification.

**Intersectional Disidentification**

Feminist/Black/legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw first utilized the term intersectionality as a means to highlight “the multiple and overlapping systems of oppression marginalizing women of colour,” specifically black women, and draw attention to these subjects’ vulnerability and invisibility within mainstream as well as antiracist and feminist discourses (Crenshaw 1265). Intersectionality positions the socio-political subject in a matrix identification, whose lived-reality is situated across “overlapping systems of oppression.” Moreover, the intersectional subject, like the hybrid subject, is non-essentialist and defends itself from what Crenshaw terms a “vulgar constructivism,” wherein identification is reduced to an imaginary social construct, denying the lived-realities of social categorization. Rather, the intersectional subject is at once pluralistic in its dimensionality and located in a particular convergence of socio-political systems. In this way, Crenshaw offers an understanding of a multidimensional subject that is not

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8 In utilizing the slash here, as opposed to the hyphen, I hope to resist the aggregate subjectivity implied by the latter, to present a more active negotiation/tension in matrix identification. As John Ocho differentiates: “Si el signo de alguien como [Gustavo] Pérez-Firmat es el guión, en el que los elementos se unen y se cierran con firmeza, el signo por excelencia de Guillermo Gómez-Peña, […] es la barra (/), señal de yuxtaposición: una minifrontera interna, siempre volátil, siempre presente” (Bitácora del Cruce 22). (“If the sign of someone like Pérez-Firmat is the hyphen, in which the elements unite and attach firmly to each other, the sign par excellence of Guillermo Gómez-Peña is the slash, designating juxtaposition: an internal microborder, always volatile, always present.”) All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
only utopically negotiating across identifications but also simultaneously experiencing the convergence of systems of oppression upon its multiply marginalized identity.

Specifically, when turning to the politics of representation, Crenshaw defines the category of “representational intersectionality” as “the cultural construction of women of color” (1245). Crenshaw posits this category as a means to attempt to account for the social “devaluation of women of color” as subjects of legal discourse, by making a link between this devaluation and “how women of color are represented in cultural imagery” (1282). It is important to underscore the particular, legal context of Crenshaw’s formulation, as the category of representational intersectionality is aimed at illuminating the social reality of intersectionality—that is, the multiple and overlapping systems of oppression marginalizing women of colour (1265). As such, representational intersectionality is set forth by Crenshaw as an examination of the role of the production and reception of mainstream cultural images across intersectional axes and their effects on the intersectional subject.

While Crenshaw’s conception of intersectionality underscores the limitations imposed on the intersectional subject, the application of intersectionality as a methodological approach hopes to recognize these socio-political realities while also acknowledging a space for their resistance. Leslie McCall’s assessment of contemporary methodological applications stakes out one of the most common as the intracategorical approach, which also “inaugurated the study of intersectionality” (McCall 1773). The intracategorical approach to intersectionality hopes to activate what Crenshaw has stipulated as a “meaningful identity politics” (Crenshaw 1297) by acknowledging multiple, categorical positioning, as well as engaging with this positioning in its complexity towards a political voice. The intracategorical approach—as with a “meaningful identity politics”—must negotiate the tension between categorical essentialism and complex subjectivity. As McCall observes, “since symbolic violence and material inequalities are rooted
in relationships that are defined by race, class, sexuality and gender, [only] the project of deconstructing the normative assumptions of these categories contributes to the possibility of positive social change (1777). The intracategorical approach, then, while not deconstructive of its categories, nevertheless hopes to recognize categorical realities and the lived experience that negotiates both with and against these: “The point is not to deny the importance—both material and discursive—of categories but to focus on the process by which they are produced, experienced, reproduced, and resisted in everyday life” (McCall 1783). In this way, the intracategorical approach attempts to account for intersecting categories, while recognizing the limitations of categorization.

Significantly, while Muñoz does not use the term intersectionality outright, his discussion of disidentification is highly informed by the intersectional mapping of the minoritarian subject. While, as Muñoz states, “[h]ybridity is one way to discuss the crossfire of influences, affiliations, and politics that happen between a lesbian identity, as well as in or in between the intersection of Cuban and North American traditions of performance” (Disidentifications 120), Muñoz never falls into the reductive readings of hybrid identity as either a static identity or as general flux. Rather, he postulates disidentification as a survival strategy in the very face of the social-reality of intersectional positioning. As he elaborates: “routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence. I have gone to great lengths to explicate, render, and imagine complicated strategies and tactics that enact minoritarian subjectivity” (161). To apply an intersectional methodology to disidentification is then not to redress Muñoz’s argument, but rather to underscore the intersectional subject as at once mapped across a matrix of intersectional representational ascriptions, and disidentifying “on and against” them. Thus, the material, socio-political reality is the framework in and across which the intersectional disidentifying subject
performs her agency.

**Identity as Event**

In framing an intersectional disidentifying subject there remains a constant tension between essentialist and constructivist understandings of identity, and the larger problematic around political visibility and the subject. For his part, Muñoz notes the disidentifying minority position as an emergent “identity-within-difference,” and hopes to focus in on identity formation “at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit” (*Disidentifications* 6-7). Intersectional methodology likewise aims to account for difference, yet as Jasbir Puar notes, while the intersectional framework is often “deployed as a call for and a form of anti-essentialism” it is also often collapsed into the essentializing of a “multiple” subject (“IAA”).

Intersectional methodological approaches, while seeking to be expansive, remain confined to a finite series of categories. As McCall notes in her assessment of the most common, intracategorical approach to intersectionality: “the ‘multiple’ in these intersectional analyses refers not to dimensions within categories but to dimensions across categories” (1781). Thus, the subject is “placed at the intersection of multiple categories […] but only reflects a single dimension of each” (1781). In an attempt to resist this simplification of the multiple, McCall suggests a more comprehensive approach to the complexity of intersectionality to be the (inter)categorical approach (1784).⁹ This approach analyzes “the intersection of the full set of

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⁹ McCall terms this approach both the intercategorical and later the categorical, so I am using the combined term “(inter)categorical.” Notably, in the more often cited opening of her article, McCall refers to the approach that she advocates for as “intercategorical.” Yet she soon switches to calling it—perhaps more accurately—the “categorical” approach in the latter sections where she explicates its methodological framework. In initially referring to it as intercategorical, McCall seems to try to distance herself from too much of a categorical “embrace.”
dimensions of multiple categories” (1787, emphasis my own). Yet even McCall’s (inter)categorical approach to intersectionality remains necessarily circumscribed to a finite series of axes. As Paula-Irene Villa notes, intersectionality’s attempt toward expansiveness often leads to a too-easily-ignored “etc.” at the tail end of methodological multi-categorization. As Villa explains, “the ‘etc.’ is a kind of theoretical rhetoric which, while acknowledging the complexity of practices and experiences, at the same time tends to do away with it” (176). She asks:

Can we describe the complex ‘doing’ of people by using the admittedly complex and interlocked categories that the intersectionality framework offers? Or do we again reduce the factual complexity and particularity of practice in favour of a selected number of categories that we assume are ‘the’ core dimensions of modern social structure (such as the consensual trinity of gender, class, and race), and by doing so reproduce […] the blindness to factual complexity and its normative dimensions due to the attention paid to hegemonic norms? (176-177)

Villa here questions the very categories of intersectionality as themselves imposed through systems of oppression. As Puar elaborates:

many of the cherished categories of the intersectional mantra, originally starting with race, class, gender, now including sexuality, nation, religion, age, and disability, are the product of modernist colonial agendas and regimes of epistemic violence, operative through a western/euro-american epistemological formation through which the whole notion of discrete identity has emerged. (“IAA”)

In the above, Puar underscores that these categories are not only in themselves problematic in their categorical impositions, but also reinvest toward a fixed, discrete “subject.”
In conceptualizing the marginalized subject, intersectionality, though attending to the subject’s matrix of axes, may also reify her as a “subject of difference.”

Rey Chow attacks intersectional methodology as creating difference in the universally, re-deployable form of a “subject x” whose difference is not actually accounted for, but rather becomes the framework for identity, a violent “poststructuralist significatory incarceration” (Chow 53). For the intersectional to not be reduced to this “subject of difference” we must then turn to the body as a possible site of extra-categorical intersectionality.

Specifically, Villa proposes a turn to the somatic dimension of embodied practice as a means for the intersectionality framework to more readily engage the “complexity and particularity” of lived experience, and not reduce these across hegemonically acceptable minoritarian axes of identification. By focusing on the body as the site of intersectionality, we can attempt to engage the full breadth of her intersectionality. Expanding on McCall’s (inter)categorical approach to intersectionality to also include a consideration of the somatic, or, what I would suggest as the extra-categorical, posits the intersectional body as an embodiment that may move past the containment threatened by categorical simplification, as always more than “subject.” The body offers a space that is at once marked by its intersectional categories and also, “something more.” To understand the extra-categorical excess that is the somatic, Villa elaborates:

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10 Latina feminist scholar Norma Alarcón offers an alternative reading of an intersectional identity as a “subject-in-process,” formed through “dynamic combinatorial transculturations” (“Conjugating Subjects in the Age of Multiculturalism” 138). Yet while Alarcón’s “subject-in-process” can be said to activate a disidentificatory negotiation across the myriad ideologies in which it finds itself interpellated, it is still always configured in primary relation to the category of “subject.”

11 Significantly, Villa’s redress intervenes onto 21st century debates around the application of intersectional methodology, and does not connect back to the historical antecedents of intersectionality in the 1990s. Thus, while Villa offers the somatic as a new consideration, I see it less as a revision and more of a reemphasizing of an element already imbedded in the intersectional discourse of the 1990s, wherein Crenshaw too hoped to use intersectionality as a way to make room to read an expansive, particular lived-experience.
embodiment as part of any social practice shows that ‘doing’ is necessarily more and thus other than the incorporation of theoretically and analytically defined central social categories—however many categories there might be. […] It seems important to recall that categories of difference and inequality follow their categorical or structural logic and that action follows its own practical logic, including its corporeal dimension […] Each of these logics relies heavily on the other, that is, they are co-constitutive, but they are not the same and cannot be reduced to one another […] we should not lose sight of the inconclusive nature, instability and (also theoretical) constructed-ness of categories, and I argue that one main reason for this need lies in the somatic aspect of concrete social action. (171)

The extra-categorical, somatic dimension of the body in performance can thus be said to engage across and past the multiple axes of intersectional identification.

If bodies are a site of excess, they can move past the confines of even the multiply mapped positioning of an intersectional disidentificatory subject. Villa draws on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault to query the category of subject, and so force the expansion of subject as the site of a body’s intersectional engagement. Specifically, Villa follows Butler\(^\text{12}\) in marking the subject as that socially recognizable position, that is far more definitive and limited than the realm of embodied, or concrete, personhood (Villa 172). As Villa explains, “one could sociologically describe persons, the individual or the self as an effect of norms. The self would be a representation of a subject. […] But real, empirical subjection doesn’t work this way. I am not a scientist—not always, not fully, not definitely. […] people constantly fail to live up to the subjects they should be” (175). Echoing Foucault, Villa concludes “[p]ersons are excessive

\(^{12}\) Villa is referencing Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997).
compared with subjects. There is an excess of complexity, of emotions, of needs and yearnings, an excess of biographical experience” (178).

We can move to think of the body in performance as engaging not only towards an embodiment of a subject’s identity, but also as moving beyond subjecthood. For Puar, the means to achieve this is to consider intersectionality along with assemblage. She proposes that, “intersectionality as an intellectual rubric and a tool for political intervention must be supplemented—if not complicated—by a notion of (queer) assemblage” (“IAA”). For Puar, intersectionality and assemblage offer “frictional analytics” that together allow for a situating of intersectionality and identity as an event. Specifically, thinking alongside assemblage allows for considerations of affect and power outside the confines of “subject x.” As Puar explains,

No matter how intersectional our models of subjectivity, no matter how attuned to locational politics of space, place, and scale, these formulations—these fine tunings of intersectionality, as it were, that continue to be demanded—may still limit us if they presume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation. (Terrorist Assemblages 206)

Puar finds the analytic of assemblage productively frames categories as, “events, actions, and encounters, between bodies, rather than simply entities and attributes of subjects” (“IAA”). Assemblages thus foreground the “event-ness of identity” (“IAA”).

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13 The concept of assemblages is derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus. As Puar elucidates, the term “[a]ssemblage is actually an awkward translation—the original term in Deleuze and Guattari’s work is not the French word assemblage, but actually Agencement, a term which means design, layout, organization, arrangement, and relations—the focus being not on content but on relations, relations of patterns. For Agencement, as John Phillips explains in a recent essay, specific connections with other concepts is precisely what gives concepts their meaning. As Phillips writes, the priority is neither to the state of affairs (essence) nor to statement (enunciation) but rather to connection” (“IAA” referencing “Agencement/Assemblage,” pp. 108–109).

14 I will not take up the framework of assemblage further than to draw on this conceptualization of identity as eventness. My reasoning for this is that, while assemblage offers a reframing of subjecthood, it also poses its own
I wish to take up Puar’s emphasis on the “event-ness of identity,” focusing on the body in performance as an event, with the disidentificatory strategy of choteo as an exemplar of this active negotiation. I therefore hope to situate my forthcoming analysis of intersectional disidentification within a particular site of embodied multiplicity. Particularly, the focus of my study is the body in performance of Troyano’s performance persona Carmelita Tropicana, and I will be analyzing this performance persona’s embodied engagement with intersectional disidentification as a representational strategy of “self-enactment.”

**Reading Tropicana’s Body in Performance**

The preceding discussion has mapped the body in performance as an expansive, embodied site for engaging the representational strategy of intersectional disidentification. Now I turn to applying intersectional disidentification as a hermeneutic for my reading of Tropicana’s body in performance as this very site.

Muñoz offers disidentification not solely as a subjective survival strategy but also as “a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance”:

Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the [performance] critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any cultural field from the problematics, specifically an “anti-identity politics” position. For her part, Puar hopes to think through assemblage and intersectionality together in order to acknowledge, “that for some bodies—we can call them statistical outliers, or those consigned to premature death, or those once formerly considered useless bodies or bodies of excess—discipline and punish may well still be the a primary mode of power apparatus” (“IAA”). For a different critique of the “anti-identity politics” discourse of assemblage, see Alexander G. Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Weheliye proposes racialized minority assemblage/subjectivity, as against the “strong ‘anti-identity politics’ strain in the Anglo-american academy in its positioning of bare life and biopolitics as uncontaminated by and prior to reductive or essentialist political identities such as race and gender” (6, note 8). “Racializing assemblages represent, among other things, the visual modalities in which dehumanization is practiced and lived” (6); positioning the necessary politicization of the biological as a racializing assemblage (12).
perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. (*Disidentifications* 25)

Muñoz’s application of the hermeneutic of disidentification to performance analysis can be compared to U.S. Latina, Third World feminist Chela Sandoval’s concept of “differential consciousness.” Sandoval has defined the power of differential consciousness, “as mobile—not nomadic, but rather cinematographic: a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners” (“U.S. Third World Feminism” 3). As noted by Latina performance scholar Linda Saborio, by requiring “recognition by others in order to be effective as representative of an oppositional viewpoint,” Sandoval’s notion of differential consciousness “legitimizes a relation between performance and difference” (xxi), which can be drawn out past social performativity into the realm of theatrical and performance scholarship. The politics of production and reception within theatrical performance are thus activated, not only through the body in performance’s engagement, but, necessarily, also through the reception of this body by the spectator and the scholar. Again, as suggested by Villa, the process of reception here attends to the body in performance. In this way, the spectator and scholar engage in and across the extra-categorical site of the somatic, as a means to “see” intersectional negotiation of identity as *eventness*.

Notably, the politics of reception around reading the body—in both social and theatrical analysis—often remain skewed towards a reading of the “visible,” wherein identity categories are given “anchorage in the body” (Desmond 103). The body is often not perceived as a site of negotiation, but rather as a concretization of particular representations. Yet, as Phelan has countered in her work on the politics of representation and the problematics of visibility:

Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The ‘excess’ meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that
makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite its excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to produce the real exactly. Precisely because of representation’s supplemental excess and its failure to be totalizing, close readings of the logic of representation can produce psychic resistance and, possibly, political change. (2) Phelan thus posits intersectional, disidentificatory readings as both possible and powerful. She goes on to suggest that, “by seeing the blind spot within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real” (4). In other words, a critical reading of representation not only makes visible the politics at play but also allows for a revisualization of what is possible.

This dissertation hopes to rectify the myriad (mis)readings of Tropicana’s body in performance, by engaging a hermeneutics of intersectional disidentification that recognizes the body as a site of negotiation across the eventness of identity, and one that may resist simultaneously as it enacts particular dimensionalities of identity. Specifically, I will apply the hermeneutic of intersectional disidentification to analyze how Tropicana’s body in performance engages in the comedic intersectional disidentificatory strategy of choteo: a strategy that at once enacts the stereotypical iconography of what Crenshaw terms “representational intersectionality”—the mainstream’s often devaluing cultural construction of women of colour—and resists this reductive process of identification through excessively self-ascribing it. Here what Phelan terms the supplemental excess of representation is underscored through choteo’s self-referentiality. My analysis of Tropicana’s body in performance and its activation of choteo hopes to make visible the politics of representation and the alternative modes of self-enactment that this choteadora’s body negotiates in theatrical space.
1. Mapping Carmelita: Context, Influences, and Early Performance

Before proceeding to a more thorough explanation of the intersectional strategy of *choteo* as activated by Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance, I will use this chapter to provide the socio-historical context in and through which this performance persona first took the stage. I will locate the artist Alina Troyano across her socio-historical context, and then chart her participation as a member of New York City’s East Village club scene. Specifically, I will chart her involvement at the WOW Café, whose aesthetic heavily influenced her work. This early context maps the groundwork that forged Carmelita’s intersectional performance persona.

**Locating the Artist**

To attempt to locate the artist at this point of entry into her performance practice is to necessarily encounter the inadequacy and limitation of aggregate factual biography. In presenting certain factual material corresponding to the artist, I do not wish to account for her identity, but rather broadly outline the intersectional matrix in which she appears to be constructing her performance persona. Very broadly, the social identity of the artist is that of a Cuban-American, queer woman. The artist’s identification, and disidentification, across these complex and heavily loaded labels of Cuban-American, queer, and woman, is one I cannot hope to fully circumscribe within the scope of my project, nor is it the aim of this project to capture the specific intersectional relationality between these multiple aspects of identification. Rather, I will try to outline key aspects informing Troyano’s intersectional social identity, towards a glimpsing of the possible identity thematics imbuing her theatrical performance of identity. The forthcoming list of “facts,” while categorically constituting the Subject “Troyano,” necessarily at once constrict and simplify toward a particular identity. Yet this biographical information is shared here
precisely with the intention to provide the reader with these limited identity labels as they “situate” at once the location from which the artist might speak—the context in which her performing body is located—and the location from which she is assumed to speak, that is, the location ascribed to her performing body.

Troyano was born in 1951 in Cuba and, at the age of seven, she immigrated with her family to the United States (“Carmelita Can Be a Beast”). Having been born in Cuba, but coming of age in the United States, Troyano forms part of the U.S. statistical category of first generation—foreign-born—immigrants. Racially, within the United States, Troyano would be categorized as Hispanic, defined most currently as “of the culture and traditions of those who trace their roots to Spain, Mexico and the Spanish-speaking nations of Central America, South America and the Caribbean” (U.S. Census 2010). Troyano would be classified as of female sex, which by U.S. statistical categories, with its implied cisnormativity, also designates the gender of woman. Her official occupation was that of a public servant in her 20s and early 30s, until she segued into working as a full-time artist in 1985, specifically “straddling the worlds of performance art and theater” as a performance artist, playwright, and actor (Tropicana “About”).

As the above standardized analytical categorization makes clear, much identificatory complexity has been left out in relation to class, race, and gender, as well as a complete overlooking of sexual orientation. Troyano’s class upbringing has a particular effect on her racial identification, within the U.S. Latino community. Her family’s relocation to the United States in

15 Cisgender, as defined by sociologists Kristen Schilt and Laurel Westbrook, refers to, “individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity” (Schilt 461).

16 Alice Forrester recalls that, in 1985, Troyano quit her “real job” and became a full-time performer, starring in the WOW Café’s St. Joan of Avenue C (First Ten Years 44), wherein Troyano played the titular role as Juanita Losaida (Lady Dicks 150). Losaida is a Nuyorican pronunciation of “Lower East Side,” and, as Muñoz elucidates: “The term Losaida has been used to describe a neighborhood in the Lower East Side of New York City where el barrio meets bohemia” (Disidentifications 212).
1958—prior to the Cuban Revolution, and just before Castro’s government was instated on January 1st, 1959—positions it as part of the upper class and upper middle class first wave of Cuban immigrants who left Cuba pre-revolution or in the early years of the revolution to avoid Cuba’s socialist restructuring. The bulk of this exilic community moved to Florida, where they created an insular, middle class Cuban community, defined by anti-Castro, right-wing biases, as well as by a “white” Cuban identification. While racial identifiers across the Americas are rife with racist inscriptions of white superiority and black inferiority, the Latin American context also shows a proclivity to assign racial “whiteness” in conjunction to, and as equated with, a higher class status. The designation of a racial category aligned with an individual’s class may seem incongruous from a North American perspective. Yet, in the Latin American, and specifically Caribbean, context, despite a highly diverse and interracial population, racist colorism drives a “racial amnesia”—wherein people, “deny and/or underscore the vast significance of Africa on their entire racial and cultural quilt” (Cruz-Janzen 69), so as to align themselves with a white bio-racial identity that promises, if not fulfills, a higher class position. Troyano’s family might then be designated as racially “white” according to U.S. Latino as well as Cuban social markers that equate middle to upper middle class with “whiteness” and position the Troyano family as part of a “white” majoritarian elite, albeit through a colourist re-definition of biological race. What is more, within the U.S. Latino classification of “brownness” or moreno as a larger “catch-all” category for Latinos of mixed colonial Spanish (ostensibly white), American indigenous, and African descent, colourism plays a divisive role in ranking lighter-skinned “brownness” as preferable, as well as often denying any “blackness” even within the most dark of “browns.”

17 The ongoing internalized racism of colourism has led to not only an “amnesia” around African descent in Latin American peoples (specifically in the highly racially hybridized communities of the Caribbean region) but, also to systematic rejection of “blackness” as a marker of foreign citizenship. Notoriously, in the Caribbean region, the
is significant to highlight that within the United States, the social designation of racial whiteness often excludes members of the Latino or Hispanic ethnic population.\(^{18}\) I would suggest that, as a Cuban-American, Troyano is negotiating across both Cuban and U.S. racial hierarchies, and that, in conterminously navigating across these at times conflicting distinctions, may be more likely to be conscious of them as shifting social constructs.

As with her racial and ethnic designations, Troyano’s generational identification is more nuanced than the statistical category of first generation immigrant. Having left Cuba at the age of seven, Troyano can be understood as forming part of what Gustavo Pérez Firmat calls the “1.5 generation”: the generation who left Cuba as children, and came of age in the United States (\textit{Life on the Hyphen} 15). Pérez Firmat posits this particular “in-between” generation of Cuban-Americans as having a Cuban-American identity that is highly informed by an “exilic memory,” a mix of childhood memories of pre-revolutionary Cuba, reinforced through the romanticized anecdotes of the parents’ generation. Pérez Firmat places this generation as constantly negotiating their own biculutration. Notably, while Pérez Firmat posits the “1.5 generation” as “appositional” rather than oppositional in its negotiations of bi-national politics—specifically marking them with an anti-revolutionary bias, as brought over by the parent’s generation and reinforced within U.S. culture (\textit{Life on the Hyphen} 15); Muñoz points out the exceptions to this position, specifically in and through Troyano’s disidentification with this right-wing political bias (“No es Fácil” 78).

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18 Notably, the U.S. census recognizes a distinction between ethnic identity and racial identity, stating, “People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race” (U.S. census 2010, p.2).
Troyano’s gender identification conforms to cisnormative assumptions, positioning her as a woman within both the patriarchal structures of the United States, and U.S. Latino society. Yet, significantly, Troyano is a woman of queer sexual orientation. This queer positionality is significant as a further disidentification with majoritarian heteronormativity, both within the broader U.S. context and the particular heightened machismo and homophobia of the Latino community. Troyano as a queer Cuban-American negotiates disidentification with the U.S. Latino community, with its Catholic-influenced conservatism around traditional gender roles—women as homemakers, wives, and mothers—and the outright rejection of homosexual and queer subjects as moral community members.

The above sketches a conjectural map of Troyano’s socio-political identification. It does not purport to position the artist definitively in any such way. Rather, it is meant as a means to access the identificatory thematics that are at play in the aesthetic work of the artist: specifically, Troyano’s artistic investigation of the process of personal (dis)identification across socio-culturally-ascribed characteristics. In so far as Troyano may be labelled demographically and analytically a middle class Cuban-American woman of the 1.5 generation, her performance work upsets the assumptions of what these markers imply for one’s identity and instead performs the lived negotiation and eventness of intersectional identity.

The WOW Café

The WOW Café served as a foundational space for Troyano’s performance work.
Particularly, this collective, lesbian performance space and its investment to voicing and exploring a feminist politics free from the restrictions of some 1970s “cultural feminism” (Dolan, “Ruminations”), and doing so through irreverent humour, distinctly shaped the inception of the persona of Carmelita Tropicana.

The WOW Café—today recognized as the longest-running women’s and/or transgender people’s theatre in the United States (Wow Café)—originally began as an international woman’s festival—Women’s One World—in October 1980, in New York’s East Village. The Women’s One World festival offered a novel feminist space in performance: a highly diverse, pluralist and sexualized space. After two highly successful runs of the festival, and bolstered by a high-demand in New York City’s lesbian performance community for a permanent space that would continue to nurture the driving ethos behind the Women’s One World festival, the WOW Café was established in March 1982.

Troyano first encountered WOW through its festival, as she recalls:

It happened one night at the Women’s One World (WOW) International Festival, held in multiple venues on the Lower East Side. My eyes were ablaze at the spectacle of so many

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19 It is important to note that, in the early 1980s, this scene self-identified as lesbian; while the moniker of queer is a late 1980s and early 1990s re-labeling of lesbian within a broader LGBTQ terminology. For one such discussion see Dolan’s “The Return of the Five Lesbian Brothers.”

20 The festival ran for two weeks, and included a mix of performances, concerts, and exhibitions (Hill & Paris 99). The festival organizers—and founders of the subsequent WOW Café—are Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, Pamela Camhe and Jordy Mark; with Camhe and Mark leaving WOW in 1983, one year after it settled into its first permanent space (Lady Dicks 66).

21 The WOW Café’s first home at 330 East 11th Street, in the East Village, would serve as both a performance space and as a social centre: “a hangout, a girl’s social club” (Weaver qtd. in Solomon 96); “[i]n a typically ‘bent’ fashion, WOW christened its new space as a ‘home for wayward girls.’” [...] The storefront was imagined as a kind of playground where bad girls could be as bad as they wanted [...] WOW girls behaved considerably outside the bounds of mainstream and feminist decorum” (Lady Dicks 96). The WOW Café operated out of this first location from 1982-1985, until, driven out by gentrification, a new space—slightly better suited for theatrical performance—was found in the fall of 1985: “an abandoned doll factory, four flights up in a city-owned building” (Lady Dicks 21). Since 1985, this walk-up space on 59-61 East 4th street continues to operate as the WOW Café space.
women in all colors, sizes, shapes doing every art imaginable—music, poetry, theatre, cooking. I thought I’d found paradise. I was especially moved by the play *Split Britches*, performed by a theatre troupe with the same name, made up of Deb Margolin, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver. As the future Carmelita would exclaim: It made me cry in one eye and laugh in the other. At last, feministas with a sense of humor! I was hooked. So when the girls that put the Festival together opened up the WOW café, I followed. (*I, Carmelita* xiv)

Troyano highlights her discovery of “feministas with a sense of humor” at WOW. Indeed, the WOW festivals were significant in that they broke with the restrained, mainstream feminist sensibility that had been cultivated during the 1970s. As Jane Chambers noted in her review of the first festival: “Women are laughing again. Women are smiling and singing and telling jokes. Out of the decade-long depression of the Women’s Movement a culture has emerged” (qtd. in *Lady Dicks* 27). Specifically, Chambers’ review places the WOW festival as reacting against the 1970s feminist movement—one pejoratively labeled politically correct, due to its circumscription of appropriate feminist sexuality, as set out by the anti-pornography movement. Just as the academy found itself on the brink of the Feminist Sex Wars—the series of heated debates between the Women Against Pornography campaign and sex-positive feminists, which was first sparked at the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality—WOW’s first festival in 1980 broke with much of the preceding feminist cultural production by resisting political correctness and celebrating sexuality. As poet and novelist Eileen Myles noted, “The festival dropped a bomb in the middle of the scene, rewriting the look of lesbians ready to get over the seventies”
(Myles qtd. in Lady Dicks 29). For scholar Kate Davy,²² “It was as if all those policed out of cultural feminism during the 1970s showed up at WOW’s festivals” (Lady Dicks 85). As Davy elaborates:

The festivals embraced features antithetical to the preponderant feminist sensibility coming out of the 1970s—cross-dressed and sexually explicit performances, festival-goers who showed up dressed to kill (nary a Birkenstock sandal or flannel shirt among them), and the erotically charged atmosphere that permeated nearly every dimension of the festivals.

(Lady Dicks 17)

Troyano echoes this sentiment when she recounts that “[a]t [the] WOW [festival,] I saw all kinds of women, in all kinds of clothes and haircuts and colors—not just your battle-fatigue serious feminist! It was wonderful” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). For Troyano, the inclusivity of the festival’s feminist positionalities was a key draw to becoming involved with the WOW Café. As she explains, in the first festival, “There was a lot of stuff that was really awful, but what was great was the spirit of it. […] Feminism was not something I wanted to be associated with. You had to be a separatist, not shave under your armpits. And WOW was something else: it had feminisms, had comedy” (“Archiving Revolutions”). Troyano elucidates her embrace of these pluralist feminisms with an anecdote about her having had both a girlfriend against pornography and a boyfriend at the time; she went to her boyfriend to have him get rid of his porn—because she is a feminist—“except for these two [pornographic magazines]” (“Archiving Revolutions”). As Holly Hughes notes, outside of the academy, “there was no way to access a feminist critique

²² Kate Davy’s Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers is significant as a singular resource on the WOW Café, as it offers extensive details on the first thirty years of WOW’s operation: a product of Davy’s more than decade-long research project, including countless interviews, and rooting through old boxes. Davy’s toil enables a clear path through the various, and at times contradictory, accounts of WOW’s foundational years.
of the women against pornography campaign,” and so it was that WOW offered a space for “feminists who had run out of other feminist organizations” (“Archiving Revolutions”).

Dolan credits WOW as forging a significant site “to craft new ways of working together as women, as lesbians, as artists (amateur or eventually professional) with a desire for art and erotics, for politics and play, for pleasure and the sustaining labor of hard, resource-poor, idea-rich theatre work” (First Ten Years xiv). Troyano traces her performance work as having emerged from this space of negotiation:

My personal narrative at WOW is as much a coming-out story as it is my initiation into a life in the arts. Although I had studied theatre, gone to Circle in the Square and HB Studio, I began my artistic life at WOW. (First Ten Years 13)

For Troyano, theatre was always at a distance, until she arrived at WOW: “WOW served as a whole social network, not just in terms of theatre, but as something that fully supported you. […] I was so lucky to be part of the tribe that is WOW” (“Archiving Revolutions”). She has remarked elsewhere that, “[i]t was at WOW that I’d found my voice and my tribe. If there hadn’t been a WOW Café, I probably would not have become a performer or writer. That was true of many women who were part of WOW” (First Ten Years 9). She elaborates:

WOW became a fertile playground. It was a theatre grounded in gender and sexual politics and a meeting place for like-minded individuals to create work with a social critique. We could not make money at WOW, but the opportunities were great. We were encouraged to do it all: write, direct, design, and act. Our work was irreverent, raunchy, part of the counterculture. We did not focus on coming-out stories because a lesbian identity was a given. We were then able to tackle other issues such as the impact of gentrification, the state of the economy, or the representation of lesbians in the arts. Our work was too edgy
and raw to be ‘commercial,’ but we were professional and WOW was recognized with a prestigious Obie award. (*First Ten Years* 11-12)

**The WOW aesthetic**

Three key aspects of the WOW aesthetic can be traced through to Troyano’s performance work as the persona of Carmelita Tropicana: namely, lesbian sexuality, irreverent humour, and pop recycling. WOW set the groundwork for taking on a negotiation of lesbian sexuality in performance, and attending to it through the activation of irreverent humour and, as found also within the greater East Village performance scene, a pop recycling of television and mainstream media’s representational imagery.

The first key aspect of the WOW Café’s aesthetic is its commitment to “the exploration and theatricalization of lesbian sexuality” (*Lisa Kron* qtd. in *Lady Dicks* 136). As Troyano elucidates:

As a women’s space with a lesbian majority, we ruled, but we invited all women to participate. This was a departure from some ‘70s feminist groups, which did not want feminism to be identified with lesbianism. The straight and queer women who came knew the deal […] If they felt comfortable, these women stayed at WOW. (*First Ten Years* 12)

With the singular forerunner of Medusa’s Revenge, WOW distinguished itself as a place wherein lesbian subjects were negotiated in and through representation, and this representation

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23 All four founding members of WOW, “had participated at one time or another in […] a little-known lesbian theatre called Medusa’s Revenge” (*Lady Dicks* 17). Medusa’s Revenge was a lesbian feminist theatre, founded in 1976, located at 10 Bleecker Street, off the Bowery in the East Village. The theatre was run by two Cuban exiles: Ana Maria Simo and Magaly Alabau. The theatre had a women-only audience and performer policy, and committed to creating work that challenged the feminist mainstreams of the time. “Medusa’s Revenge was as far afield of the
did not have to be censored or reworked for a heterosexist mainstream spectatorship. As Madaline Olnek reminisces:

WOW was vital because they were saying things that you couldn’t hear anywhere. […] There were also so many obstacles to putting up lesbian material, which was always much more difficult outside of WOW. At WOW, lesbians were the majority, so the lesbian stuff was never an issue. You could actually focus on making the work better, because the lesbian content wasn’t an obstacle. (*First Ten Years* 95)

Alice Forrester further politicizes this perspective on lesbian content by emphasizing that,

WOW was a lesbian space. Bisexuality was hardly accepted, and heterosexuality was tolerated. We used to joke and say that straight people had to pay double at the door, so everyone had to say they were queer to get in at regular price. In my opinion, that wasn’t feminist politics, it was queer politics. We explored butch and fem themes, we explored queer relationships... (*First Ten Years* 45)

Significantly, this queer politics opened up to a negotiation of the representational strategies available to queer bodies on stage. For Davy, the work of “the WOW girls,”

put an alternative world onstage explicitly and addressed their audiences as if all were born and bred citizens of it. In so doing, they referenced an offstage site of lesbian sexual practice—a sexuality by, about, and for women. For this site to register in the realm of the symbolic, however, requires a shift in the foundational terms of representation, the

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period’s white middle class feminism as a lesbian theatre space could get.” (*Lady Dicks* 42). Its work was characterized as “boldly sexual,” but remained generally obscure outside the lesbian East Village scene (*Lady Dicks* 42). Both the diverse and subversive nature of the work at Medusa’s Revenge were carried over to WOW.
opening up of an alternative representational space through which previously unthinkable
subject positions are constructed for willing spectators\textsuperscript{24} to take up. (\textit{Lady Dicks} 137)

A second aspect of WOW’s aesthetic was a tendency to use irreverent humour as a means
to politicize feminist concerns. This tendency can be traced to the influence of WOW co-founder
Lois Weaver, a founding member of Spiderwoman Theatre,\textsuperscript{25} who went on to teach many WOW
performers.\textsuperscript{26} As noted by several critics, “[t]he WOW esthetic—in contrast to the more
prevalent, serious lesbian feminist viewpoint—is characterized by enjoyment and the ability to
poke fun at themselves, and they treat lesbian issues with a formerly neglected humor” (Parnes
11); “WOW has always been miles from the lesbian/feminist ‘aesthetic.’ Too rude. Too raunchy.
Too self-mocking and downright gay.” (Carr 9) The irreverent humour utilized at WOW not only
displaced and critiqued the serious lesbian feminist viewpoint, it also opened up a space to
articulate a wide spectrum of perspectives and feminisms, hitherto highly un(der)represented.

\textsuperscript{24} The WOW Café’s audience in the 1980s was made up of “mostly women and mostly lesbians that ranged from
supporters to admirers to rabid fans” (Dolan, “Return”), drawn to the Café’s articulation of lesbian and feminist
positions that were outside the contemporary feminist viewpoint. “What immediately struck festival participant C.
Carr about the storefront space on E. Eleventh Street was the mix of women. ‘Everyone was there […] middle-class
women from the Midwest, working-class New Yorkers, women of color, bar dykes, straight women, butches,
femmes, leather dykes… and nobody cared who anybody was or was not’ (\textit{Lady Dicks} 93). As Dolan explains,
“[t]he Café’s growing audience spoke to the nerve it touched in a subculture hungry for comedy and eager to shrug
off the yoke of feminist political correctness” (Dolan, “Ruminations”).

\textsuperscript{25} Spiderwoman Theater, still in operation today, was founded in 1976 by Muriel Miguel, and brought together a
diverse collective of women. It has been influenced by the practices of the 1960s feminist movement—notable
among them, the practices of consciousness-raising and experimental theatre—yet their artistic aesthetic differs
sharply from other feminist theatre of the 1970s. While Miguel had worked with the experimental Open Theatre for
a long time, and drew from the experimental form, she deviated from the assumption that “serious matters [should
be] presented seriously” (\textit{Lady Dicks} 36). While drawing on stories from personal experience—following the credo
of “the personal is political” of consciousness-raising—Miguel and her collaborators at Spiderwoman Theater
reworked these practices with humour and indigenous storytelling techniques. This expansive reshaping of 1960s
feminism enabled Spiderwoman Theater to remain in operation well into 3\textsuperscript{rd} wave feminism. Weaver’s work with
Spiderwoman heavily influenced her own tendency towards experimental, layered rehearsal and the constant use of
humour as a means to politicize feminist concerns. For a thorough analysis of the influences on U.S. feminist
theatre, see Charlotte Canning’s \textit{Feminist Theatres in the U.S.A.: Staging Women’s Experience}.

\textsuperscript{26} Weaver offered acting workshops to members at WOW, which she has described as “encouraging the independent
artist rather than teaching an actor” (Weaver qtd. in Stroppel 17).
Reacting against “the perception […] that lesbians aren’t funny” (Madaline Olnek qtd. in *First Ten Years* 95), much of WOW’s work sent up expected representational tropes. As Hughes describes:

> We valued humor above all; we loved cheap jokes best of all. We were not interested in merely breaking the silence and certainly not in creating positive images of women. We wanted to insert ourselves into the lowliest forms of pop culture and bust up the joint with our messy, undomesticated sexy selves, always entering, always laughing. (*First Ten Years* 30)

WOW’s ethos has been characterized by “the spirit of improvisation, of flouting the rules, and of lesbian irreverence and parody” (Dolan, “Ruminations”). This often meant that the performances on stage played with excessive stereotype as “character.” Rather than constructing character along the traditional theatre’s realist conventions, the performers paraded out characters that were framed in an immediately recognizable trope or stereotype, and whose complexity and duration varied widely. These tropes and stereotypes were “driven by parody—parodies of classical narratives, genres, historical figures, popular icons, and cultural norms, sometimes all in the same show” (*Lady Dicks* 7); “[t]he premise at WOW was that all signs and symbols were available and anyone had permission to indulge her wildest fantasies” (*Lady Dicks* 101).

Moreover, these characteristics were true of WOW, as well as of the larger East Village club scene of which WOW formed part. Alongside WOW, a group of small bars, operating as performance venues, had sprung up in the East Village in the early 1980s, taking advantage of the low rents in the neighbourhood (*Lady Dicks* 121). By 1984, these venues were collectively labeled “the East Village club scene,” among them: Pyramid Cocktail Lounge (1981), the Limbo Lounge (1982), 8BC (1983), Darinka (1984), and Club Chandelier (1984)] (*Lady Dicks* 121). As Davy explains,
[v]irtually everything that characterized the East Village club phenomenon was also true of WOW. An ‘anything goes’ ambience permeated club performances made by a generation of artists weaned on television sitcoms, talk shows, soap operas, and commercials. Performances commented on mainstream culture through riotous, scathing, yet loving parodies of its popular forms. […] Unlike much avant-garde theatre at the time, club performances returned narrative to the stage and in such a way that the most serious content could be fodder for outrageous comedy. (Lady Dicks 123)

As this dissertation shall show, Troyano’s work as Carmelita Tropicana takes up this irreverent humour as she negotiates disidentification across feminist and other intersecting representational identifications.

The third key aspect of the WOW aesthetic that can be traced through to the work of Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance is that of pop recycling. In the case of WOW, this specifically refers to the recycling in performance of U.S. television imagery. As Hughes describes:

Our canon was pop culture, more Gilligan’s Island than Waiting for Godot. Most of us were children in the 60s, when the country was ripped apart by racial tensions, assassinations, and the Vietnam War and then put back together by social justice movements of that time. Most of us were too young to play a part in the radical rebuilding. We ducked and covered as we were told. And we watched a lot of TV. We couldn’t escape the way this new medium was teaching us how to be American, how to be girls. In the midst of that turbulent era, a stream of shows told the same story. White fathers know best. Make room for daddy. When I hear the phrase ‘heteronormative,’ scenes from these shows flash through my mind forty years later. (First Ten Years 29-30)

Hughes continues that some other shows served as exceptions:
[they] were about groups of people who were not necessarily biologically related. […] These shows’ sensibilities were deeply queer. They suggested that life could be organized around something other than a patriarchal family, and their ridiculous comedy implied a critique of white heterosexuality. Perhaps no show punctured the myths of midcentury normal with vivid evocations of anxiety better than The Twilight Zone. […] WOW artists, like many East Villagers, referenced these shows over and over again to conjure up family values that were subsequently spoofed or smashed, often to the theme of The Twilight Zone. (First Ten Years 30)

As Hughes references, this pop recycling was occurring across the East Village club scene. Uzi Parnes—founder of Club Chandelier, and a significant figure in the East Village art scene—further describes how the form of these performances shared a distinct aesthetic:

Call it Pop Performance, Dada Cabaret, New Vaudeville, entertaining Performance Art, or just plain Burlesque, it is a performance phenomenon that has taken root in the clubs of New York’s East Village. Its style relates closely to performance art in the 70s, but differs in that the new performers in the East Village have rejected minimalism and a structural emphasis and have returned to a focus on content. Their work comments on popular culture through parody […] Fittingly, it was spawned in clubs […] where entertainment is what the customers want. Yet, in spite of its entertainment value, Pop Performance is a self-conscious art form by a generation of artists nurtured on television and mass media. (Parnes 5)

The self-conscious recycling of television and mass media representational imagery activated the disidentificatory strategy of countercultural art practice. As Village Voice reviewer C. Carr reflects:
While traveling the [East Village] club circuit, I saw countless pieces of anti-television—parodies or vulgarizations of beloved or dreaded old shows. Much of it was worse than anything I’d seen on the tube, and not worth reviewing, but the fact of its existence still meant something. Artists who came of age in the seventies and beyond can’t disown the television parent. They treat media as primary experience, and the best of them go well beyond manipulating its imagery. (Carr xix- xx)

This negotiation across mainstream imagery, and its critical manipulation, offers a prime example of a disidentificatory representational strategy. As Muñoz elucidates,

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture. (*Disidentifications* 31)

WOW’s playful and irreverent reworking of mainstream media representation was committed to creating a space for reinvention and alternative representation. As Troyano remembers:

> That’s when our WOW revolution began […] We believed in our mission to represent women like us—whatever that meant. […] Back then […] Art was more about process than product, more about aesthetic edification than career, more about transgression than mainstream assimilation. […] Before *The L Word, Ellen, Will and Grace*, the Logo Channel, and *Glee*, there was WOW, making queer art, putting
lesbians on the map, creating a culture that would one day seep into mainstream. (*First Ten Years* 9-10)

**Early work at the WOW Café**

Troyano’s participation at WOW began in 1982, and the work there invited her to explore the representation of lesbian sexuality on stage, as well as inspired the creation of her performance persona. Specifically, Troyano began to foster key aspects of her performance work through collaborating with Holly Hughes, and getting involved in WOW’s comedy class and “Variety Nights.”

Troyano had the opportunity to collaborate with Hughes on various pieces, notable amongst them Hughes’ *Well of Horniness* (1983) and *The Lady Dick* (1985). These works are significant in that Hughes’ constructions of lesbian representation sharply contrasted the existing, mainstream feminist representations of the time, specifically in its openly sexualized representation of butch/femme lesbians. As Davy notes, “In the 1970s a great many feminists considered representation of butch/femme lesbians to be the epitome of derogatory stereotypes” (*Lady Dicks* 41); and Hughes reads this rejection of certain sectors of the lesbian community, as well as its accompanying rejection of active lesbian sexuality, as continuing through to the mid-1980s. As Hughes recalls: “What made somebody a lesbian, I was told, wasn’t wanting to have sex with women … [for] if you admitted you wanted to have sex with women, you would be accused of being just like a man… Apparently, sex was something lesbians used to do before they got politics and opened food co-ops” (Hughes qtd. in *Lady Dicks* 51). Amy Goodloe points out that it was only in the late 1970s and into the 1980s that butch-femme gender performance became subversive, with prominent lesbian feminist figures like U.S. Latina Cherrie Moraga expressing the feminist potentialities of butch performance, and feminist scholar Judith Butler
repositioning the butch demeanour as at once imitative and subversive (Goodloe). Hughes’ work was part of this move at WOW, engaging in a raw way with the feminist possibilities and limitations of these representations.

Hughes’s *Well of Horniness* was “[o]ne of the most successful pieces to emerge” from WOW] in the early 1980s (Parnes 11). Like many other WOW performances, the piece involved female drag, and “utilized an all-woman cast who burlesque both male and female roles, making fun of straight and lesbian stereotypes” (Parnes 11). Performing in Hughes’ production invited Troyano to perform as two distinct stereotypes on stage, in the particular, humorous style of the WOW Café, and with the overtly sexual tones that would soon become Troyano’s trademark. As Troyano explains, Hughes:

cast me as Al Dente, Chief of Police, and Georgette, a butch girl. The role of Al Dente became easier to tackle once Jack Smith\(^\text{27}\) [...] watched the rehearsal and gave me three magic words: Bark the part. Bark the part, of course. I had imagined Al Dente as a cross between Marlon Brando’s Grandfather and a bulldog. Georgette was harder. Playing butch hit closer to home. All those voices from my adolescence came back to haunt me: ‘Don’t laugh that loud.’ ‘Don’t walk that way, *pareces una carretonera.*’ ‘You look like a truck driver.’ I had been sent to charm and etiquette school to cure my gruff demeanor. Now I was being asked to play a butch girl and revel in it. When I stepped on stage, took off my

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\(^{27}\) As Muñoz elaborates: “Smith, the now-legendary avant-garde filmmaker and performance artist who died of AIDS complications in 1989, pioneered an image of a hilarious and hyper-active gay male subjectivity that had not only not existed in representation before him, but was essentially unimaginable to queer spectators” (*Disidentifications* 122). Smith worked with both Uzi Parnes (founder of Club Chandelier) and filmmaker Ela Troyano (Alina Troyano’s sister) and Parnes and Ela Troyano are Alina Troyano’s earliest and long-time collaborators (*I, Carmelita* xvii).
shirt exposing bare arms in a tank T-shirt, and flexed my muscles, the girls went ‘Oooh.’ I had a revelation: This wasn’t so bad. (I, Carmelita xiv-xv)²⁸

Particularly, as Georgette in Hughes’ Well of Horniness, Troyano took part in “an aesthetic in service to an explicit, productive rendering of lesbian sexuality,” namely, through a sexually explicit scene that would gain wide notoriety within the local lesbian community—“what became known as ‘the pussy-eating scene’” (Hughes qtd. in Lady Dicks 140).²⁹

This first opportunity to play up an openly butch lesbian identity on stage in front of the supportive crowd at WOW was a starting point for Troyano’s engagement with constructing characters that boldly embodied stereotypical identities, within a context that framed these in a critical—non-mainstream—way. Significantly, while noting her own growing willingness to take on and explore these representations in performance, Troyano also marks the fraught process around this negotiation:

The idea of a lesbian stereotype is a paradox given that lesbians have been historically invisible. If lesbians were imagined at all it was mainly as butch. One of the things I loved most about these early years at WOW is that we, that is lesbians, were able to come up with our own representations and have fun with them in the process. We had fights

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²⁸ Troyano also reminisces on this performance elsewhere: “She [Hughes] had me doing things that were so heavy for me! I had to play a man and a butch girl. That was hard. I can't be butch! I had to shut up all these voices in my head that said I couldn't be loud, that I had to be a nice girl. But the voices in my head were silenced as soon as I stepped onstage wearing this tiny T-shirt. I was playing Georgette and I was flexing my muscles. All the girls went nuts. I thought, ‘It’s not so bad to be butch!’ That's how my career began” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”).

²⁹ In this scene, Georgette meets her brother Rod and his fiancée Vicky at a restaurant. “Georgette orders dinner, but Vicky does not” (Lady Dicks 140). It soon becomes revealed that Vicky has homosexual desire, cued by the waitress’s line: “Excuse me, Miss, are you gonna order anything or are you just gonna eat hers?” (Lady Dicks 141)

Shortly thereafter, “[a]s Rod delivers a lengthy monologue […] his fiancée is under the table with her head between his sister’s [Georgette’s] legs. This scene was staged in many East Village clubs explicitly, with Georgette [played by Troyano] responding elaborately” (Lady Dicks 141). As Davy concludes, “Well played nearly every club during the heyday of East Village performance. The scene creates a powerfully suggestive image that lived on notoriously in the local lesbian community long after the play had ceased to be performed” (Lady Dicks 140).
around these topics but we were all committed to supporting each other’s work.

(“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

In this way, Troyano’s negotiation of lesbian representation at WOW involved both taking up otherwise shunned lesbian representation, and negotiating what it meant to embody such a representation on stage—opening up to the possibility of disidentification.

A second early collaboration between Troyano and Hughes was in Hughes’ *The Lady Dick*. Troyano recalls how: “Holly gave me one of my juiciest roles at WOW: Con Carne in *The Lady Dick*” (*First Ten Years* 9). This work is significant as it earned Hughes the title of having created a subversive and punchy “dyke noir theatre” (Carr xvii). As C. Carr describes in her review of the piece, 30 entitled “The Queer Frontier”:

> The characters in […] *The Lady Dick* […] are brazen queers and hard-boiled ones at that. They hang out in a lesbian bar called the Pit that looks like the interior of a fish tank. […] *The Dick* creates a lowlife pulp fiction ambience with its Billie Holiday songs, butch/femme style, detective patter, and rapid-fire double entendres. But there’s no plot. And no crimes in this bar except the patrons’ unnaturalness. These aren’t the dykes who make it to the Donahue show. They wear society’s contempt like a badge of honor, but it costs them. Cynics, backbiters, and braggarts—the assembled tough cookies argue and tell stories, insult and proposition each other. […] This is the first attempt I’ve seen at a dyke theatre of queerness, a play in the wicked and ridiculous spirit of Charles Ludlam, the Hot Peaches, or Jack Smith. […] A risky ‘Dyke Theatre’ […] The territory Hughes

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and Tropicana have started to carve out—rude, wacky, politically incorrect, sleazy, and overtly sexual—is the place where lesbians, suddenly confident in their inappropriateness, are allowing themselves to roam for the first time. (Carr 85-87)

More broadly, Hughes expands on the term “dyke noir” as signifying not only the style of her show, but also as describing,

what many of us knew ourselves to be, at least in terms of our artistic aspirations. We looked at the movie stereotypes of dykes as ruthless, unruly women with murder in their hearts and we refused to get onboard with any movement that would offer up sanitized versions of ourselves. We were done with being nice girls. We were armed and dangerous and didn’t care who knew it. (First Ten Years 100)

“Dyke theatre” thus encompassed the willingness to take up socially disdained representations of lesbian identity and negotiate them on stage.

Alongside taking up these overtly sexual, butch lesbian characters in Hughes’ shows, Troyano began to piece together a performance persona. Troyano describes her sense of the WOW Café as a “place where the credo for everywoman was ‘Express yourself.’ A place that said if existing theatre does not represent women like us, let us create that theatre” (I, Carmelita xiv). WOW’s inclusive and specifically feminist performance policy was bolstered by the

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31 Troyano began to bill herself as “Carmelita Tropicana” from 1983 onwards. She recalls that when Hughes’ Well of Horniness was about to be performed live on the radio, she quickly came up with it to preserve her anonymity (Carmelita Tropicana with Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé: Performing Que(eries) Series Part 3, 18min).

32 The non-hierarchical nature of membership, the lack of official leaders, and the limited scope of foundational operational policies radically opened up the possibilities for the kind of work taking place at the WOW Café. The one policy on performance work involved participatory labour. As Hughes recalls, access to performing in the space was predicated on “sweat labour,” wherein, rather than having gatekeepers, if you showed up and worked on other peoples’ shows, “you would get a show regardless of whether it was good or not” (“Archiving Revolutions”). Hughes has described WOW at this time as “a place where it was okay to be wrong, to invent yourself” (“Archiving Revolutions”). As Davy further explains: “From the beginning, WOW accommodated a felt but unarticulated value for women simply getting up onstage. This impulse marks WOW as feminist. […] This desire to empower women and promote their agency would ultimately lead WOW to embrace a number of practices antithetical to those of
unofficial, but incredibly strong stewardship of Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, who continually encouraged members to perform on stage. “Anyone is encouraged to get up and perform at WOW […] that encouragement creates a freedom to express oneself. Once a performer feels safe, you can train her” (Weaver qtd. in Solomon 101). Troyano herself recalls taking a comedy class at WOW, wherein she discovered that she couldn’t do comedy as herself, “as Alina” (“Performing Que(e)ries” 33 16min). Rather than shying away from the opportunity to perform, she began to consider performing as a distinct persona.

Across the East Village club scene, and true also at WOW, “[p]erformers adopted personas they sometimes played both on- and offstage” (Lady Dicks 123). At WOW, in resistance to traditional audience/performer distinctions, not only were all members encouraged to perform—with “Variety Nights” operating as an “open mic”—but also a porousness between audience and performer, as well as artist and persona, was cultivated as a means to foster free, non-traditional expression. This was especially evident in WOW’s theme parties, which “broke down the static performer/audience dyad, prefiguring theatre in WOW’s new home as so participatory that the line between performer and spectator would be blurred” (Lady Dicks 100). This slippage was also encouraged at WOW’s storefront Sunday Brunches, wherein members gathered to socialize. As Davy notes, “[p]laywright and performer Claire Moed would show up decked out as Marilyn Monroe, for instance, and maintained that persona throughout the brunch” (Lady Dicks 100). Moed reminisces: “The heels. The makeup. The dresses. It was the only place in the world where I could wear those clothes and it could be lesbian” (Moed qtd. Lady Dicks

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33 “Carmelita Tropicana with Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé: Performing Que(e)ries Series Part 3.”
This expansive inclusion characterized WOW in its early storefront years, with “[p]orous, permeable boundaries […] between the theatre and the street, brunch and performance, and performers and spectators” (Lady Dicks 101). It fostered the artists working within it to take risks, and to freely construct bombastic, irreverent personas. Moreover, as WOW artists began to perform across the circuit of East Village clubs in the early 1980s, they would flow in and out of these informal performance venues as artist/persona, audience/performer.

The anecdotal ‘birth’ of the persona of Carmelita Tropicana is often credited to Shaw convincing Troyano to take the stage on one of WOW’s “Variety Nights.” As Davy narrates:

It was an evening emceed by performance artist Alina Troyano, who was then a fledgling actress. Because the night’s offerings were scant, one of WOW’s founding members, Peggy Shaw, convinced Troyano to ‘go out there and do something.’ Reaching back to her country of birth as a source of inspiration, Troyano addressed the audience in a Cuban accent, recited some poetry, and sang the Cuban national anthem. The audience loved it, and Carmelita Tropicana was born. (Lady Dicks 5)

Carmelita would soon become a regular at WOW and across the East Village club circuit, performing both on and off stage, as “one of the club scene’s most thoroughly–realized personas, sort of a low-rent Carmen Miranda” (Carr 82).³⁴

³⁴ An early iteration of Carmelita Tropicana in performance was her television-parody format performance of “Carmelita Tropicana Chats/Chicken Sushi” (Lady Dicks 187), the which also became a regular performance at Club Chandelier. To view an iteration of this skit—wherein Carmelita takes a raw chicken, places it on a platter on the stage on top of a long Japanese mat, and covers it with a can of black goya beans, some paprika, and two little colourful umbrellas—see “Carmelita Tropicana with Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé: Performing Que(e)ries Series Part 3.”
Intersectional Persona

The performance persona of Carmelita Tropicana is not only involved in a negotiation of representational imagery across her lesbian sexuality and queerness, but also around Latina/o ethno-cultural identity. As Troyano recalls, her early work was affected by both the influence of WOW and of INTAR, as she found collaborators with whom to engage across an intersectional politics of representation.

Alongside WOW, INTAR was an influential space for Troyano’s work. INTAR, founded in 1966, is “one of the United States’ longest running Latino theater producers in English” (INTAR website), and, according to Troyano, “was and remains one of the most important Spanish-speaking theatres in the country” (First Ten Years 189). As Troyano elaborates:

[1]ike WOW, Intar was significant for the network it provided. It was there I met María Irene [Fornes], Graciela Daniele, and Max Ferra, as well as other writers and musicians that were starting out, like Manuel Pereiras, Ana María Simo, Lorraine Llamas, Alfredo Bejar, Micky Cruz, Bobby Sanabria, Luis Santeiro. (I, Carmelita xvii)

Moreover, by working across WOW and INTAR, Troyano felt supported to explore aspects of her intersectional identity. She reflects that:

[i]f WOW was a theatre space grounded in gender and sexual politics, Intar was the Latin hood where we could check out our roots. Intar, an arts complex […] nurtured Latino talent through its theatre, art gallery, and two significant workshops, the playwriting workshop led by María Irene Fornes and the musical theatre workshop led by George Ferencz and Graciela Daniele. (I, Carmelita xvi)

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Troyano’s collaboration with INTAR allowed her to develop the complexity of the Carmelita persona. INTAR invited Troyano to join the musical theatre
workshop, and paid her a stipend to write the book for a musical (*I, Carmelita* xvi). As she recalls: “I had never written more than a few monologues in the voice of Carmelita. A play seemed a Herculean task. (Xena had not yet arrived.) And a musical to boot” (*I, Carmelita* xvi). In developing this work, Troyano solicited the help of Fornes at INTAR, as well as Weaver at WOW; soon the project brought in collaborators from across both these spaces. As Troyano relates, negotiating across these collaborators of her early performance career was not always easy:

> When I started out, I sort of split myself. I was doing stuff at WOW with all the WOW women. […] Then I had INTAR, where the name ‘Latino’ started coming up and we were finding our roots. I was split between the lesbian and the Latino. A lot of times, at INTAR, they were giving me money to develop a show, and I would bring the WOW people in. It was like trying to mesh your worlds, which sometimes was very difficult to do. (*First Ten Years* 189)

With this early project, Troyano’s lyrics were set to the melodies of composer Fernando Rivas, who would go on to become Troyano’s collaborator both in and out of INTAR (*I, Carmelita* xvii), and with whom she developed her first full-length musical, “The Boiler Time Machine.”

In developing the character of Carmelita to become the protagonist of this show, Troyano also began her significant collaboration with Uzi Parnes and her sister Ela Troyano—equally invested in the work’s queer and ethno-cultural negotiations.

> Significantly, in collaborating with Parnes and Ela Troyano, Alina Troyano was able to explore both queer and Latina aspects of representation. As Troyano explains:

35 “The Boiler Time Machine” was performed at both PS122 and INTAR, from 1986-1990 (*Tropicana* “About”).
My first collaborators were Uzi Parnes and my biological sister Ela Troyano, who are both filmmakers, directors and writers. [...] As a triumvirate of two cubists and one Jewish (an Uzi-ism), we created work that made Carmelita the protagonist, a super Latina heroine who, when pitted against evil forces, always triumphed in the end. (*I, Carmelita* xvii)

At first, Parnes and her sister aided in developing the costumes and visuals for the character of Carmelita (“Performing Que(e)ries” 19-20min), and soon went on to becoming her co-creators and directors. As Troyano elaborates, their visuals,

added a flamboyancy to Carmelita—Uzi by creating fruited boas and hat chandeliers that light up my life and the stage, Ela by saving a charred sequined bustier from a fire I had in my apartment, adding glittered fruit to the burnt left breast so I could appear at a TV interview looking intact with just a hint of fruit. (*I, Carmelita* xvii-xviii)

The fruits in Carmelita’s costume are one example of an intersectional engagement with flamboyant and exotic imagery, constructing a persona that is a queer, “super Latina heroine” engaging in a negotiation of iconography and representation.

Furthermore, the persona of Carmelita Tropicana was also developed through her performances at Club Chandelier—the space run by Troyano’s sister Ela and Uzi Parnes. Club Chandelier was an important second space for carving out the persona of Carmelita, making her a key figure of queer East Village performance at the time. Unlike the WOW Café’s exclusive female-only membership and theatrical bent, Club Chandelier was a platform for gay, lesbian,
and queer artists from across theatrical, film and visual arts. Club Chandelier was a space for a wide-range of experimental, expansively queer performance work.36

Troyano posits that, “[t]hrough Carmelita I could be whoever I wanted to be. It didn't matter if I transgressed certain expected behaviors” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). Her transgression spans an intersectional disidentification and negotiation of expected behaviours, embodying Carmen Miranda imagery while also playing a “butch in femme’s clothes” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). Carmelita weaves together the exoticized hyper-femininity of the Latina stereotype alongside a butch representation of lesbian desire. As Troyano describes:

Carmelita plays with the stereotype of Latinas, for example, but she goes beyond it.
She's the agent of her own story. Notice the women in the telenovelas, the Latino soap operas: they are always defined by the men in their lives. Latinas are stereotypically linked with heterosexual romance. Carmelita has her romances but she's a lesbian. That in itself breaks the Latina stereotype. But she also goes beyond the stereotype of the lesbian. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

Queer Latina scholar Lillian Manzor elaborates on this intersectional negotiation:

Carmelita Tropicana ‘pretends to play’ not only with stereotypes of Latin(o/a)ness but also with both Anglo and Latino stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. She does so in the lesbian address of her performances, which decenters the Latina heterosexual spectator as well as the Anglo lesbian spectator. As a gay self-parody of Carmen Miranda, then, Tropicana’s performances open up the space for a different kind of self-

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36 The club was founded in July 1984 by Uzi Parnes, and co-managed by Parnes and Ela Troyano. Club Chandelier was located in the East Village in a second floor walk-up at 120 Avenue C, between 7th and 8th Street. The club itself was an illegal venue, “where the windows were blacked out to keep the fire department from noticing” (Schulman 88). Club Chandelier’s location placed it not only within the East Village more generally, but also within the specificity of “Losaida”—the Puerto Rican neighbourhood of Alphabet City. The space “had previously housed a Puerto Rican social club called Flamingo” (Parnes 14).
representation, one that constructs female bodies that resist fetishization while undermining traditional ethnic and gender representations. ("Two Tropicanas" 374-375)

Influenced by both the WOW Café, INTAR, and the East Village club scene in general, Carmelita’s body in performance thus weaves across “[h]er queer and cubana body” (Disidentifications 139), embodying a range of intersectional stereotypes, and doing so in a subversive and irreverent resistance to mainstream, as well as fixed, notions of identity. The following chapter will examine how choteo can be used as a particularly useful optic to examine Carmelita’s work.
2. *Choteo as a Performance Optic*

*Choteo as a Critical Practice*

José Esteban Muñoz is the first critic to apply *choteo* as an optic for reading Carmelita Tropicana’s performance work. Muñoz activates *choteo* as a particular practice of “critical Cubanía” and a comedic disidentificatory strategy (“Choteo/Camp” 38). Yet he does not undertake an analysis of the particular character of *choteo*. I wish to deepen the application of *choteo* to reading Carmelita Tropicana’s work by taking up the specifics of *choteo* and foregrounding the intersectional and disidentificatory potential of this act as a representational strategy. To do so, I will first go back to existing literature on *choteo* in order to gather and weave together what constitutes the act of *choteo*—a communicative act with a particular kind of content, context, and trajectory. This more complex understanding of *choteo* provides the groundwork from which I will elaborate on how this act can be applied as a rich optic to navigating the complexity of the intersectional *choteadora*.

Muñoz reads *choteo* as a practice of subversive mockery, which may function as a comedic disidentificatory strategy, and whose character is, more particularly, a form of “critical Cubanía” (*Disidentifications* 117). While aligning *choteo* as a survival strategy, Muñoz does not take up a more specific discussion of the elements of this communicative act. Yet in turning to the broader Cuban scholarship on *choteo*, one discovers that it has been variously construed, with each analysis aiming at a different reading of its effect. *Choteo* can be understood most generally as a Cuban term for a kind of verbal or paraverbal mockery. But the attribution of either a critical

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or a Cuban nature to this act of mockery has been heavily contested, across what I see to be the key question of who are its agents, that is, who is the *choteador(a)*?

The delineation of what constitutes *choteo* has been taken up most thoroughly in a long-form study by Jorge Mañach, a prominent thinker on Cuban cultural identity at the turn of the twentieth century. In his *Indagación del Choteo* (An Analysis of Choteo), originally presented as a lecture in 1928, Mañach posits *choteo* as a low-form of mockery, which he finds problematically ubiquitous in Cuba and takes pains to disavow from being an essentially Cuban form (10). Significantly, writing at a time of Cuban economic depression and under the corrupt government of Gerardo Machado (Chomsky 26), Mañach is keenly invested in critical cultural practices, and in the construction of a progressive independent republic. Nevertheless, Mañach finds *choteo* a dangerously disrespectful practice, whose lack of discernment devalues its critical strength and produces a vulgarity that he hopes the more mature republic of Cuba will outgrow in its “coming of age” in the twentieth century. Specifically, Mañach explains the broader category of mockery, or *burla*—of which *choteo* is a part—as a kind of protest or reaction against authority that points out an internal contradiction (Mañach 63). He praises mockery when it is at its higher forms—ones which apply finer critique, such as irony (63). In contrast, for Mañach,

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38 Mañach became very well known in Cuba as an important cultural thinker, after delivering a lecture in 1925, at the age of only 28, on “La crisis de la alta cultura en Cuba”. This lecture later became a widely published treatise, precepts of which he put into action when he became Minister of Education in 1934 (Mañach 9).

39 As Gustavo Pérez Firmat notes in 1984, “Mañach’s is not, to be sure, the only study of *choteo*, but it is the best and the best known” (*Literature and Liminality* 169).
el *choteo*, como hábito, como actitud sistemática que es, resulta por lo general una forma muy baja de burla. Allí donde nadie halla motivos de risa, el choteador los encuentra—o finge encontrarlos. (63)

Notably, Mañach’s dismissal of *choteo* as a vulgar, “knee-jerk” reaction, directed undiscerningly and so lacking in critical effectiveness, seems actually to bristle not at *choteo*’s aimlessness, but rather at its target. While claiming that *choteo* is merely “una burla sin motivo” (a mockery without motive) (Mañach 64), Mañach goes on to accuse *choteo* of constructing its own motive and daring to introduce mockery into and onto the serious:

una burla que inventa su motivo y que, para usar la frase criolla, tan significativa, ‘le pone rabo’ a un objeto serio […] En torno de cualquier persona o situación respetables, crea una atmósfera de jocosidad que se va cargando rápidamente, hasta hacerse tan densa que el objeto mirado a través de ella resulta desfigurado y grotesco. (64)

While Mañach tries to deride *choteo* by dismissing it as nothing more than immature, empty mockery, he cannot help but, reticently, acknowledge that *choteo* must be somehow prescient in its “attack,” otherwise it could not be dangerous. He concedes:

No sería el choteo, sin embargo, todo lo peligroso que generalmente es, si se limitara a ser esa risa sin objeto. Lo más frecuente es que lo tenga y que ese objeto sea su víctima. Tal vez hasta en los casos en que se nos aparece como una pura improvisación,

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40 “*Choteo*, as habit, as merely systematic behaviour, turns out to be in general a very low form of mockery. The *choteador* will find—or pretend to find—reason for humour where no one else does.”

41 “… mockery that invents its own motive, and to use the accurately descriptive colloquial term, ‘pins a tail’ on a serious object […] It creates a mocking atmosphere around any respectable person or situation—one which devolves quickly until it becomes so dense that the object seen through it is disfigured and grotesque.”

42 In one of his few detailed examples of the act of *choteo*, Mañach recounts the action of a group of youths who, passing an open window, first listen attentively to the beautiful piano performance of the woman within, only to then walk away and mock it for no reason (73).
realmente está el choteo reaccionando contra algo externo que ni él mismo percibe bien. (64)\

In the terms of his concession, Mañach reveals the class politic inflecting his analysis. It is not that choteo lacks critical insight; rather, even if choteo proves a critically effective form of mockery, Mañach refuses to acknowledge a critical consciousness on the part of the sender of the action—the choteador. While the act itself may prove “acaso un indicio de protesta contra algo” (a possibly accurate index of protest against something) (64), it still emanates, for Mañach, from an inherently uncritical source, whose reaction against social limitations is not an active resistance or subversive choice, but rather a persistent, immature impatience with any sense of authority (65). Mañach depicts the choteador as one blindly throwing insults at “real or perceived limitations” (65), implying that the choteador is unable to aptly discern between necessary social hierarchies and statutes of behaviour, and unjust ones. The choteo then, even in its subversive potential, is reduced—and so dismissed—by Mañach to be the tool of the low-class ignoramus.

Mañach refuses to recognize the low-class, uneducated sender as an adequate critic, because, in essence, Mañach only respects the critical position of the upper class—a position that, of course, does not question its own privileges. What is more, while at once fearing the choteador’s dangerous action, Mañach even tries to reduce the choteador to an essentially passive position. He quips that the moment the choteador meets with real resistance, he submits to authority: “El choteo es un prurito de independencia que se exterioriza en una burla de toda

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43 “Choteo, however, would not be as dangerous as it generally is if it limited itself to being a targetless humour. More often it does have a target and that object becomes its victim. Perhaps even when it appears to us as a mere improvisation, the choteo is actually reacting to something external that it itself cannot fully perceive.”

44 As Muñoz notes, the act of choteo is usually described as a male practice (Disidentifications 115). Muñoz will be the first to actively apply it to a choteadora.
forma no imperativa de autoridad” (Mañach 71). Yet while Mañach attempts to use this as an attack on the critical capacity of choteo, I would suggest that this actually highlights the disenfranchised position of the low-class, uneducated choteador, who, despite his ability to be critical and verbally subvert hierarchy, remains otherwise bound by its authority.

We can conclude then that Mañach’s reticence to openly acknowledge choteo’s subversive potential is primarily driven by his desire to cultivate reputable, high-class behaviour, specifically, one that allows for critique only from the most noble of sources, and at the appropriate times. For Mañach, the choteador is not a permissible social critic, for the choteador lacks the education and rank—and therefore, the authority—of one such as Mañach himself.

Mañach sees choteo as part of a disrespectful levelling practice, and concludes his treatise with a circumspectly elitist call for critical action of great restraint: “Ha llegado la hora de ser criticamente alegres, disciplinadamente audaces, conscientemente irrespetuosos” (Mañach 94). Yet what Mañach’s work confirms, despite itself, is choteo’s critically subversive potential.

45 “Choteo is a desire for independence that is externalized in a mockery of every non-imperative form of authority” (Mañach as translated by Pérez Firmat, Literature and Liminality 56).

46 Mañach’s investment in critical activism and his desire for a progressive independent republic of Cuba drove him to be an active member of the anti-Machada revolution of 1933, which brought both a short-term progressive government and the beginning of the Batista regime (Chomsky 26). Mañach continued to be politically active as a Minister of State in 1944—at the tail-end of the Batista regime—and as an anticommunist activist throughout the 1950s, until his forcible exile to Puerto Rico in 1960 (Filosofía).

47 “Este deseo de familiaridad con las cosas es algo a que el cubano es sobremanera adicto. Ya veremos que una de las causas determinantes del choteo es la tendencia niveladora que nos caracteriza a los cubanos, eso que llamamos ‘parejería’ y que nos incita a decirle ‘viejo’ y ‘chico’ al hombre más encumbrado o venerable” (Mañach 67). (“The Cuban is addicted to this desire for familiarity. One of the determining factors of choteo is its levelling tendency, which also characterizes us, Cubans—that which might be called ‘making equivalent,’ and which drives us to hail the most dignified or venerable of men as ‘old man’ or ‘boy’.”)

48 “The time has come to be critically joyous; audacious, with great discipline; and disrespectful, with a keen consciousness.”
Choteo as “Doubly Low”

Cultural critic Gustavo Pérez Firmat engages in “depathologizing” \(49\) choteo by reassessing choteo almost sixty years after Mañach, and suggesting the powerfully liminal position of choteo and its agent. For Pérez Firmat, the choteador whom Mañach has described as suffering from “a vice of mental optics or moral sensibility” (Mañach qtd./translated in Literature and Liminality 54), as an actor of “uncivil disobedience” (56), is the paragon “shit-disturber,” systematically opposed to everything, and involved in an act whose “low” content doubly performs a particular downward movement that is key to its subversive potential. What for Mañach is the pernicious ubiquity of choteo, is for Pérez Firmat its potential: “[a]ny time, place, and occasion will serve the choteador. The more inappropriate the situation, the more effective its assault” (62).

Pérez Firmat’s reassessment of choteo realigns the practice with a disruptive playfulness by offering two additional considerations to Mañach’s otherwise exhaustive treatise on the subject. These two considerations are, first, the “low” content of the act of choteo, and, second, its accompanying “downward movement.” Pérez Firmat notes that while Mañach studies the speaker and receiver of the choteo, “about the act itself he says relatively little” (Literature and Liminality 55); “Mañach focuses on the sender and receiver rather than on the message” (54-55). Pérez Firmat reads this as Mañach’s attempt to clean up choteo, to elevate it to the realm of scholarly attention, and, by so doing, to actually try and eradicate it (54). For Pérez Firmat, even the very form of Mañach’s serious study of choteo is an attack on choteo’s “inattention”:

“Mañach’s is a meditation on impremeditation, a seeming betrayal of the spirit of the subject—‘el diablillo del choteo’ […] by the seriousness of the treatment” (54). Mañach’s attack on choteo

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\(^49\) José Esteban Muñoz also engages in this, in 1996. See Disidentifications, p.136.
not only places it within an incongruent formal analysis, it also strips _choteo_ of its content: a content that, for Pérez Firmat, is key to understanding the subversive quality of _choteo_. As Pérez Firmat elaborates: “Mañach attempts a ‘purification’ of _choteo_, a filtering out of its baseness or filth. Deliberately or not, he acts to cleanse or edulcorate his subject by glossing over its scatological subtext, its bottom lines” (70). Playing here with the double-entendre of “bottom,” Pérez Firmat begins to mine the obscene allusions of _choteo_ as a means to align it with a liminal practice. _Choteo_, through its low content and the liminal displacement it enacts, revels in and reveals the “culo _in lo vernáculo_” (the ass in the colloquial) (72).

Specifically, Pérez Firmat uncovers the content of _choteo_ by elucidating Mañach’s passing reference to it as a _trompetilla_ (literally, little trumpet). Nearing the conclusion of his treatise, Mañach reflects that “la trompetilla es una saeta que se clava siempre en el blanco—in el centro de gravedad—flameando una banderita de ridículo” (Mañach 86). Pérez Firmat highlights Mañach’s use of the term _trompetilla_ as a rare moment wherein the vulgarity of _choteo_ intrudes into Mañach’s polished treatise. Pérez Firmat elucidates the colloquial meaning of _trompetilla_ as follows:

The _trompetilla_, a dark cousin of the English raspberry, is produced by pressing one’s palms against one’s mouth and squeezing out air. The sound emitted is indeed, as Mañach says, loaded with abject allusions, for the _trompetilla_ is simply the fart of the 

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50 “The _trompetilla_ is an arrow that always hits the bull’s eye—in the most serious centre, blazing the flag of the ridiculous.”

51 Mañach’s referring to _choteo_ outright as a _trompetilla_, as this “fart of the upper body,” is a surprising break in Mañach’s otherwise “impeccable” text. For Pérez Firmat, Mañach’s use of the term _trompetilla_ does not shift Mañach’s pejorative perspective on _choteo_, but it does force Mañach to slip into the vulgarity he so disdains.
upper body. One blast will cut down to size the most exalted personage, will expose the most inveterate kind of pretentiousness. (*Literature and Liminality* 63)

Pérez Firmat’s explanation of *trompetilla* elucidates the content of the act of *choteo* as a particular kind of lowbrow humour: toxic, acidic, but also distinctly “immature” in its character. Pérez Firmat explains that “[f]or all its transgressive qualities, *choteo* is often scatological but seldom genital. These are not “dirty” jokes in the usual sense of the word […] This kind of humour would not find its way into most pornographic literature, for it contains too much smut and too little sex” (66). This distinction of *choteo* from “dirty” (sexual) humour underscores *choteo* as lacking in sexual or sensual content. We can understand *choteo* then as a particularly immature mockery, in that its allusion to the corporeal is the childish transgression of pointing out the body’s “lower” functions, in contexts that otherwise seek to sanitize, and thereby elevate, them. What is more, the low content of *choteo* aims not at exultation, or the excitation of sexual titillation, but at the lowering movement of deflation.

Pérez Firmat’s second addition to Mañach’s treatise on the subject is to accent the “downward movement” of *choteo*. “Mañach is quite right […] to insist that *choteo* is not a form of wit, for wit displaces upward” (*Literature and Liminality* 68). As Pérez Firmat explains: “*choteo* is doubly low: it is a ‘low’ humour that ‘lowers’ its victims” (72-73). Pérez Firmat notes that this downward movement is both the intrinsic directionality of *choteo*—dragging down its victims—and that the *choteo* act or joke also will include this downward movement as part of its content’s trajectory (58, 65). The low content of *choteo* is then also always qualified through its movement. I would suggest that in Mañach’s reference to *choteo* as *trompetilla*, he both inadvertently acknowledges the low content of *choteo* and underscores the downward movement
that Pérez Firmat highlights as the doubly low nature of choteo. Mañach, in one of the rare moments of conceding to choteo some modicum of “healthy critical faculty,”\textsuperscript{52} recognizes that choteo also serves as a social defense: “[a]l par que uno de los grandes padecimientos del cubano, la burla crónica ha sido una de sus grandes defensas” (Mañach 85).\textsuperscript{53} Mañach provides a few examples of what he considers “worthy” choteo, both of which, unsurprisingly, take aim at “suitable” objects of disdain: the pompous egos of foreigners who arrive with a grand conqueror’s aspirations to Cuba, as well as the narcissist, whose ego is in need of disinflation (86). In both these examples, then, choteo as trompetilla, in the toxicity of its low “gases asfixiantes” (asfixiating gases) (89) works as an effective pulling downward of its receiver. Choteo is thus a contextually rooted action that displaces in and through the moving trajectory of its content and form.

Notably, Pérez Firmat elucidates the content and movement of choteo even further when he himself enacts a choteo on Mañach’s work on the subject. Pérez Firmat takes a playful joy in reading Mañach’s inclusion of the term trompetilla as an inadvertent infection of Mañach’s serious study, and pushes this further when he concludes his chapter\textsuperscript{54} on Mañach’s work with a final subversion: positing Mañach as unwittingly committing “auto-choteo” or self-parody across the purportedly high-class Indagación. Pérez Firmat claims that,

[Mañach’s] network of covert anatomical allusions tends to turn Indagación del choteo into self-parody or auto-choteo, for Mañach […] unintentionally undermines the ‘purity’ of his language. The disguised but persistent anal references contaminate his exposition

\textsuperscript{52} “el choteo haya ejercido, en ciertos casos, una función critica saludable” (Mañach 85).
\textsuperscript{53} “…along with being one of the greatest ailments of the Cuban, chronic mockery also has been one of his greatest defenses.”
\textsuperscript{54} Pérez Firmat’s chapter is aptly named “Riddles of the Sphincter.”
by bringing the ‘low’ in touch with the ‘high,’ by suggesting, in effect, that highness is nothing more than relocated lowness. (*Literature and Liminality* 73)

I read this final claim on the part of Pérez Firmat as less of an accurate reading of Mañach’s *Indagación* as an “auto-choteo,” and more precisely as the blatant act55 of *choteo* on behalf of Pérez Firmat himself. Mañach, for his part, retains a strict, arms-length relationality to the “baseness” of *choteo* across his treatise: mentioning *trompetilla* only twice, and, as Pérez Firmat has noted, averting any references to the vulgar content of *choteo*. By infecting Mañach’s treatise with the possibility of auto-*choteo* or self-sabotage, Pérez Firmat pulls down Mañach’s venerated work as not immune to the liminal subversiveness of the topic at hand. Pérez Firmat thus reasserts *choteo*’s dangerous and uninhibited ubiquity: its ability to attack by lowering down anyone, anywhere.

While Pérez Firmat focuses on *choteo* as a downward movement, I want to expand the understanding of *choteo* as a site of active negotiation, whose displacement can also be extended to an explosive multiple directionality. Early on in his treatise, Mañach describes *choteo* as a *relajo*, a “throwing it all to hell”56: “Un choteo, es decir, confusión, subversión, desorden; –en suma: ‘relajo’. Pues ¿qué significa esta palabra sino eso, el relajamiento de todos los vínculos y coyunturas que les dan a las cosas un aspecto articulado, una digna integridad?” (Mañach 67)57

55 “The *choteador* is anything but subtle; he has no talent for clever repartee or verbal fencing” (*Literature and Liminality* 68).

56 Pérez Firmat notes that, within the Cuban context, “relajo” is the “debased” word, loaded with vulgarity—as in the expression “tirarlo todo al relajo,” while *choteo* remains for Mañach the legitimate word (*Literature and Liminality* 71). Significantly, in other Latin American contexts, *relajo* might be considered as the sister term for *choteo*: for example, Mexican author Jorge Portilla’s *Phenomenology of Relajo*, wherein he describes *relajo* in similar terms to Mañach’s discussion on *choteo*.

57 “A *choteo*, that is to say, confusion, subversion, disorder—in sum: ‘release’/‘throwing it all to hell’. For, what is the meaning of this word if not the relaxing of all the conscriptions and rules that give things their formal articulation, their dignified integrity?”
The act of *choteo* performs its critique through its doubly low nature—a low content and a movement, not necessarily solely “downward” but, more expansively, outward: its dethroning of hierarchy through a displacement from the centre to the margins. In this way, the content and form of the act of *choteo* allow for its active negotiation, and, when applied as a representational strategy, the engaging of an *eventness* of identity.

**Choteo as Comedic Disidentification**

Muñoz’s reading of *choteo* as a comedic disidentificatory strategy enables an investigation of *choteo* as a performance strategy. As we have seen, Mañach derides the *choteador* as a simultaneously ignorant and dangerous individual, one whose low class position necessarily disqualifies his ability to be critical. Pérez Firmat, for his part, reads the *choteador* as a playful, liminal subversive, enacting a low content that doubly lowers its target. Muñoz, who also extends *choteo* beyond a solely male practice (*Disidentifications* 115), sees this act of mockery as activating the “third mode” that is disidentification, in its relationship to the target of its mockery, that is, “not rejecting and not embracing it without reservations” (*Disidentifications* 137). As noted in the introductory chapter, a disidentificatory strategy operates as “a mode of enacting self against the pressures of the dominant culture’s identity-denying protocols” (120). *Choteo*, as a particularly Cuban form of disidentification, in turn “helps a colonized or otherwise dispossessed subject enact a self through a critique of the normative culture” (136). Moreover, *choteo* is a kind of comic disidentification, activated through the “strategic and disarming use of humor” (119). As Muñoz elaborates:
Choteo is like camp\textsuperscript{58} in that it \textit{can be} a fierce send-up of dominant cultural formations. \textit{Choteo} […] can be a style of colonial mimicry that is simultaneously a form of resemblance \textit{and} menace […] possess[ing] a disidentificatory potential insofar as [it] mediate[s] between a space of identification with and total disavowal of the dominant culture’s normative identificatory nodes. (135-136)

Not only is Muñoz offering subversion as a far more ambiguous process of negotiating against and within dominant ideology, he also notes that, as a comedic disidentification, \textit{choteo} is able to subvert dominant culture while not openly confronting it. As Muñoz explains, this kind of disidentification “accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance itself of, scenarios of direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies” (119). In this way, Muñoz is the first to position the \textit{choteador(a)} as a vulnerable, intersectional minoritarian subject. As such, the stakes of the \textit{choteador(a)’s} enacting of \textit{choteo} are heightened: the subversive negotiation they enact is neither a haphazard accident, as Mañach would have us believe, nor a playful carnival, as Pérez Firmat posits, but a necessary survival strategy. Muñoz further elaborates that disidentification may serve as “a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label” (185). Here, the dominant ideology in its central position is found to be toxic, rather than \textit{choteo} itself as the toxic gas. Muñoz’s positioning of \textit{choteo} as a survival strategy thus offers a clear social imperative for the act itself. The \textit{choteador(a)} enacts the \textit{choteo}’s trajectory of negotiating from the margins across centre and periphery and in multiple directionalities, subverting in order to make room for herself and her “self enactment.”

\textsuperscript{58} Muñoz notes that \textit{choteo} is both aligned and at times out of sync with a camp reading (\textit{Disidentifications} 135).
The Question of Choteo’s Cuban-ness

Having traced the critical and subversive character of choteo, what of its Cuban-ness? More specifically, how has choteo been situated across ethno-cultural identifications, and how might these orient its potential application as an intersectional, disidentificatory performance strategy?

Unlike Mañach, who has taken great pains to disassociate choteo from Cuban “gracia” (positive temperament), even while noting that the Cubans are prone to it (Mañach 67), Muñoz celebrates choteo as exemplifying a “criticial Cubania”—a critical, Cuban practice—with its playful Cuban temperament of subverting hierarchies and of exulting in a creolized, hybrid subjectivity. It should be noted that Muñoz’s choice to apply choteo to Carmelita Tropicana’s work is invested in the term’s very “Cubanness,” as he is using this optic as a means to make up for other commentators having overlooked Carmelita’s specifically Latina identity, or having given it no more than a passing reference (Disidentifications 119). Yet it would be a grievous misreading to align Muñoz’s investment in the term’s Cubanness as driven by a conventional, nationalist identification. Rather, Muñoz formulates Cubanness as equivalent with creolized, hybrid subjectivities. While this move on the part of Muñoz opens up to multiple subjectivities, it also suffers from a diasporic romanticization of the Caribbean’s cultural hybridization as able to overcome monocultural dominance and prejudices. Nonetheless, Muñoz wants to celebrate the disidentificatory potential of choteo as rooted in what he takes up as the inherently creolized etymology of the term. Where both Mañach and Pérez Firmat conclude that the etymology of choteo is too ambiguous to confirm, Muñoz dismisses what he sees as their “pro-European”

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59 Mañach resolves that the etymology is too unclear, and that only a deeper query—which he will embark on—can serve to elucidate the meaning of choteo (Mañach 56): “la etimología […] no nos ayuda” (Mañach 55). Mañach also notes the possible African roots of choteo, but says that even “el ilustre Fernando Ortiz, autoridad en la provincial afrocubana de nuestra sociología” doesn’t seem too sure about this etymological root (55).
biases, and instead draws on Afro-Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz’s understanding of *choteo* as an etymologically creolized term, specifically noting its African etyma. For Muñoz, *choteo*, then, “is, by its very foundations, a creolization, a cross-cultural mix that often resembles a cross-cultural mess” (135). By positing the hybridized root of *choteo*, Muñoz frames it as a multiply (dis)identificatory practice. Moreover, by aligning it with an African root, Muñoz counters the colonial practice of linking Caribbean culture with its European lineage. In this way, by positing *choteo* as creolized, it is not only hybrid, but also specifically marginalized and potentially liminal.

Yet, rather than move forward with the implications afforded *choteo* through this somewhat romanticized positioning within creolization, I want to turn to the complex tensions around what constitutes the term’s creolization in order to deepen our understanding of its subversive potential. Returning to Pérez Firmat’s etymological analysis of *choteo* provides a more rigorous inquiry into the different lineages ascribed to *choteo*, and the political motivation behind such ascriptions. For while Muñoz dismisses Pérez Firmat as claiming that there might be more to *choteo*’s European roots (*Disidentifications* 135), I would counter that Pérez Firmat’s analysis does not side with a European etymology, but rather refuses to take up any particular political position with regards to the term’s roots. Pérez Firmat dedicates an entire chapter of *Literature and Liminality*, “The Devil’s Dictionary,” to exploring “the link between the Cuban vernacular and *choteo*” (93). Across his analysis, Pérez Firmat confirms Mañach’s earlier position that the etymology of *choteo* is unclear, yet, unlike Mañach, Pérez Firmat takes the time to assess the distinct political investments in locating the roots of *choteo* in either a European or

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60 Notwithstanding, I recognize that Muñoz might be reading Pérez Firmat’s reticence to “take sides” as a tacit acquiescence to the European colonial legacy, rather than an active resistance to it.
African lineage. Specifically, Pérez Firmat studies Fernando Ortiz’s contributions to the field of Afro-Cuban ethnography and linguistics, in Un catauro de cubanismos, a thesaurus of Cuban words and expressions (published in book form in 1923), as well as Ortiz’s Glosario de afronegrismos (published in 1924). Pérez Firmat highlights that Ortiz’s “Catauro is a profoundly political treatise, a declaration of cultural independence addressed […] to those peninsular [Spain] arbiters of linguistic propriety whose task is to ‘establish, purify, and polish’ the mother tongue” (95). Ortiz’s thesaurus is invested in rooting different Cuban words and expressions in a creolized context: taking place on the Cuban archipelago, and mixing indigenous, African, and European lineages. Ortiz’s stratagem for doing so consists in, as Pérez Firmat describes, “deracinating a word from peninsular soil by proposing a non-Spanish (usually Amerindian or African) etymology” (98). Ortiz’s work is reacting against its contemporary Spanish academy, exemplified in such works as Miguel de Toro y Gisbert’s 1920 “Reinvidicación de americanismos” (Vindication of Americanisms), wherein Cuban terms are aligned with their Spanish roots, to legitimate their usage (95). Pérez Firmat reads this etymological drive of connecting the New World back to the Old World as problematically imperialist (97) and “nourished by a centrist bias in favour of Spanish cultural hegemony” (98). Ortiz, in sharp contrast to this, engages in “decentralizing” the word and severing it from its peninsular connections (98), undertaking, “the excision of Cuban Spanish from its peninsular matrix […] an ‘avoidance’ of peninsular etymology” (100).

Specifically, Ortiz positions choteo as creolized by both providing it with Amerindian and African roots and by mocking its Spanish ones. In his Catauro, Ortiz mentions a possible derivation for choteo from achote, a red dye used by some Amerindians for body decorations. The logic being that, “[s]ince choteo embarrasses, makes its victims blush, it could be a metaphorical extension of the Indian word for the red dye,” wherein “[c]hotear would then
evolve from *achote* through the hypothetical middle step, *achotear*” (*Literature and Liminality* 98). Later, in his *Glosario de Afronegrismo*, Ortiz offers several African etyma for *choteo*:

“founded […] on the locumi or Yoruba term *soh* or *chot*, which means ‘to speak, to say,’ and, besides, ‘to throw,’ ‘to tear,’ ‘to cast out,’ all of which harmonizes with the respective sense of our *choteo*” (qtd./translated in *Literature and Liminality* 99). Just as Ortiz offers possible Amerindian and African roots for *choteo*, he closely follows these with mocking the presumed Spanish etymology of the term. In the *Glosario*, Ortiz follows up his African etyma for *choteo* by stating that: “The [Spanish] Academy supposes that the word comes from *choto* or ‘baby goat.’ This etymology is entirely unverisimilar. If the most learned Spanish corporation did not deserve our highest respects, we would say that this etymology was a joke [una etimología de *choteo*]” (qtd./translated in *Literature and Liminality* 99). For Pérez Firmat, Ortiz engages in an excessive act of etymologizing *choteo* less as a means to “uncover” its creolized roots, and more as a means to politically subvert the linguistic privileging of Spanish antecedents. In essence, in his definition of *choteo*, Ortiz is enacting a *choteo*—or mocking subversion—of the inherently imperial rhetoric of lexicography. By not only mocking the presumed Spanish root of the word, but also using the term *choteo* itself within the rhetoric of the discussion—referring to the Spanish etymology as “una etimología de *choteo*” (which Pérez Firmat translates as “this etymology was a joke”)—Pérez Firmat concludes that, “Ortiz himself is spitting on lexicography, turning an erudite disquisition on *choteo* into a *choteo*” (99). Pérez Firmat’s positing of Ortiz’s excessive etymologizing as *choteo* once again underscores the brashly playful character of *choteo*.

More saliently, Pérez Firmat finds fault with Ortiz’s attempt to excise the Spanish root of *choteo* in that it too, like its preceding imperial lexicographies, simplifies the creolized plurality of the term: “The irony of Ortiz’s avoidances […] is that Cuban Spanish is not Castilian only to
the extent that it is African or Amerindian. Ortiz can only replant roots, not remove them altogether” (101). The creolized root of *choteo* lies not only in a *locumí* or *Yoruba* source, as Muñoz wants to highlight, but in an even more multiple decentralization across Amerindian, African and Spanish “origins”—an ambiguity that cannot be resolved, and which lies at the source of the term. Pérez Firmat thus recognizes the unresolved tensions within creolization generally, and the term *choteo* specifically. Underscoring the tensions within the creolized term *choteo*, I want to draw out the act of *choteo* as one that is oriented in multiple directions, and at once bound to and resistant of its trajectory/ies.

Drawing upon this discussion, I wish to align *choteo* with a form of intersectional humour. Intersectional humour, as conceptualized by Latina scholar Alicia Arrizón, is the utilization of sardonic humour by intersectional subjects in performance, in order to subvert the imposed stereotypes of “intersectional forces” (“Martha Chaves” 20, 30). Arrizón posits intersectional humour as an empowering act, wherein “[s]ome comic women openly address the intersectionality of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, among many social categories,” in their performances (“Martha Chaves” 34). Notably, this intersectional humour emphasizes the multiple negotiation of identity of the intersectional subject, by “pinpoint[ing] multiple dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations” (“Martha Chaves” 25).

In the case of Carmelita Tropicana, as Muñoz describes:

Her queer and *cubana* body is unstable and fragmented; it registers on its surface the intermingling of the identity bits that make up her performances and persona […]

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61 Alicia Arrizón uses the concept of intersectional humour to analyze the stand-up performance work of Martha Chaves in her essay, “Martha Chaves’s ‘Staying Alive’ Narrative: Comedy, Migration, and Feminism.”
undermining notions of authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices. *(Disidentifications 139)*

Specifically, Carmelita Tropicana undermines notions of fixed identity by embodying a range of intersectional stereotypes, and forging a space to negotiate them through the subversive self-enactment of *choteo*.

**Can the Choteador(a) Speak? Or, rather, how does she?**

Having detailed various characteristics of the act of *choteo*, I will now turn to the mode of articulation that is *choteo*. How the *choteador(a)* speaks is described differently by each of the scholars on the subject, but these descriptions are significant for charting the terms of articulation and how they, in turn, will inform my application of *choteo* as an optic for reading Carmelita Tropicana’s performances. Moreover, while the *choteo* is described as a verbal and paraverbal act, I will conclude by extending it to include non-verbal, physical communication.

Unsurprisingly, Mañach has posited *choteo* as an immature bleat on the part of an ignorant non-agent. While Mañach and Pérez Firmat both agree that the precise etymology of *choteo* is unclear, Mañach nevertheless highlights the possible etymological root of *choteo* as the Spanish reference to a baby goat: “Andaluces hay que quisieran conectarlo con la voz ‘choto’, que es el nombre que se le da […] al cabritillo. ‘Chotar’—del latín *suctare*—significa en Andalucía mamar y, por extensión, conducirse con la falta de dignidad que exhiben los cabritillos en lactancia” (Mañach 55).62 While Mañach focuses the etymological connection on the generally immature behaviour of a baby goat, and Pérez Firmat reads Mañach as placing

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62 “There are Andalusians who want to connect the term to the word ‘choto,’ the name given to the baby goat. ‘Chotar’—from the Latin ‘suctare’, means to suck, and by extension, to conduct oneself with the lack of dignity exhibited by baby goats during lactation.”
“[c]hoteo as the dialect of the inarticulate” (Literature and Liminality 72), I want to reread Mañach’s dismissal of choteo not as inarticulate, but as an un-reined-in vernacular.

Firstly, I would like to draw out the connection between the verbal “bleep” of the baby goat and the verbal eruption that is choteo. While Mañach never refers to choteo as a verbal form, Pérez Firmat underscores the realm of its articulation as the “sonorous,” “exclusively verbal or paraverbal” (Literature and Liminality 63). Pérez Firmat introduces the potential African etymology of the term as highlighting the verbal: “In Fernando Ortiz’s opinion the word derives from an African root meaning “to speak,” an etymology corroborated by the related term, chota, Cuban for “snitch”. The choteador, like the chota, is one who speaks when he ought not to […] not seen but heard […] choteo materializes in a word” (63). In this way, the various etymologies can be said to capture the act as a sonic break of decorum. Pérez Firmat picks up on the abrupt nature of choteo when he describes it as a “slip of the tongue.” For Pérez Firmat, choteo takes place when the speaker “unwittingly” violates the decorum he is charged with maintaining—the act of authority becoming a counter-performative (60). And yet, conceiving of choteo as a “slip of the tongue” seems akin to dismissing the possibility of a conscious, critical intentionality on behalf of the choteador(a). While the choteo is an eruption, a “fart of the upper body,” it is also able to articulate a sharp critique. Therefore, I wish to reread Pérez Firmat as positing the choteador’s “unwitting” act as a potentially “tongue-in-cheek” slip of the tongue. That is to say, we can deduce from Pérez Firmat that the “happenstance” nature of the choteo is a description of its performative style, as one that is meant to seem improvisational and not a reflection of its subject’s lack of intentionality. The choteo is a carefully crafted attack, presented in the form—hidden under the guise of—a “slip of the tongue.”

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63 Pérez Firmat analyzes Fernando Ortiz’s Glosario de afronegrismos (1924).
While the preceding scholarship on *choteo* has restricted the performative nature of *choteo* to the verbal and paraverbal, Muñoz takes up *choteo* as a far more broad, Cuban, social “performance style” (*Disidentifications* 136), without restricting its articulation to a specific kind. Significantly, in Muñoz’s application, the act of *choteo* is extended across the verbal, paraverbal, and non-verbal. Moreover, as Muñoz proposes *choteo* as an optic “to decipher Carmelita’s performances and production” (135), *choteo* is extended to designate a performance style not only in social performance, but also within theatrical performance. Muñoz’s application of the *choteo* optic to a reading of Carmelita Tropicana takes account of the verbal text of her acts, the paraverbal “cracking voice and bogus accent” (138), as well as the non-verbal: the costumes and props she utilizes, and her physical gestures (136-137). Muñoz’s activation of *choteo* as a mode of performance that is also a strategy of disidentification further positions it across the representational politics of both a dominant and minoritarian subjectivity. In other words, *choteo* can be an articulation and embodiment of images that are constructed across dominant and minoritarian ideologies. Muñoz further extends the optic of *choteo* to very form of Carmelita Tropicana’s performances. For Muñoz, Carmelita is not only enacting a critical *choteo* of the various topics she takes up, but also the nature of the performance itself follows the *choteo*’s form. Muñoz writes: “*Choteo* revels in the chaotic, the ambivalent, the ‘untidy’ […] *choteo* elucidates the ambivalent, complicated, mixed-up, and jumbled nature of the hybrid self through this comical medley” (138). Muñoz can be said here to link the form of Carmelita’s performance to the *relajo* or “throwing it all to hell” of *choteo*: extending the space of Carmelita’s performance acts to echo the process of *choteo* enacted therein.

I wish to follow Muñoz in applying this broad understanding of *choteo* as a disidentificatory strategy that traverses verbal, paraverbal and non-verbal articulations and embodiments. I take up Muñoz’s application of *choteo* as an optic for reading Carmelita
Tropicana, with significant refinements. My application of *choteo* will include drawing out the doubly low nature of *choteo* as an embodied strategy whose context, content and trajectory are actively negotiating a multiply oriented body in performance, as she performs across and against intersecting positionalities. The body in performance of the *choteadora* speaks the *eventness* of identity: articulating a disidentificatory self-enactment that is in constant motion across dominant and minority identifications, and a site of identity negotiation.

**Meeting the Choteadora**

Shortly after reading Muñoz’s critical writing on Carmelita Tropicana, I met her in performance through a YouTube video aptly titled, “Carmelita Tropicana Sample.” An edited amalgamation of video clips of various performances ranging across live performance and film footage, from 1994 to 2009, this sampler provided me with my first taste of Carmelita’s performance. More specifically, it showcased Carmelita’s bite and revealed her to be a *choteador(a)* in three very distinct performances of “self enactment,” namely: the persona of Carmelita Tropicana, her drag persona Pingalito Betancourt, and her performance as the (in)animate object of a sub-prime house.

The sampler begins with a two-minute excerpt of Carmelita Tropicana performing at Joe’s Pub in 2009. The iconic Cuban song, “Ay, Máma Inés,” plays loudly across the empty stage, and shortly thereafter Carmelita Tropicana enters dancing and singing along, to the chorus line “*todos los negros tomamos café.*” Carmelita is wearing a deep red headdress, with sparkles and feathers; a sequin beaded bodysuit leotard with a dark purple feather boa sewn onto its

64 Joe’s Pub at The Public, New York City.
65 Literally, “all of us blacks drink coffee.”
midriff, leaving both of its ends to hang over and onto Carmelita’s legs; and white go-go boots. A thick Cuban accent interrupts the music, asking jovially that the music be taken down: “a little lower, a little lower, that’s how I like it,” while generously tossing her sexual innuendo into the crowd. As soon as the music fades out, Carmelita changes her rhythm, delivering a fast-paced introduction, seemingly in one breath: “Hallo People, how you doing? Alrright. I don’t know if you recognize my face but I am Carrrmelita Tropicana, Miss Lower Eas’ side, beauty queen, famous nightclub entertainer and performance artist”. The only moments of slower rhythm occur in the exaggerated elongation of the Spanish rolled “r.” As promised by her name, Carmelita Tropicana has entered the stage and represented herself as an echo of the iconic dancers of Havana’s famous Tropicana club: comfortably dancing to “Ay, Máma Inés” in a showgirl-like costume, “oozing” Latina sexuality through an open flirtation with the audience. And yet, even in the first few moments proceeding her entrance, Carmelita is also visually dissonant from the representation of herself as an iconic Tropicana showgirl: the costume’s go-go boots, as well as the short legs and corpulent body of the fifty-eight-year-old performer, frame the representation of the Tropicana dancer as a cabaret send-up. This send-up is reconfirmed by the performer’s claims to being a “beauty queen” and “famous nightclub entertainer.” Immediately, Carmelita has invited the audience into a playfully subversive space, where the top-tier showgirl is inflected with kitsch. The short clip concludes with Carmelita Tropicana introducing the upcoming cabaret show—which she appears to be MCing—as a cabaret that is “so Dada it’s going to be mama.”

When the persona of Carmelita greets her Joe’s Pub audience, her choteo is in full swing. She is a menacing copy of the U.S. go-go dancer, constructed from the dominant ideal of

66 “Carmelita Tropicana Sample” 0:49-1:05min.
feminine beauty (i.e. white, blond, long-legged, happy to be the object of male desire). Here, this go-go dance is inf(l)ected with a middle-aged, non-white body, thick false Cuban accent and a queer sensibility. In her medley of imagery—a kind of “cubana lesbian camp” (Disidentifications 120)—Carmelita echoes the disordered, relajo form of choteo—while also specifically “bringing down” each icon in a non-verbal choteo of its conventional position. But it is in her verbal mastery that Carmelita delivers her most articulate choteo. While seemingly entering the stage as the sexualized object of her audience’s desire, dominated traditionally by the heterosexual male gaze, Carmelita quickly subverts the dynamic: she is the one who asks for the music to be “lowered” until it meets her sexual desire, “a little lower, a little lower, that’s how I like it.” A middle-aged, U.S. Latina, queer woman voices desire: enacting choteo’s “dragging down” and re-orienting of desire from centre to the margins. Notably, this displacement is marked by mature content. Pérez Firmat has positioned the content of choteo as immature and non-sexual, in its distinction from a “dirty” joke (Literature and Liminality 66). In Carmelita’s choteo, she introduces sexual innuendo, and yet, her irreverence does not descend to a “dirty” sexual vulgarity. Carmelita’s choteo dares to push towards the sexual, and pushes past the limits of even Pérez Firmat’s sense of choteo’s content, expanding it to “fit” her intersectional body. She introduces sexual desire to decentre prudishness, and to re-position it as elevated content. The disinflation of hierarchy continues, as she delivers a short but sharp “fart of the upper body” with the line “so Dada it’s going to be mama.” In one toxic blow, Carmelita subverts the male dominated art world, and positions it, rather than herself, on the margins—if only for a second.
Immediately on Carmelita’s go-go heels comes a second clip—a performance by Troyano’s drag character, Pingalito (literally, little penis) Betancourt, at New York City’s Museo del Barrio, also in 2009. Pingalito is wearing a brown fedora hat, black glasses with a dense clump of masking tape wrapped around their bridge, and a white, plastic cleaning jumpsuit covered in black marker letters and drawings. Pingalito is giving a lecture to an audience seated immediately in front of him. He stands in front of a blank projector screen and a small table upon which are displayed conference presentation supplies: two plastic water bottles, a poster, some markers. There is also an upright mic stand to his right. Pingalito speaks into a cordless mic, which he holds in his left hand, as he uses an unlit cigar in his right hand to punctuate his sentences. His lecture is about art, specifically, constructivist art. With a thick Cuban accent, equal to Carmelita’s in its exaggeration of the rolling “r,” but distinctly less coquettish, and more staccato, Pingalito explains Constructivism to his audience, using the words and drawings on his jumpsuit as visual aids. Across his “pectoral chest” he has written “abstract,” down his left arm sleeve “architectonic,” and so on. Pingalito’s authority as a lecturer on art is playfully constructed across his self-assured delivery, juxtaposed against his non-academic, non-“high-class” demeanour. Pingalito soon reveals his “outsider” position to the world of fine art, as he defines artistic abstraction as follows: “What does he mean when he says ‘abstract’? It means that when you go to a museum and you look at a painting, and you don’t know what the heck it is, that is abstract.” This “outsider” position is one of jovial middle class “brutishness,” a stereotyped dismissal of modern art on the basis of its lack of obvious value. Yet just as Pingalito has positioned himself as potentially beyond the authority to critically decipher modern art, he

67 New York City’s Museo del Barrio, which dubs itself “New York’s leading Latino cultural institution,” is a space dedicated to present and preserve the art and culture of Caribbean and Latin Americans (Museo del Barrio “About”).
68 “Carmelita Tropicana Sample” 1:11 - 3:45min.
continues to lecture on the constructivist painting. He gestures to the geometric shapes painted on the front of his jumpsuit: the two circles and rectangle on his chest are a painting titled “naked lady lying down, oh, no please, sorry, sorry, it’s not naked because we are in a museum. In a museum you say, nude lady lying down.” Pingalito’s self-correction simultaneously reveals his knowledge of “the nude” and mocks this term as high-class jargon. He continues his artistic assessment by turning to reveal the back of his jumpsuit, covered in several circles and rectangles. He elucidates: “the lady is running down to this geometric shape,” and pointing to a triangle with M15 written in it, located on his behind, he continues, “can you see, the shape right here is an M15; the lady is running for the M15 bus.” Pingalito concludes: “You get the picture.” Pingalito’s lecture on constructivist art has “infected” the art work with the quotidian: the abstract geometry of constructivism has been finally explained by being “taken down”—down to a triangle drawn on the performer’s behind, and signifying the reality of running to catch the M15 bus. This quotidian is firmly rooted in a working or middle class reality. The clip of Pingalito concludes with a crude “reassertion” of his authorial position: Pingalito, Cuban macho man, points the audience’s attention to “5th Avenue” written on the inside of his left leg. As he does so, he rubs this area up and down, suggestively: “You can see 5th Avenue. Maybe some girl wants to go to 5th Avenue with me.” His hand then goes up, in a dismissive palm facing out gesture, while his eyes remain confidently lascivious: “It’s okay,” suggesting that his sexuality is at once untameable and completely legitimate.

Carmelita Tropicana’s above enactment as Pingalito Betancourt is a choteo of an art historian’s museum lecture. In place of a white, upper class, male art scholar dressed in a suit and tie, Pingalito appears: a non-white, middle class (wo)man (in drag). Pingalito is wearing the cleaning jumpsuit attributed to janitorial staff, and yet, he is giving the lecture. The verbal choteo echoes the subversion of the iconography: with the paraverbal fake, thick, Cuban accent,
Pingalito proceeds to elucidate his audience through literally lowering them down his jumpsuit. The explanation of constructivism is taken down to his buttocks—that favourite *culo* of the vernacular, according to Pérez Firmat—where a triangle signals the M15 bus, a further reduction from high art’s economic luxury to the pragmatic reality of the working and middle class’s transportation. Most “low” is Pingalito’s move towards his inner left leg, wherein he rubs this area up and down, suggestively, and invites “some girl” to join him down “5th Avenue.” Here, not only is the lowering to the crotch a debasement of a high-art lecture, but moreover, by being a drag performance by a queer, feminist artist, this action is a loud “trumpet” in the face of patriarchal postulations of misogyny. Here again, it might seem that Pingalito’s *choteo* moves past Pérez Firmat’s circumscription of its content, and into the overtly sexually vulgar, “dirty” joke. Nevertheless, I propose that Pingalito’s *choteo* takes sexual vulgarity as the “butt” of its joke, and achieves a lowering of the speaker of such vulgarity, which decentres and realigns the “dirty” with the ridiculous. Particularly, within its exaggerated performance and female drag performance of such a Latino archetype, the *choteo* embodiment of this final quip about “5th Avenue” reveals itself to be an unsparing mockery of the blatant misogyny of macho posturing. By enacting aggressively inappropriate—but normatively ubiquitous—impositions of male sexuality through female drag, this *choteo* calls attention to them. In Pingalito’s anatomical gesturing to his phallus, Tropicana as Pingalito must transpose what might otherwise be Pingalito’s indicating of his “junk” to the rubbing of “his” (her) thigh, in order to create the illusion of phallic erection. The (imaginary) embodiment of the phallus thus at once calls up this site of male, patriarchal sexism, and also undermines it by signaling its lack (i.e. its physical absence). Moreover, a second type of masculinity being performed and subverted is a particularly Latino macho. Here, because the Latino macho is at once central in his masculinity but marginal in his ethnicity, he can be read as ridiculed for his attempt to identify his marginal
“member” with the central, most expensive avenue of New York City. The choteo of the middle class, Latino macho posits him in an authorial position of which he is usually denied, while also unsparingly critiquing his desire for that centrality.

In the third salient clip from “Carmelita Tropicana Sample,” Carmelita appears as a “subprime house.”69 Performed as part of the cabaret performance evening in 2009 at Joe’s Pub, the clip begins with a large cardboard box on stage, covered with paper cut-outs, among them a rainbow flag, a cartoon bomb, and a cartoon mouse. On the downstage side of the box, about three-quarters of the way up and dead centre, a lit light bulb sticks out of the facade. Carmelita’s accented voice is heard in an uncharacteristically slow pace, dragging its pauses:

But this is not caquita [Spanish for ‘small poop’]. Don’t be confused. Not caquita. It’s a light. A shining light to show you the way. This is my house. Anybody want to buy? A subprime house? Cheap mortgage. Don’t you want my house? I think I’m going to give you caquita. (The light bulb is pulled back into the box, a small hole reveals itself in the façade) Now my caquita may be a caquita you never tried before, (Carmelita’s hand comes out of box hole) but don’t be afraid. Here you, come have my caquita (throws something out towards audience). I’m going to give you caquita, even if you don’t want caquita. Some of it is melted caquita. (hand comes out again, throws something towards audience again) Why is that? Why does caquita melt? (throws again) I don’t understand. Ooh, it’s hard (box starts to move slowly across stage) La jicotea por precaución lleva su...

69 7:37-9:17min.
“casa a cuestas.” Can you translate that? How about this? *La fea tiene que apagar la luz para decir que es bonita.*

This performance as “house” at the tail end of a two-year, subprime mortgage housing crisis in the United States crudely imagines the state of crisis. A playful verbal turn from the naiveté of *casita*, or little house, as Carmelita drags herself as box across the stage, she first explains, not “this is not casita” but rather “this is not caquita” (this is not shit). The subprime house has been visually reduced, or lowered down, to a cardboard box, covered in paper cut-outs. The *choteo* subverts the rhetoric of the housing market before its collapse: the false promises of cheap mortgages become embodied in crude flings of what is deemed to be “caquita.” The vulgarity of the gesture simultaneously pulls downward on both theatrical “propriety,” and the false-promise of class mobility, enacting an unapologetic *choteo*. The final verbal breaks, where the box turns to speaking in Spanish for some “words of wisdom,” extend the *choteo* past a solely U.S. context, to a critique of the inefficiency of any received wisdom in the face of overwhelming economic crisis. Specifically, the Cuban idioms are spoken as though they might contain some exotic, enlightened perspective on the situation, but they fail to do so.

Across the three distinct embodiments in this short sampler, the representational strategy of *choteo* is being activated to critically disidentify across and against a range of intersectional perspectives. The *choteadora* irreverently redirects mainstream narratives of gender, sexuality, race, and class into a multidirectional upsetting of their assumptions by representing them in a lowering down and decentring of their context and content. The forthcoming chapters investigate how Carmelita activates *choteo*’s queer feminist irreverent humour across two key full-length

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70 “The turtle carries her house on her back as a precaution.” Notably, the term Jicotea refers to the Caribbean tortoise, Jicotea Cubana.

71 “The ugly one has to turn off the light to say she is pretty.”
3. A *Choteo of Site: Dis-placing Carmelita and Pingalito across Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution*

**A Choteo of Positionality**

Having outlined the early context and influences on the performance persona of Carmelita Tropicana (Chapter 1), as well as the potential for the representational strategy of *choteo* to displace and centre (Chapter 2), this chapter will analyze the activation of an intersectional *choteo* across Troyano’s first full-length play: *Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution* (henceforth *Memorias*). The play, co-written by Troyano and Parnes, premiered at the WOW Café’s first storefront space on June 7, 1985, and was originally billed as “Carmelita Tropicana’s Ciao WOW,” as it marked Carmelita’s last performance in this space. The piece was further developed during a three-week run at WOW’s new space in the fall of 1986, and thereafter, “it opened to excellent reviews and a four-week run at P.S. 122 in the fall of 1987” (*Lady Dicks* 22). As Troyano describes, with *Memorias*, “there were many firsts:”

> It was my first play and it was co-written with Uzi Parnes. It was the first time Carmelita Tropicana, the alter ego I created at WOW, appeared along with Pingalito Betancourt, my other [female-to-] male drag persona. (*First Ten Years* 148)

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72 Notably, all of Troyano’s early theatre work as the persona of Carmelita Tropicana is credited as written by Carmelita Tropicana. I, however, am circumscribing my labeling of the Carmelita Tropicana to the body in performance of this persona, as the artist Alina Troyano has created a full oeuvre of works to date, amongst them her early works as Carmelita Tropicana.

73 *Memorias* marks the beginning of Troyano’s long-term collaboration with Uzi Parnes, who co-wrote, directed, and designed, while Troyano wrote, acted, and produced (*First Ten Years* 148). Moreover, Troyano notes that Parnes’s involvement with this show, as well as his future collaborations with Troyano at WOW, “were an anomaly for WOW since Uzi was allowed to be involved in a way that no male had before or since. He was regarded as my family, since he was living with Ela, my sister, and ran Club Chandelier with her, where the WOW girls performed regularly” (*First Ten Years* 148).
The work follows Carmelita Tropicana, and her drag character Pingalito Betancourt, as they are (re)(trans)planted across key sites of the Cuban-American imaginary: from Havana’s Tropicana nightclub to the phantasmagoric passage between Cuba and “America.” Specifically, *Memorias*’s intersectional *choteo* irreverently displaces both the site itself and the persons positioned within it. The *choteo* destabilizes the foundations of diasporic home, class station, and identity position, by lowering down the context and content of these sites to reveal them as spaces of negotiation.

**Carmelita at the Tropicana**

The breadth of *Memorias*’s *choteo* of positionality begins in its key referent: the expansion of the Carmelita Tropicana persona across an entire theatrical space. *Memorias*’s first iteration at the WOW storefront in 1985, entitled “Carmelita Tropicana’s Ciao WOW,” presented its original audience with a long-form exploration of the persona they had become familiarized with, anchoring the logic of the world of the play around Carmelita’s reality. Carmelita’s ongoing intersectional negotiation becomes both the driving force of the long-form narrative, and the terms of its mise-en-scène. In the extension of Carmelita Tropicana’s persona out and across the dramatic set, Carmelita does not become camouflaged. Rather, the *choteo* that her body in

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74 A second referent across and against which *Memorias* situates itself is the film from which it took its title. According to Chon Noriega, the title of Troyano and Parnes’s play references and “reworks” a “nationalist allegory,” namely Thomas Gutiérrez Alea’s film *Memories of Underdevelopment*, from 1968: “the first major feature film produced in postrevolutionary Cuba. The film concerns itself with the role of the nonrevolutionary, postbourgeois artist amid the Cuban missile crisis—and it does so by juxtaposing the main character’s sex life and psychological observations with an apocalyptic moment as the new state found itself at the centre of the cold war. […] Troyano replaces the earnest males of the original and inserts none other than Carmelita Tropicana […] But what secures the displacement is […] Pingalito Betancourt […] he is not that different from the character in Gutiérrez Alea’s film. Both provide lectures, criticism, and lyricism in equal measure; and in both the imbrication of sexual and political discourses complicate the parody.” (*I, Carmelita xi*)
performance activates becomes a multidirectional, explosive relajo, which irreverently subverts everything in its path.

*Memorias*’s opening scene reveals this symbiosis of body and space. The Prologue is set in New York City, 1987—the contemporaneous spatio-temporality of the artist herself, at the time of the play’s first performance. The opening stage directions read: “Carmelita Tropicana, a modern-day Carmen Miranda, appears in front of a slide projection of a postcard of Cuba with a rose in her hand, singing ‘Memories’” (*Memorias* 391). In this first juxtaposition, the Carmelita persona is presented as simultaneously inhabiting various spaces, both in her own psyche and as a body in space. Specifically, Carmelita is occupying the 1987 set, along with its extension into the “real”—the larger East Village club scene of which she is a contemporary. This is layered with her coterminous positioning in the diasporic “elsewhere,” that is, in the Cuban postcard of which her Tropicana-ness is a souvenir—in the literal sense of the term’s etymology “to come up from below”—a kind of return, of a subject otherwise positioned. Carmelita’s intersectional negotiation across these three places is underscored by the choteo of her multiple positionality. Carmelita’s body in performance is “firmly” located within the contemporaneous performance space of NYC’s East Village, wherein she is a lesbian/queer artist. And yet, her body is also similarly “rooted” within its Cuban orientation. Meshing these together, Carmelita becomes a site for a kitsch, lesbian send-up of Carmen Miranda: the idyllic “originary” Cuban home negotiated across the space of queer entertainment by an off-tune and over-emphatic rendition of ‘Memories’ in English with a thick Cuban accent. The intersectional negotiation of the body of

75 Both C. Carr and Jill Dolan have emphasized Carmelita’s “singing voice” in reviewing her work: “Dancing in her flowered sarong, singing an off-key ‘You Light Up My Life’ (her signature song), preparing her infamous chicken sushi, or interviewing ‘famous’ guests, Carmelita is a Latin bombshell of great self-possession” (Carr 86); “Carmelita, in Mike Douglas fashion, warmly informs the crowd that she will begin with a medley of her greatest hits, and relates that she's recently won an award for her singing. In an unselfconsciously off-key voice, she sings
Carmelita is thus extended across the set, which likewise weaves together Cuban-American and queer narratives.

Act I zooms out of the close-up on Carmelita to reveal her eponymous space: the Tropicana club. The Carmelita Tropicana persona has hereto operated as an ambulant *choteo* of the Tropicana nightclub. Now, through *Memorias*, Carmelita extends her *choteo* by constructing her reinvisioned Tropicana space and inhabiting it along with her fellow characters. The Tropicana club is a famous, historical Havana nightclub, renowned for its chorus girls, and offering entertainment to Cuban upper and upper middle class patrons, as well as foreign tourists. Significantly, it is a space that is jointly constructed both in Cuban-American diasporic memory, and in North American popular culture. As Lillian Manzor notes in her essay “The Two Tropicanas,”

> the use of the name Tropicana is intimately tied to Anglo cultural representations and constructions of Latin(o)ness, especially within popular culture. I write Latin(o)ness because in the United States, the specificity of Latin American ‘ethnicity’ is usually fused with Latino under the name Hispanic […] willingly in the case of Tropicana […] she participate[s] in a discourse that began at least in the 1930s with Hollywood’s productions of Good Neighbor Policy films. In performance, we could trace it back to Broadway’s 1939 musical productions of *The Streets of Paris* with Carmen Miranda and *Too Many Girls* with Desi Arnaz. Some characteristics of this construction are familiar: tropical rhythms, exotic clothing, colorful locales, and an exuberant body language. (371)

As Troyano recalls:

> old standards like ‘Que Sera Sera’ and ‘You Light Up My Life,’ pronouncing the lyrics with the Cuban accent she maintains throughout the performance” (Dolan, “Carmelita Tropicana Chats” 30).
Besides the obvious reason of the name I had chosen, there were other reasons for setting Act I of Memories at the Tropicana nightclub in Havana 1957. […]

To create a cabaret environment he [Parnes] set up tables and chairs for the audience. For me the Tropicana conjured up bedtime stories of the greatest nightclub and memories of my relatives, exiles whom romantically yearned for a pre-revolutionary Cuba. (I, Carmelita xix)

The Tropicana here becomes an emblem for the exiled upper middle class Cuban, who left pre-revolution and who longs for that which has been lost, and a potential object of desire for the Cuban-American member of the 1.5 generation who constructs its worth through both inherited, exilic memory and the exoticising gaze of Anglo cultural production. Yet, significantly, Troyano at once recreates the Tropicana club of the 1950s, romanticized in her parents’ reminiscences, and reinhabits this nostalgic space, introducing multiple counter-narratives to subvert its iconography. As the artist explains:

Memories have to do with your own memories. Once you remember, you are no longer remembering the act itself, but you are remembering the memory of the memory. And the more you go back, it's the memory of the memory of the memories. So you have generations, like a Xerox, and they start getting faded, faded. But what you have is sort of like my parents' memory of this wonderful romantic Tropicana, of what Cuba was like in the fifties, which we all know wasn't so beautiful. And I can take it and don't have to be romantic with it because it was not my time. So I can take liberties with it and I can break it every which way. If you were living in the period you can be very romantic and very precious with that kind of material. But that's not what we do; we take it to town. That way we give it more of a clear vision perhaps, because we put the good and the bad taste in, and sometimes bad taste is actually good. (“Memories and More Memories”)

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Troyano is thus questioning the romantic notions of this cultural site; layering the exilic memory with transgressive counter-narratives—what she labels “bad taste.” This subversion is captured cleverly in Act I, in the interaction between tourists Brendah and Brendaa, when they first arrive at the entrance to the Tropicana nightclub:

Brendah: Are you sure this is the Tropicana? It doesn’t look like much of a hot spot.

Brendaa: The sign outside said “Troiana.” The “p” and “c” were missing. (Memorias 401)

The Tropicana is the extended playground of “Troyano,” the artist, who has reimagined the space, leaving political correctness aside. As Troyano elaborates elsewhere:

The play is a mix of Carmelita’s memories as she re-enacts her history and my own exilic memories and those of my relatives, especially my father, who was a comandante in Castro’s revolution. His revolutionary stories, his defection, and his escape by boat fed the play. The song and dance numbers ‘Yes, We Have No Bananas,’ ‘Siboney,’ and ‘Besame Mucho’ are fun, but they also aim to critique Cuba’s colonial, ethnic, and gender politics. (First Ten Years 149)

The Tropicana will thus become a space to negotiate across and against received iconography, and send-up and critique the expected, and “acceptable,” forms of its representation, and by extension, of the “tropicalized” bodies within it.

Memorias’s choteo of the Tropicana club is concretized through a Tropicana set that represents two spatio-temporal variations: first, in Act I, the Havana “original,” and later, in Act III, as the Tropicana A-Go-Go club in New York City, in the year 1967. Notably, the Havana “original” is framed within the broader setting of the first act sets within the context of Havana, in the year 1957. Setting the first act in 1957 positions the action during the ongoing struggle for the communist revolution—begun in July 1953—but before Fidel Castro’s coming to power in 1959. In this way, Havana in 1957 is the echo of the “originary” spatio-temporality of exilic
memory: pre-revolutionary Havana at the final moment the Cuban is “at home” before exile. This romanticised pre-exilic moment in diasporic memory is swiftly subverted through the choteo’s irreverent dragging down of its stereotypic iconography. In a clever send-up of the audience’s expectations for locating Havana, the first act includes a parody of a tour of Havana. The character of Machito—whose name translates literally to “little ‘macho’ man,” and in the work plays the role of Carmelita Tropicana’s brother—gives a tour of Havana to Brendah and Brendaa, two U.S. tourists. The tour is at once exhaustive and incredibly rushed through, as Machito is hoping to at once meet the tourists’ expectations of Havana sightseeing and to speedily return to his work in plotting a revolution. The scene is staged with Machito, Brendah, and Brendaa running in place in front of a quickly moving slideshow of Havana’s top sights—an iconic line-up of projected images of old Havana (Memorias 394). Havana as a backdrop for Act I is thus comically revealed as an exotic projection of outsider—in this case, specifically U.S.—expectations.76

The Tropicana club set in Act I, scene iv, revels in this same stereotype-turned-choteo of what the club might look like. The stage directions describe the Tropicana nightclub set as follows: “A red lamé curtain with green ruffles hides the performance area, and two tables in front of the platform area are set up to give the appearance of a cabaret” (Memorias 396-397). As Troyano recalls, using materials provided them by Material for the Arts, “Uzi [Parnes] was imaginative with the flaming red-orange lame and neon lime-green polyester, using both for the curtains and the costumes” (I, Carmelita xix). Additional set details include two fake palm trees,

76 The U.S. tourist and her expectations are heavily parodied in Memorias. Davy provides a wonderful reading of these two characters of Brendah and Brendaa: “two white, similarly dressed ‘American girls’ […] They are essentially interchangeable in their indistinguishableness and suggest, by extension, that all white women and white tourists are as well. […] White womanhood is the warehouse where vacuous consumerism and white supremacy are stored […] Brendah and Brendaa are multilayered caricatures that have no emotional depth but are packed with a plethora of meanings” (Lady Dicks 156).
which frame the central performance area, as well as side-curtains of black tinsel. The upper-middle class space of the historical Tropicana nightclub is thus reframed, and lowered down, to the “bad taste” and limited material conditions of the East Village clubs.

In Act III, essentially the same set represents a New York City variant of the Havana hotspot: Tropicana A-Go-Go, in 1967. The Tropicana A-Go-Go, as the stage directions illuminate, has “the same set of the Tropicana nightclub in Havana with the exception of a cage in the back with a dance-machine-a-go-go dancer” (Memorias 416). As Machito explains: “welcome to the Tropicana-A-GO-GO. Is exact replica of Havana nightclub. Carmelita spared no expense.” The curtains, the palm trees” (Memorias 418). While the positioning of this second site, this time on U.S. soil, reinforces the enduring memory of Havana in exilic memory, it does so while simultaneously undermining its authenticity. The choteo of this space has moved it down from a high-class site of Cuban national pride to a cheap, exotified U.S. replica. Moreover, by doubling the Tropicana club of Act I to serve also as the Tropicana-A-GO-GO of Act III, Memorias undermines the “authenticity” of this key Havana site. The choteo of the Tropicana club reframes the space as a mere pneumatic reiteration of Old Havana. Moreover, the irreverence of choteo revels in the newly displaced site: celebrating the invasion of counternarratives into this formerly “sacred” icon.

The subversive transposition of the Tropicana club is underscored further by Memorias’s performance context: the mid-1980s East Village club scene. The material performance conditions at both WOW and PS122—recycled materials, relatively small performance spaces,
and the absence of high-end stage values—take part in reframing the Tropicana club as an irreverent *choteo* of the “original.” In the piece’s first iteration at the WOW Café’s storefront space, the lavish hall of the Tropicana club was dragged down and subverted through the restrictions of the space itself. As Dolan recalls, “330 E 11th was a tiny, narrow space with a jerry-rigged stage and an odd collection of places for the ragtag audience to sit” (*First Ten Years* viii). Alisa Solomon details the staging conditions as follows:

> The stage, like the entire space, is barely 10 feet wide. With its floor of octagonal ceramic tiles, patterned along one side, the rooms [sic] seems like it might have been someone’s vestibule or, even earlier, half of a dining room. Now, impossibly narrow and maybe 20 feet long, it hardly contains a dozen or so rows of folding chairs. The homemade lightboard of household dimmers sits in the center of the room, controlling a handful of small, outdoor-type reflector lamps—all the electrical system can accommodate. The backstage area is a ten feet by ten feet jumble of old props, bits of costumes, and chunks of sets. (Solomon 96)

*Memorias*'s full premier at the WOW’s second location, 59-61 East 4th street, in the fall of 1986, likewise situated its dramatic set within the frame of both the urban blight of the East Village in the 1980s, and only marginally improved production values.

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79 The WOW storefront space, in general, consisted of “a long narrow space with no formal stage. About halfway through, a kitchen divides the front area from a rear dressing room/sitting area. The club is regularly repainted white, and pink folding chairs line the space in groups of five” (Parnes 11).

80 Dolan recalls: “I followed them to their new space on E. 4th Street, climbing the stairs with anticipation because I never knew what I’d find up those three flights, as I passed shuttered warehouse spaces and hoped my path wouldn’t be crossed by rodents” (*First Ten Years* viii).

81 Both WOW spaces also lack(ed) an audience foyer. As Hughes describes: “There’s no foyer, no space to receive you. […] You’re inside or you’re outside, there’s no liminal space” (*First Ten Years* 3).
At 1,250 square feet the space was still small, but it was possible to squeeze in as many as sixty spectators on the floor and a few risers at one end, with a small dressing room at the other end. The stage was about 21 feet square in between. As many as 30 lighting instruments could be hung from the 10-foot ceiling. By WOW standards it was Radio City. 

(Lady Dicks 22)

Notably, even when Memorias moved to its performance run at PS122, the conditions were not much better than at WOW. As Hughes’ notes, at the WOW’s second space, 

There’s a dressing room, and off the dressing room a curtain hides a toilet. No sink, just a toilet, with a tiny window on one side and a list on the opposite wall. How proud we were that we had a tiny place to pee for the performers; it was a cool thing we had and PS122 didn’t. PS122 was the bigger gig, the place to get reviewed, the part of the iceberg that was visible above water, but it had no place for the performers to pee. (First Ten Years 5)

Hughes’s comparison of the material conditions of these spaces across the bare bones factor of a backstage toilet brings home the extremely limited performance conditions of these spaces. The dramatic space of Memorias revels in the performance space’s restrictions: a choteo infusion of the “hit-and-run” theatre aesthetic82 woven through the representation of the glamorous Tropicana club.

The choteo’s displacement of the iconic Tropicana club takes aim not only at the club’s station, but also subverts the compulsory heterosexuality associated with it. In Memorias, feminist and lesbian/queer politics are activated through the transposition of the Tropicana club into a world that is infused—both directly within the dramatic text, and indirectly through its

82 “Joni Wong, a lighting designer who was one of the first to infuse production values into WOW’s aesthetic, has described the years in the storefront as ‘‘hit-and-run theatre.’ Put it up fast; then it’s gone” (Lady Dicks 93).
performance context—by the WOW Café’s lesbian sensibility. As previously noted, in the 1980s and 90s, WOW Café operated as an *a priori* lesbian space. Not only is *Memorias* being performed within this counterpublic, and by a group of lesbian performers, the dramatic world of *Memorias* is also inhabited by lesbians. The protagonist Carmelita Tropicana is openly lesbian, and is also the manager of the Tropicana Club, both first in Havana in 1955, and later in New York of 1967. Tropicana’s homosexuality does not exclude her from having power in what might otherwise be thought of as a traditionally heterosexual, as well as patriarchal, space. The Tropicana club becomes a site that houses these non-PC, irreverent, transgressive bodies.

**Tropicalized Bodies**

The historical Tropicana club is iconic both as a physical site and for the “Tropicana girls” within it. The iconography of the Tropicana is thus also inscribed upon the Cuban bodies performing within. As Manzor notes, “[t]he name Tropicana is literally the name of a Cuban nightclub famous, before 1959, for its beautiful chorus girls. Even today, however, the Tropicana show, whether in Havana or in world tours, exhibits Cuban music and dances, men and women, as specimens of a ‘national’ culture commodified for foreign consumption and taste” (“Two Tropicanas” 372). Likewise, in *Memorias*, the *choteo* of the “Tropical” space extends also to the bodies within it: particularly by emphasizing the collapse between space and individual body. The *choteo* of the Carmelita Tropicana persona-turned-set goes on to shift the ground for every one of the tropicalized bodies within in.

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83 For more on the “tropicalization” of Latino/a subjecthood, see Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman’s edited volume *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad.*
The Tropicana club is managed by Carmelita Tropicana and filled by the Tropicanettes—the Tropicana club’s cabaret performers. The appearance of the first Tropicanette, or cabaret performer, Rosita, includes the following directions: “[s]tanding in front of the curtain, pointing out that her dress is made from the same fabric as the curtain” (Memorias 397). Taking the moment to underscore the bleeding over of set and costume, Rosita’s gesture positions the Tropicanettes as bodies whose “authenticity” and value is directly derived from the club space itself. The performance of the Tropicanettes enacts a choteo of the expected choreography of these bodies in performance. Memorias’ press release describes the piece as a “multi-media, comedy extravaganza with music and a cast of ten lovely beauties, in English, that presents the personal memoirs of the daughter of the Cuban revolution and star of stage and screen, Carmelita Tropicana” (Lady Dicks 154). These “lovely beauties” perform the idea of Tropicana club entertainment with the same subversion that Carmelita’s persona is known for. Drawing from the WOW Café’s unabashed celebration of lesbian sexual desire, the lesbian performers representing these tropicalized bodies to a lesbian public layer the expected male-gaze objectification of these female bodies with a performance that addresses homosexual desire, and opens up to the potential of female sexual agency. The tropicalization of these performing beauties is similarly decentralized by representing the Tropicanettes performing a number entitled “Yes, We Have No Bananas,” in a showgirl style, pronouncing the “yes” as “jes” (Memorias 397), in a purportedly thick Cuban accent,84 with fruits attached to the rear of their costumes (Lady Dicks 156). The choteo’s displacement of high-end values is brought home through the ridiculous text, and the

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84 As Troyano recalls: “It was great to have WOW girls—none of whom were Latinas […] perform Cuban characters. They all brought inimitable accents—some a bit more Polish than Spanish—to their roles” (First Ten Years 149).
physical “dragging down” of what might be mistaken for Carmen Miranda’s infamous fruit headdress. The liminal re-positioning of the ‘exotic fruits’ onto what Pérez Firmat calls the “culo in lo vernáculo” (the ass in the colloquial) (Literature and Liminality 72), signals the choteo’s upsetting of stereotypic Latina iconography. Crassly placing the infamous fruits on the Tropicanettes’ rears at once activates an irreverent dismembering of the Carmen Miranda icon, as well as suggests a critique of the very crassness of the primary image’s reductiveness of Latina identity.

The Tropicana nightclub, while distinctly orienting itself as a site of entertainment, is also a site for possible dis-orientations: “a place for art, revolution and political intrigue” (Memorias 396). The seemingly apolitical “romantic” naiveté of the Tropicana’s entertainment is peppered with an intersectional choteo rendering of a revolutionary plot. Carmelita and her brother Machito are involved in a communist plot to overthrow the government, with the help of Lota Hari, an East German gunrunner and spy, and granddaughter of Mata Hari. Carmelita is the head of “Operation Fry the Banana”—a plot to assassinate Havana’s chief of police, Capitán Maldito (Memorias 400). In this way, the revolutionary plot is unabashedly mixing its U.S. stereotypes of acceptable villains: from the East German spy to a Caribbean “banana” plot. As Manzor notes, where Carmelita has taken her last name to signify “the exotic other,” she is activating not only the “harmless entertainer” aspect of this moniker, but also the other side of the stereotypical construction of Latino-ness, wherein, “[t]he Latin(o/a) becomes the foreign other that, because of its very exoticism, is considered savage, dangerous, a Bataillian corps étranger” (“Two Tropicanas” 372). This dangerous aspect of the “exotic” is invoked through Carmelita’s revolutionary fervour. The absurd songs of the Tropicana chorus girls are laden, within the dramatic text, not only with crude sexual politics, but also with code: Pingalito is sent by Machito to tell Tropicana that “the banana was not sliced” (Memorias 396-397)—that is, that he
has failed in his attempt to assassinate Capitán Maldito. At once negotiating entertainment and politics, Tropicana describes herself to Lota as follows: “I am artist revolutionary. I sing; I fight” (*Memorias* 410).

This choice to portray Carmelita Tropicana as at once an entertainer/manager at the Tropicana club and a left-wing revolutionary particularly complicates Cuban-American diasporic memory. It posits a lesbian/queer, working class, politically revolutionary body as an exemplar of pre-revolutionary Havana. This subverts the mainstream Cuban-American, anti-Castro stance, which, as Pérez Firmat posits, the generation who left Cuba before the revolution tend to maintain, as part of their romantic idealization of the pre-revolutionary period (*Life on the Hyphen* 15). Yet while I am arguing for the political critique within *Memorias’s* dramatic text, the presence of this *choteo* has been variably read across the performance text. Laurie Stone’s *Village Voice* 1987 review of *Memorias* criticized the play for “the omission from the piece of the actual Cuban revolution—Castro and Ché are never mentioned.” Stone attributes this oversight to “fuzzy thinking” on the part of the playwrights. Her review makes clear that she is unaware of the pro-Castro position implied in the dramatic choice to have Carmelita Tropicana leave Cuba after failing to overthrow the regime; or that, while neither Fidel Castro nor Ché Guevara are mentioned directly, the third act takes place in 1967, the year of Ché’s assassination. Stone’s overlooking of Tropicana as a pro-communist revolutionary may well be the result of the mode of theatrical presentation: an over-the-top WOW Café performance, wherein the spectacular, and often rough-edged quality of performance may have over-shadowed the nuanced delivery of particular information, far more easily culled from the printed dramatic text. Notably, Kate Davy’s analysis of *Memorias*—based on the performance she saw, the dramatic text she has read, and her familiarity with the WOW Café—takes specific issue with Stone’s criticism of *Memorias* as overlooking of Cuban politics, not because Davy disagrees with
Stone’s claim, but because of Stone’s linking the dismissal of Cuban politics in the play as driven by the dismissal of men. In her review of Memorias, Stone had not only questioned the absence of Cuban revolutionary politics but also linked it to a lesbian positionality. Stone writes, “It’s impossible to tell what Tropicana thinks of Castro’s regime, but since her character simultaneously turns away from men and Cuban politics, an impression is left that Castro is abandoned because he’s a man.” Davy resists this conclusion as one that does away with female agency: “Here Carmelita’s lesbianism is reduced to turning against men rather than to women. The agency of woman […] is once again eschewed by the claim that she can only make sense in relation to the category of ‘man,’ in this case Fidel Castro.” For Davy, Tropicana in Memorias “is not indifferent to the historical revolution of Cuba; rather, she plays on it to portray a different kind of revolution—one that gives voice to the politics imbedded in stories never told, the histories missing from history books” (Lady Dicks 157). Davy’s recognition of the feminist, queer, and classed narratives in Memorias opens up to the possible, otherwise marginalized narratives the work engages with.

Memorias’s choteo of Carmelita’s revolutionary plot also weaves in an “epic” homosexual love story between Carmelita and Lota Hari. Carmelita’s left-wing revolutionary stance pushes against the mainstream by not only aligning with, but also falling madly in love with the East German spy. Tropicana first meets Lota Hari in Act I, at the Tropicana nightclub in 1955 (Memorias 406). “Lota is played by Diane Jeep Reis as a dead ringer for Marlene Dietrich” (Lady Dicks 155), and a love story begins to develop between them. This love story grows across the course of the play, and finally is recounted in all its details by Pingalito at the top of Act III, at the Tropicana A-Go-Go in 1967, where Pingalito explains that Tropicana and Lota have remained together across these twelve years, and have adopted a little blond girl called Nota (Memorias 419). Again, Memorias at once includes the narrative of a successful lesbian
relationship within the context of Cuban revolution, and critiques the couple’s relationship, for taking up the hetero-normative signs of longevity and commitment, with its creation of a family unit. In this way, across the landscape of what is, ostensibly, Cuban diasporic memory, Carmelita reshapes the terrain by embodying a queer revolutionary that at once locates and dislocates herself across her intersectional points of orientation.

**Tropicalized Drag**

The final group of bodies occupying the site of the Tropicana club are the various male characters, particularly Capitán Maldito, Machito, and Pingalito. The *choteo* of these characters weaves together Latino, heterosexual, male stereotypes, and in so doing opens up a space for a critique of exoticism, heterosexism and misogyny. Notably, in the performance context of *Memorias*, all of these bodies are performed in female drag. Female drag, or masculine drag, is the act of a cis female performing the masculinity that is normatively prescribed by dominant hetero-patriarchal ideology as belonging to the “other” sex. While the act of male drag, or feminine drag, as attributed to homosexual male practice, is generally acknowledged by queer scholars to have the potential of—if not always to be actively engaged in—subverting normative prescriptions of sex/gender, female drag has been the subject of some debate amongst scholars who question its ability to “make visible” the female performer potentially enacting the gender subversion. Yet, according to Holly Hughes, within WOW’s performance context, all-female drag presented women playing men “in quotes” (*Lady Dicks* 160). Positing the all-female drag in

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85 See, for example, cultural anthropologist Esther Newton’s seminal *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, wherein she dephatologizes discontinuities between gender and sex.

86 See Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity*, and Davy’s “Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp,” wherein they posit that female drag is less “legible” as a subversion of gender roles, because in performing masculinity, the body tends towards the non-performative.
Memorias firmly within this performance context, I read the female drag as making visible the disidentificatory negotiation of masculinity: a choteo of masculinity that decentres it, and allows it to be negotiated across gender and sexual orientation.

The first key male character is in fact Carmelita’s foil: Capitán Maldito, Havana’s evil chief of police. Through Capitán Maldito—whose name literally means Captain Damned—the dramatic text unveils the Brutality of sexist “machismo.” Troyano recounts that this character is modeled after “a real chief of police in Cuba, based on the stories my father had told me, who was a torturer, who killed a lot of people” (“Performing Que(e)ries” 34:16-34:28min). Notably, Maldito’s character is framed with the Tropicana site—an extension of the “super [queer] Latina heroine” that is Carmelita—and so, Maldito serves as the “evil forces” against which she “always triumph[s] in the end” (I, Carmelita xvii). The choteo of Maldito’s violence is “dragged down” through a female drag performance by a lesbian body, decentring the grounds of heteronormative, masculine power. Maldito first performs a violent act in the Tropicana club of Act I, wherein he is still in charge as Havana’s chief of police. As Troyano recalls:

Although Memorias was a comedy, my favorite moment in the play came from a not-so-funny image I had of someone being tortured to a seductive jazz riff. I told Uzi [Parnes] my image and he turned it into a musical number where Carmelita’s protégé and singer Rosita dances with the sadistic Chief of Police. (I, Carmelita xix-xx)

Capitán Maldito arrives at the club, and begins to harass Rosita, who is performing as the main chanteuse. He soon forces her to sing the romantic—and recognizable to an U.S. audience—“Bésame Mucho” ballad while he “dances brutally with her, throwing her around, twisting her arms, pulling her hair, bending her fingers, finally dropping on the floor,” as Rosita sobs throughout (Memorias 405). This violent sequence reveals Capitán Maldito in his full sadistic macho agency. Maldito brags to the U.S. tourists: “I am El Macho de Machos. A macho among
machos. I have two [fighting] cocks. One’s named Adolph, for Hitler, and the other Rudolph, for the reindeer” (Memorias 404). Maldito’s description of his “roosters” lowers his authority down to the level of dismissable, crude absurdity. Moreover, here the “dirty” joke implied in Maldito’s speech is subverted through choteo to debase only him, and not to take the audience down into crude sexual humour. Davy notes that the juxtaposition of this unapologetic violence with its all-female drag performance creates a strong critique, while simultaneously proving exceedingly humorous: “As performed by the actors Kate Stafford and Lisa Kron, this dance was outrageously funny and horrifying, its alignment of macho with violence against women unmistakable” (Lady Dicks 158). By staging male violence, Memorias at once recognizes its ubiquity and displaces its acceptability.

Capitán Maldito’s violence is soon subverted through Carmelita’s triumph: a feminist queer re-envisioning of the violent sequence in Act I. With the transposition of the Tropicana club into the exilic New York City of Act III’s Tropicana A-Go-Go, the dramatic text situates Carmelita Tropicana as, again, manager of the club. But this time, her power is not circumscribed by the corrupt governance of Capitán Maldito. Instead, in Act III, Capitán Maldito is now a high school janitor in New York City (Memorias 416). Notably, while neither Fidel Castro nor Ché Guevara are mentioned directly in Memorias, by positioning Act III in 1967, the play’s timeline stretches across the pre- to post-Cuban revolution. 1967 is the year of Ché’s assassination in Bolivia, after his capture by the U.S.-backed Bolivian military, and the year which marked the end of the active revolutionary struggle. In this post-revolution moment, when Maldito arrives at the opening day celebration at the Tropicana A-Go-Go, ready to exert his revenge on Carmelita Tropicana and her Tropicanettes, he is confronted and defeated by Carmelita. The process of confrontation and victory over Capitán Maldito begins with Brendah lacing his drink with hallucinogens at Carmelita’s signal (Memorias 421). Next, as Maldito
begins to succumb to the drug, Carmelita proclaims: “I, Carmelita Tropicana, in the name of all here at Tropicana-A-Go-Go, j’accuse Maldito” (Memorias 422), which opens up the floor for all the witnesses to his crimes to step forward and accuse him directly. After Marimacha and Rosita decry him, Carmelita takes over. As the stage directions explain: “Carmelita goes into an incantation and during it, the chorus chants ‘bongo, bongo, bongo,’ and does a line dance while she recites a poem” (Memorias 422). Carmelita’s incantation finally turns Maldito into a chicken (Memorias 424). Carmelita’s victory over Maldito at once disrupts heterosexist, masculine violence, and also articulates a choteo of the terms of her own power. The way in which Carmelita Tropicana shows her strength over Maldito positions her multiply across what constitutes a “home court” advantage. While Carmelita claims to have learnt her chicken incantation while in Nepal, the verses of her incantation as well as the nature of the revenge act strongly echo an U.S. TV version of Caribbean voodoo. A key verse of her incantation goes as follows:

Like Desi Arnaz, /We sing to you,/ Babalú, Babalú, Ay. /Oh, Gods of Africa/
Yemayá y Obatala/ Grant favour to your humble servant/ Who speaks Shakespearean
verse/ And transform this flesh and spirit/ To another universe. (Memorias 423)

The references to Arnaz and the Babalú at once highlight the Cuban-inspired elements of her chant, and complicate their “authenticity.” The Babalú is both a popular Cuban song that references the Santería87 deity Babalú Aye, and the signature mambo song of Arnaz’s fictional TV character Ricky Ricardo. The Cuban elements are thus realigned across a diasporic positionality that draws on a mix of syncretic Afro-Cuban tradition and U.S. television.

87 Santería is an Afro-Caribbean religion, syncretically drawing on Yoruba and Roman Catholic elements. For an engaging study, see David H. Brown’s Santería Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion.
Carmelita interjects other influences into her chant: Shakespeare, Nepali prayer, and even Elvis. In this way, Carmelita wields a barrage of stereotypical representational imagery as a weapon: quite literally, it is this amassing of derivative stereotypes that, through a *choteo* redirection, gives Carmelita her sacred power over Maldito. Carmelita Tropicana’s strength in her showdown with Maldito is her intersectional negotiation across multiple “home” strengths: her Caribbean ancestry, her position as a leading figure in the East Village club scene, and her global worldliness. In this way, as part of a parodic *choteo*, the recycling of a myriad range of clichés conquers the misogyny and compulsory heterosexuality of the corrupt regime symbolized by Maldito.

Capitán Maldito enables the space for Carmelita to reveal herself as an active revolutionary. Notably, Carmelita concludes the play with the phrase, “Let us always remember *que la lucha continua* and art is our weapon” (*Memorias* 424). Again, this is an intersectional “call to arms.” “*La lucha continua*” is a reaffirmation of solidarity with the socialist revolution. Significantly, this marks both Carmelita’s commitment to the socialist revolution’s expansive goal to continue to fight for class equality across the world; as well as suggests a disidentification with Castro’s regime as not meeting the socialist promises it portended. Carmelita’s left-wing revolutionary struggle is here revealed as a disidentificatory negotiation of the Cuban revolution. She continues to “fight” even after Ché’s death, and notably, also after Castro’s coming to power. Tropicana’s reassertion of this call to continue the struggle is also intersectional, negotiating equity across class, as well as race, gender, and sexuality.

The portrayal of Machito’s masculinity and Latino-ness constructs an intersectional *choteo* of the North-South politics of sexual tourism. Machito—whose very name bespeaks his masculine, “macho” virility, albeit concluding with the Spanish diminutive “ito”—presents the Latino lover version of his sister, Carmelita Tropicana. Notably, within the performance context
of WOW, Machito also engages a butch performance of lesbian sexuality, as performed by Maureen Angelos. As Troyano writes about the first production of *Memorias*, “a macho among machos […] Angelos was wonderful at [female-to-] male drag and cut a dashing figure that made both straight women and lesbians swoon” (*I, Carmelita* xviii). In this way, the drag performance of Machito not only activates a matrix of lesbian desire across its purportedly heterosexual plot narrative, it also opens up the space for negotiating a range of lesbian representations, including butch ones, as well as the embodiment of female masculinities.

Intersecting with the gender drag, Machito takes up a “Latino” iteration of masculinity, both in the dramatic text and in the performative context. Within the dramatic text, Machito must negotiate his own exoticization as the object of amorous pursuit of the two white U.S. tourists, Brendah and Brendaa. This subplot allows for a critique of the exoticizing gaze of U.S. lust for the Cuban subject. The dramatic text at once subverts presumed heterosexual norms by positing the women as the sexual predators; and also takes up the colonial tendency to feminize the colonized “Other” into an object of desire for the colonizing subject. Both Tropicana siblings—Carmelita and Machito—share in being tropicalized bodies of desire. Machito’s Latino-ness is at its most pronounced through the way in which the white U.S. tourists engage with him. Brendah and Brendaa reduce Machito to an exotic object, and, in doing so, remain blind to his

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88 Maureen (Moe) Angelos was an active member of the WOW Café, as well as a member of The Five Lesbian Brothers, a provocative lesbian collective. For more on The Five Lesbian Brothers, see Davy’s *Lady Dicks and Lesbian Brothers* and Lisa Kron’s website.

89 Specifically, the WOW Café space eschewed the negative pathologizing of butch lesbians. This is also the aim of Sue Ellen Case’s “Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic,” wherein she destigmatizes the butch/femme aesthetic, and rejects its being labeled a “false consciousness.”

90 Davy describes Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity as “enacted by women who refuse to agree that masculinity belongs solely to male bodies, wrenching masculinity away from this misperception and claiming it as their own.” (*Lady Dicks* 160)

91 Edward Said’s *Orientalism* provides an analysis of the colonial “feminization” of the colonized “Other.”
involvement in the revolutionary plot, as well as to any of the problematics of national and
gendered politics taking place around them. As Kate Davy aptly sums up:

Preoccupied with their own concerns and mouthing inanities throughout, these twin
tourists represent North American ethnocentrism and imperialism. When an especially
violent incident in the revolution takes place in the nightclub, the two sit at an adjoining
table completely engrossed with a matchbook on which a few lines of Machito’s romantic
poetry are written. Oblivious to the historical events unfolding around them, they busily
steal ashtrays off the tables along with every other souvenir they can get their hands on.
Brendah and Brendaa are so entirely out of sync with the rhythm and action of the play that
they stand out as self-interested, greed-driven, particularly white sore thumbs. (*Lady Dicks*
156)\(^\text{92}\)

The white U.S. tourists stand in for the exotifying gaze of sexual tourism, highlighting Machito’s
intersectional disidentification across the heightened status of masculinity and the exotic value of
foreignness.

When turning to the performance text and its intersection of gender and ethnic
representation, the *choteo* at play becomes less clear. According to Davy’s review of Angelos’
performance as Machito, it was her intersectional portrayal of the excesses of a *Latino* male that
made the female drag visible. In other words, for Davy, the intersection of gender and ethnic
“dragging” allowed for the *choteo* of these to take place. Halberstam links the visibility of gender
play to its intersection with race, arguing that, “[m]asculinity [dominant masculinity] […]
becomes legible as masculinity when it leaves the white male middle-class body. Arguments

\(^{92}\) For more of Davy’s analysis of feminist/lesbian critiques of whiteness, see “Outing Whiteness: A
Feminist/Lesbian Project.”
about excessive masculinity tend to focus on black bodies (male and female), latino/a bodies, or working-class bodies” (Female Masculinity 2). Davy, in keeping with Halberstam’s argument on the ostensibly “non-performative” white masculine body, echoes this position: “[i]n mainstream representation […] people of color are constructed as somehow more embodied than white people and therefore more animated” (Lady Dicks 160). For Davy, “[r]ace is in a large measure what makes male impersonation in Memorias de la Revolución readable” (Lady Dicks 159). She elaborates that,

In the mid-1980s, […] women disappearing into male roles felt like women’s sexuality returning to the closet. But this is precisely how Troyano pushed at the boundaries of what was conceivable at the time. In performance, Memorias de la Revolución gave women free rein over the performative landscape of Latino masculinities, and […] they exulted in the pleasures of cross-dressing. (Lady Dicks 161)

Davy suggests that an excessive performance of Latino-ness is what made visible the portrayal of stereotypical Latino masculinity, with this ideally opening up the space to pluralist gender negotiations. However, I read Davy’s review as also potentially indicating that the choteo of Latino representation is not taking place in the performance of Memorias. The send up of Latino masculinity appears to lack any nuance here, instead reduced to the equivalency of an excess of masculinity that can only be luxuriated in by the white performers “allowing themselves the freedom” to inhabit “excessive” non-white bodies.

The last, but certainly not least, of the male characters embodied in Memorias is Pingalito Betancourt. It is this body that offers an intersectional choteo that is equal to Carmelita in its
active negotiation and subversion of mainstream representation. Muñoz has described the character of Pingalito Betancourt as a “choteador par excellence” (Disidentifications 136). Muñoz’s assessment seems rooted in the character’s expansive use of drag. As he explains of Pingalito: “Carmelita’s drag performance [of Pingalito] operates on an axis concerned with more than biological gender difference. In this instance, the drag is calibrated also to represent and parody identities across class, national, and generational lines” (Disidentifications 133). The act of “dragging” is thus likened to the process of choteo, in that it at once “represents and parodies” that which it takes up. I wish to rename what Muñoz defines as the expansive drag of Pingalito’s embodiment as an intersectional choteo—that is, as the comedic disidentificatory negotiation of different identities, across their intersectional axes. Pingalito, as we have sampled in the preceding analysis of his art lecture (Chapter 2), is oriented across male, heterosexual, middle class, Latino, Cuban-American axes.

Pingalito’s position as a middle-aged, middle class member of the Cuban exile community in Miami creates specific axes of embodied (dis)identifications. His age, class, and location suggest that he is a member of the first generation of Cuban exiles, who left before Castro took power in order to preserve their middle class wealth, and settled primarily in Miami. Miami’s Cuban community is further dominated by right-wing conservatism, characterized by sexist gender ascriptions and homophobia. The artist’s inspiration for the character provides a first insight into the kind of persona that Pingalito is meant to embody. As Troyano explains:

Pingalito came about because of my mother. My mother one time calls me up and says,

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93 The nuance of Pingalito’s persona might be attributed to his having benefited from being an already developed persona prior to Memorias, as well as to Pingalito’s being performed by Troyano herself. Memorias is Troyano’s first work to include both Carmelita and Pingalito (First Ten Years 148).

94 Muñoz elaborates on this in his description of Pingalito, wherein he also characterizes him as as the protoypical male of a homophobic, middle class, emigrant family in Miami (Disidentifications 133).
“Oh, my god! I can’t believe they’re telling me stories about this guy whose name is Pingalito.” And I went, “Wait right there.” All of a sudden, I didn’t even have to think of a character. I knew who this guy was. He’s a stereotype of Latino blah blah blah.

Pingalito means, actually, ‘little dick.’ That’s what the name of it is. (qtd. in Horowitz 103)

As she elaborates elsewhere, “[w]hen I heard the name Pingalito…little Dick, a typical macho Cubano, sauntered off the page with guayabera and cigar” (I, Carmelita Tropicana xix). The “Latino blah blah blah” that is the empty bravado posturing of this “typical macho Cubano” is taken up in performance that performs a choteo of aggressive heterosexual male desire, as well as of an entitled middle class nationalist and class positionality.

Specifically, Pingalito “maps” himself in a long monologue in which he uses a restaurant place mat of Cuba to educate the audience on Cuban facts and establish himself as a macho authority on cubanidad. Pingalito delivers this monologue on the set of Havana’s Tropicana club in Act I, after joining the Tropicanettes at the tail end of their “Yes, We have no bananas” number, and singing the line “the banana was not sliced,” as a means to relay Machito’s message to Carmelita of the failed assassination plot against Capitán Maldito (Memorias 396-397). 95 Pingalito grounds his “Facts about Cuba” monologue 96 squarely in his singular visual aid. He describes it as: “a place mat I pick up in Las Lilas restaurant of Miami titled ‘Facts About Cuba’,” and which includes an outline of the island of Cuba, “shaped like a Hoover vacuum

95 Notably, across Memorias, Pingalito functions as a narrator, providing key information to advance the plot, as well directly addressing the audience.

96 This monologue appears in both Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution (Memorias 398-399) and Milk of Amnesia (Latinas on Stage 121-122), with some slight variation: in Memorias, the monologue has five facts; in Milk it is reduced to three facts. For a video clip of the monologue, see “Carmelita Tropicana with Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé: Performing Que(e)ries Series Part 3,” 42:20-43:46min.
cleaner” (*Memorias* 398). Significantly, by using this U.S.-made audio-visual as the central “source” for Pingalito’s knowledge of key Cuban “facts,” Pingalito performs a *choteo* of Cuban diasporic nationalism, and its particular classicist ascriptions. Las Lilas, the restaurant from which the place mat is taken, is owned by Gloria Estefan and her husband, icons of (upper) middle class Cuban exile and Cuban-American wealth in the 1990s. The reference to Las Lilas, a “popular Cuban steak house in Miami […] recalls a bit of middle-class Cuban-American family-life culture,” and, at the same time, “contests the bourgeois conventions within the Cuban exile community” (*Disidentifications* 133) by dragging them down into the world of *Memorias’s* Tropicana club. Pingalito, by being a patron of this restaurant—if only for long enough to grab a place mat—situates himself as a Miami-based, middle class Cuban. But the *choteo* of Pingalito’s station begins with the reduction of his patronage of Las Lilas to utilizing its place mat as a key aid in his lecture on Cuba. By performing *choteo*’s lowering down, Pingalito reduces the middle class, diasporic community’s knowledge of the Cuban “homeland” to a thin, and tacky, made-in-Miami place mat. Pingalito thus irreverently mocks the identificatory presuppositions and even the validity of the “memory” of this diasporic community. For Muñoz, Pingalito’s representation of Cuban “jingoism” is:

> especially poignant for second-generation Cuban-Americans who have never seen the island and have had to depend on similarly hyperbolic renditions of their lost homeland […] Pingalito […] signifies upon the condition of second-generation Cuban Americans who have to juggle, decipher, and translate propaganda and anecdotal evidence in order to ‘know’ their native land. (*Disidentifications* 133)

Pingalito’s orientation as a Cuban in Miami is further destabilized by his binational positioning. The monologue is performed by Pingalito wearing his “customary” outfit of a guayabera shirt—“the national dress of a Cuban male” (*Disidentifications* 133)—thick dark glasses with tape,
brown fedora and cigar, and speaking in a thick Cuban accent. Yet saliently, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano reads Pingalito’s performance—specifically his accent—as identifying him "binationally” (205): at once from the U.S. in his English fluency, and Cuban in his intonation. She suggests that this bipositionality enacts “the mixture of ‘tradition and critique’ in his presentation of Cuban identity” (205). Nohemi Sólorzano-Thompson refines the binational positioning suggested by Yarbro-Bejarano to the more circumscribed framework of Miami:

Although I agree that he spouts a mixture of tradition and critique, I would like to point out that this binationality is limited to Miami. He is not identified as a mainstream ‘American,’ yet he would also be an outsider in Cuba. His outfit in fact suggests he is only at home in Miami. (85)

Moreover, Pingalito is only “at home” in a particular sector of Miami. As Muñoz explains, Pingalito is an “older Miami-based Cuban exile who is sheltered within that city’s right-wing Cuban power base while he pines for a mythical lost Cuba” (Disidentifications 133). Pingalito’s monologue enacts a choteo of this attempt to hedge a particular nationalist and class ascription, along with a choteo of sexist and racial bias.

Pingalito begins his monologue with a choteo of Cuban macho sexism. Pingalito’s first fact is that Cuba is the Pearl of the Antilles, “because of its natural wealth and beauty” (Memorias 398). This fact provides Pingalito with a quick, overtly sexualized sequence of downward-moving musings on the “nature” of landscape. As he elaborates: “none can compare with the beauty of the human landscape. Óyeme mano, estas coristas de Tropicana, those chorus girls of Tropicana with big legs, big breasts” (398). Soon, Pingalito performs a choteo of synecdoche as he proclaims of dancer Tongolele’s behind: “[t]hat ladies and gentlemen, is landscape” (398). As in Pingalito’s choteo of the art lecture (Chapter 2), the choteo of sexist objectification does not enact the “dirty” joke of its primary referent, but rather it displaces the
speaker of the content down to reveal his false bravado and stupidity. Moreover, the female drag performance of Pingalito’s machismo further destabilizes and multiply decentres it. Layered onto and across Carmelita’s lesbian/queer body, the performance of Pingalito activates the axes of masculine heterosexual desires as well as of lesbian gender negotiation. Muñoz situates Pingalito as operating within this queer context, and so activating both a critique of hetero-masculinity and playing with feminine masculinity. He states, that “[t]he male character in this sequence is supposed to register both outside of and inside of the erotics of ‘butch/femme’” (Disidentifications 127). As Davy elaborates on “butch-femme” representational identifications:

> Wearing the gender of the ‘other’ sex is not the point. Nor is it about drag in the sense of simulation. No attempt is made to hide the lesbian beneath a mask of male or female gender identity; to fool the audience, even momentarily, is not the objective. As a dimension of erotic identity, butch-femme is about sexuality and its myriad nuances. It is also about gender in that it appropriates gender in its social articulation and representational construction. In butch-femme iconography, attributes which in dominant culture are associated with strict gender roles are not sex-class specific. Worn by lesbians, these attributes have meanings for lesbians in a same-sex lesbian culture that do not necessarily symbolize conformity to rules of gender behavior and the oppositional dynamics of polarized gender roles. (“Fe/male Impersonation” 123)

This redirects Pingalito’s aggressive sexuality across a matrix of lesbian and feminine desires.

Moreover, the gender drag being activated in Pingalito’s performance can be further complicated if we consider the possibility of Carmelita’s persona—the body in masculine drag as Pingalito—as herself engaging in a feminine drag. Troyano remarks that Memorias’s director and co-writer “Uzi [Parnes] was thrilled to have an all-female cast playing both female and male drag” (First Ten Years 149). This implies a playful subversion of any “authentic” performance of
gender across either male or female characters in the play, and opens to a negotiation of femininities and masculinities. Yarbro-Bejarano labels this layered embodiment of Pingalito as representing “drag-on-drag metaperformances” (203). Following in this vein, Manzor reads Pingalito as a “s/he” in performance (“Two Tropicanas”), but while this highlights the possible coterminality of these gender performatives, I think it problematically fails to recognize the effective act of female drag that Pingalito is also embodying, and I therefore choose to refer to Pingalito in the male pronoun. The layering of Pingalito’s embodiment with the persona of Carmelita’s embodiment opens up a site of negotiation in considering the intersectional axes of gender and Latino/a-ness: potentially, a choteo of non-white masculinity layered over a choteo of non-white femininity. For her part, Davy posits Pingalito’s Cuban masculinity as somehow less performative than Tropicana’s Cuban femininity: “while a character like Pingalito is much less expressive than Troyano’s rendering of Carmelita Tropicana, he is far more expressive than portrayals of his white, bourgeois counterparts” (Lady Dicks 160). Might Davy be taking this position because Pingalito within Memorias is being framed within and through the body in performance of Carmelita? Is Davy reading Carmelita’s performance as its own excessive dragging of feminine gender, as suggested by Parnes? Alternatively, might Davy posit all non-white femininity as even more excessive than non-white masculinity, based on her reading of masculinity as non-performative? Muñoz, in contrast, praises Pingalito as the “choteador par excellence,” seemingly equating Carmelita’s performance with fewer axes of choteo, and so positions Pingalito’s performance as having greater range. Might Muñoz’s distinct “sizing up” of Carmelita and Pingalito point to an assumption of “authenticity” in Carmelita’s non-white femininity, as somehow less performative, or even as inherent to the performing body of Alina Troyano?
Without any means to resolve the layered gender embodiment that is the intersectional *choteo* of Pingalito, I return to tease out another axis of *choteo* across Pingalito’s “Facts about Cuba”: the *choteo* of race. Pingalito asserts fact number three: “Spanish is the official language of –[Cuba]. This is true. And it’s a beautiful language. You talk with your hand; you talk with your mouth” (*Memorias* 398). He soon goes on to use this question of language to trouble a Cuban expression. Pingalito goes about his *choteo* by first positing the status quo and only later dragging it down. As such, he first naively teaches his audience his “favourite” idiom:

My favourite expression when you want to find out the color of someone, you say,

Oyeme mano ¿y dónde está tu abuela? Tell me, brother, where is your grandmother?

(*Memorias* 398)

It is only as Pingalito arrives at the next fact that the implication of wanting to “find out the color of someone” is critically foregrounded: “Three-fourths of all Cubans are white, of Spanish descent, and a lot of these three-fourths have a very dark suntan all year round” (*Memorias* 398). Here, Pingalito immediately follows up the “fact” of Cuban whiteness with a tongue-in-cheek underscoresing of “a very dark suntan.” This comically irreverent suggestion of the suntan performs the *choteo’s trompetilla*—that is, it deflates a Cuban, colonial desire to align with whiteness, with the introduction of an “other” genealogy. Pingalito’s disidentification with Cuban (-American) racial politics is ever more clear when he concludes: “When they ask me, Pingalito, and where is your grandmother? I say, mulata y a mucha honra. Dark and proud” (*Memorias* 399). Never out right rejecting the “fact” of Cuban “whiteness,” Pingalito offers—in a manner that might even be read as “innocent”—a different creolized genealogy. And yet, it is through what Pérez Firmat has described as *choteo’s* “improvisational,” “slip of the tongue” performative nature, that *choteo* hits its “bull’s eye.” Muñoz explains that, “Pingalito’s quip speaks to the hypocrisy of Cubans who can trace their European roots to Spain but are
nonetheless unable to pin down that missing grandmother who is, more often than not, of African descent” (*Disidentifications* 133). What Mañach has called the “toxic danger” of *choteo* is here, as a disidentificatory survival strategy enacted from the margins, enacting, according to Lillian Manzor, a social corrective: “In this scene, then, not only does s/he [Carmelita as Pingalito] accurately correct official versions of our racial makeup but s/he proceeds to undermine biological definitions of race based on phenotypes” (“Two Tropicanas” 388). The “polite racisms of everyday Cuban life” (*Disidentifications* 136) are subverted into a seemingly ‘polite’ anti-racist reaffirmation of African and creolized ancestry.

In listing a string of “facts,” the “*choteador par excellence*” that is Pingalito enacts an embodied intersectional *choteo* that targets multiple axes and their intersections. Moreover, just as feared by Mañach, and lauded by Pérez Firmat and Muñoz, this *choteo* can be dangerous to the dominant ideologies it both takes up and mocks. As Muñoz confirms, Pingalito’s *choteo* does, “not wink at the jingoistic Cuban nationalist and reassure him that everything is satisfactory; rather, it renders visible the mechanisms of privilege that such subjectivities attempt to occlude” (*Disidentifications* 135). Rather, “[n]o one is let off the hook; the ironic and sharp attacks on Cuban and Cuban-American racism, sexism and general hypocrisy are *not* retracted” (*Disidentifications* 133).

Pingalito performs his star monologue in Act I, within the Tropicana club, and is able to travel over to New York City’s Tropicana A-Go-Go in Act III, continuing to serve as a narrator in this second Tropicana space. This *choteador* is absent, however, from the third key site of *Memorias*: the boat journey of Act II, a mise-en-scène grounded in the transitional nowhere place of crossing.
The Site of Crossing

Act II is set within the perilous voyage from Cuba to the U.S. by boat—the exilic path taken by many first generation Cuban-Americans. Positioning Tropicana in the literal site of crossing over, of perilous “between-ness,” Memorias cleverly develops the literal into the multiply metaphorical. The site of crossing extends itself in diasporic memory beyond and in resistance to clear points of origin or arrival. Tropicana’s crossing is a choteo displacement of multiple axes of crossing: finding one’s own “home” across and against not only national and cultural allegiance, but also one’s “calling” across a matrix of desire (career, politics, sexuality, etc.).

The action of Act II takes place at sea, as Carmelita Tropicana, Lota, and one other Tropicanette, Marimacha—the derogatory term for lesbian, literally “gay-tomboy”—are fleeing Havana by boat, after a failed revolutionary attempt. The act is staged as the dangerous boat-crossing between Cuba and the coast of Florida—the literal displacement that defines Cuban-American diaspora. The stage directions note: “in the middle of the ocean on a row boat […] It is night. There is a painted backdrop with clouds” (Memorias 411). Yet it immediately also layers this iconic “site” of crossing with other imagery. As Davy notes:

*Memorias de la Revolución* repeatedly draws on images, narratives, and songs from various historical periods, classical works, Hollywood films, and other forms of popular culture, layering the piece with wildly disparate references. This mix resonates with the ways in which the characters’ multiple identity categories intersect in both predictable and unpredictable ways. (*Lady Dicks* 157)

The recycling and reworking of mainstream imaginary activates a choteo across and against the disparate trajectories traced by its referents. The opening of the act reveals, “a tableau staged to resemble the famous nineteenth-century painting of George Washington crossing the Delaware with Carmelita posed nobly as the figure of Washington” (*Lady Dicks* 157). This famous image
is layered over with a ridiculous conversation about Tropicana giving up her bracelet so that the rest of the crew will not starve, a parody of “the melodramatic scene from the 1944 Hollywood classic *Lifeboat*, when the character played by Tallulah Bankhead sacrifices her diamond bracelet as fish bait for the starving crew” (157). This multi-layered iconography complicates a reading of this crossing to a singular dimensionality of what it might mean to be “Cuban”-American, and invests the narrative with pluralistic, intersecting perspectives.

At the centre of this iconographic whirlwind at sea is Carmelita Tropicana’s *choteo* of the Cuban religious allegory of La Virgen del Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint, apparition to three fishermen at sea. Specifically, the Cuban cultural allegory around la Virgen de Caridad del Cobre is that she, “appeared before three adrift Cuban sailors (black, white, and mulatto), an act that offered a symbolic resolution to the racial divisions that marked the nation” (*I, Carmelita x*). As Troyano recalls, “Uzi [Parnes] thought that what *Memorias* was missing was religious iconography. He conceived Act II somewhere near the Bermuda Triangle […] The Virgin could appear to Carmelita” (*I, Carmelita xx*). In *Memorias’* displacement of this narrative, sailors at sea are the motley crew of Carmelita, Lota, and Marimacha. La Virgen herself is renegotiated as “a Yiddish-speaking mother in drag” (Dorson). As Troyano jokes, “if she’s Jewish and speaks Yiddish, who could we get to play a Yiddish mama?” (*I, Carmelita xx*). The Virgin is performed by the show’s co-author Parnes, who makes his appearance “on 16mm film as an apparition” (*Lady Dicks* 155). Interspersing some Yiddish into her performance of these “toxic identities—caricatures of Jewish motherhood and Catholic veneration of the Virgin […] recuperate[d] through humorous dialogue of serious import” (Dorson), La Virgen is in herself an amalgam of

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97 Notably, Parnes’ apparition posits a female drag performance within the otherwise strictly all-female cast of *Memorias*. Moreover, by confining Parnes’ body in female drag to the medium of film, the performance of the play at its original venue, the WOW space, did not breach the WOW rule of denying stage access to men.
icons: “[p]erforming between cultures, identities, and mediums” (Lady Dicks 157). The choice to represent La Virgen, the holiest of Cuban, Catholic icons, in “drag”—across not only gender drag, but also across this hodgepodge of stereotypes—is, according to Muñoz, “perhaps the ultimate choteo of ‘authority’ for a pious Catholic Cuban or syncretic practitioner of Santería” (Disidentifications 137). Each point of reference is represented and subverted into an eclectic kitsch, excessive portrayal of its otherwise venerated positionality.

Not only are the bodies within the site of crossing a decentring choteo of the original holy narrative, the content of the apparition is dislocated from the traditionally holy to the transgressive sites of artistic fame, lesbian sexuality, and political revolution. During her visitation, La Virgen tells Carmelita Tropicana: “You have been chosen by the Goddess herself to be the next hottest Latin superstar, but you gotta wait” (Memorias 414). With this promise of greatness to come, La Virgen cautions:

But listen, Carmelita. There’s a little problem. There is a difficult road ahead. […] Cuba will no longer be your home. Her revolution will not be your revolution. Yours will be an international revolution. […] Let it be through your art. Your art is your weapon. To give dignity to Latin and third-world women—this is your new struggle. If you accept, you will be gifted with eternal youth. […] You will suffer much. Spend years penniless and unknown until 1967. (Memorias 415)

La Virgen’s repositioning of Tropicana’s revolutionary struggle across the axes of an international revolution—one focused on fighting for minoritarian and women’s rights—situates Carmelita’s crossing-over as an opening-up to Carmelita’s intersectional positioning: multi-national, multiply positioned. La Virgen’s vision of Carmelita’s resurgence as a famous artist revolutionary in 1967 is not only important for the plot—wherein, as discussed above, Carmelita emerges victorious in Act III—but also in its realignment of Carmelita as engaged in a struggle
larger than, and not solely tied to, the Cuban revolutionary. La Virgen thus grants Carmelita an intersectional, disidentificatory positionality.

The play goes further still in sending up the traditional constructs of Catholic visitation. In order to attain her “calling,” Carmelita must also make a promise of heterosexual chastity. La Virgen warns Carmelita: “Never let a man touch you. You must remain pure, like me” *(Memorias* 415). Carmelita quickly replies: “Oh yes. Never let a man touch me. Believe me, to Carmelita Tropicana Guzmán Jiménez Marquesa de Aguas Claras, that is never to be a problem” (415). In this clever equation of the norms of Catholic female purity as non-conflictual with homosexual desire, Tropicana subverts the church’s patriarchal heterosexism and carves out a space for homosexuality. Tropicana sends up the Catholic veneration of chastity, and its projection of the virgin/whore dichotomy on femininity. As scholar Alicia Arrizón has noted in relation to irreverent intersectional humour:

> For the Latina feminist, the subversion of ‘normative’ femininity is coupled with the dismantling of the virgin/whore dichotomy embedded in the gender relations in Latina/o cultures. This dichotomy implies that women must assume subservient roles, either as Madonnas/virgins to be protected, or as whores to be desired and punished by men.

(“Martha Chaves” 32)

Carmelita can and will meet La Virgen’s expectations of “purity” not because she will abstain from sex, but rather because of a “loophole”: the Catholic worldview’s complete rejection of homosexuality means that chastity is only formulated in heterosexual terms. In this way, Carmelita performs a *choteo* of the invisibility of lesbian desire; raising it up to be not only a given—again, both within the dramatic text of *Memorias* and within the WOW context of its performance—but, also, irreverently exploding it: revelling in lesbian sexuality as a way of fulfilling a Catholic mandate of “virgin” purity. Carmelita’s subversion of the virgin/whore
dichotomy is thus achieved indirectly by inserting the queer female subject as a “faithful” Catholic “virgin.” This then explodes the heteronormative, sexist, and homophobic terms latent within the very formulation of Catholic purity.

As the previous analysis has illustrated, across its choteo of the various axes of crossing, the site of crossing becomes a physical extension of Carmelita’s active and ongoing intersectional negotiation. Yet, significantly, in staging this site Memorias also enacts a choteo of this pluralist negotiation. Muñoz critically offers the following:

I see Carmelita’s border-crossing medley as [...], through choteo, both celebrating what can be emancipating about crossing borders and identifications and mocking this very practice, foregrounding what can be potentially disastrous, ridiculous, and even toxic about these connecting strategies. (Disidentifications 138)

What Chon Noriega has termed Carmelita’s “Multi, multi, multi” (I, Carmelita ix)—that intersectional plurality that has been praised for its porousness and critical edge—here turns its bite back on itself. While the dramatic text celebrates the eventness of Carmelita as a queer Latina superhero, Carmelita subversively dares to place this aspiration for pluralism as the butt of her choteo. For Carmelita’s excited reception of her new calling as a third-world feminist is woven together with ego-driven idealization: celebrity fame and eternal youth. Even in receiving the honour of being a left-wing revolutionary, Carmelita is also always a Latina celebrity-wannabe. The desire to move past the limitation of stereotype is revealed as a much more difficult disidentificatory process—with the strategy of disidentification understood here not as the outright disavowal of the normative, but rather a space of negotiation on and against it (Disidentifications 11). Muñoz has classified disidentification as a survival strategy, and I read Carmelita’s negotiation of herself across this site of crossing as the enacting of this struggle, a process that is not only celebratory and elevating, but also negotiates treading water, swallowing
and regurgitating the stereotypical iconography of one’s identity. As a *choteo* of this struggle, *Memorias* and Carmelita engage the difficulty of its negotiation with an unsparing, irreverent humour.

**More Memories**

Across *Memorias*, Tropicana is positioned across the re-membered iconic sites of Tropicana-ness: from the Tropicana nightclub, to the Tropicana A-Go-Go, to the boat-crossing passage. Each site becomes layered with multiple, and at times conflictual, stereotyped assumptions that in turn situate Tropicana as at once all of these simplifications and, by extension, too complex for any one of them. As Davy notes:

> By simultaneously putting into play national, religious, and entertainment figures from disparate historical periods, identity categories lose their meaning as reliably fixed entities within the narrative. In *Memorias* identity is not the psychic property of individuals. Instead, identities are performed and come across as fluid, contingent, and historically and socially situated. The intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality that produce identities are performed and critiqued in *Memorias* in ways that resist the trap of privileging and reaffirming stable identity categories. *Memorias* is inhabited with one-dimensional caricatures that bespeak multiple dimensions. (*Lady Dicks* 155)

And yet, just as all these multiplicities work to complicate simplification, it is important to recognize that Carmelita consistently returns and remains within an aesthetic of clichés. The critical complication of situating identity that is enabled by the parade of one-dimensional stereotypes at once requires their individual, excessive display. In all of Tropicana’s embodiments, she is fully committed to each aspect of nostalgic identity.
Carmelita concludes *Memorias* by singing the opening verse of the iconic “Guantanamera” (*Memorias* 424). The choice to end the play with this song echoes the preface’s singing of ‘Memories’ in front of a postcard of Cuba. Just as the preface provides a caricature of Cuban nostalgic identity, so too here Carmelita—just after having defeated Maldito with her “Nepali” incantation—repositions herself as the nostalgic, diasporic Cuban. “Guantanamera” is the renowned patriotic love song to Cuba. As Carmelita has explained in later performance work, the lyrics of “Guantanamera” are taken from Jose Martí’s poem *Yo soy un hombre sincero*, which were written by Martí while he was convalescing in the Catskill Mountains (“Manifest Destino”). In this way, his love song to the Cuban soil is written from the uprooted perspective of diasporic exile and nostalgia, of re-membering as a kind of reconstitution of “home.” Across the course of *Memorias*, Carmelita’s *choteo* of positionality at once inhabits and subverts its points of orientation: opening out from the stereotypical imaginary, and yet also always framed by its representational terminology.
4. Re-/Dis-Membering Identity: Milk of Amnesia’s *Choteo* of Memory

**The Choteo of Memory**

This chapter will analyze the intersectional *choteo* at play in Carmelita Tropicana’s second long-form piece, *Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia* (henceforth *Milk*). Where *Memorias* activated a displacement across site and its inhabitants—an expansion and complication of the Carmelita persona across key sites of Cuban diasporic memory—*Milk* takes up a more complicated (de)construction of the space of memory itself, and with it, the amorphous entity that is identity. Particularly, the intersectional *choteo* of *Milk* realigns memory as a negotiation process of re-membering and dis-membering: it represents the site of memory across the blank space of amnesia, and so locates Carmelita’s body as always in a process of ceaselessly configuring and re-configuring the multiple axes of her identity, as a means of re-/dis-membering herself. As the following analysis will show, across the course of *Milk*, the struggle to overcome amnesia re-members Carmelita across her intersectional axes, as well as continually dis-members her, finally exploding the categories of her persona and that of the artist performing her, to deliver a poignant *choteo* of the confining relationship between identity and representation.

In its *choteo* representation of the act of memory, the piece lowers down the context and content of memory. The psychological process of remembering, literally putting the pieces back together, is often simplified as a linear, cogent formulation of past experiences. The *choteo* of this act reveals it instead as a chaotic and haphazard process: a constant re-membering, rearranging, layering, and twisting of fragmented and disparate iconography that makes up the shaky storehouse of memory. Moreover, the *choteo* does not stop at a mere realignment of
memory as a multi-directional re-membering, it also offers a counter-positionality across this process, namely, dis-membering.

For my understanding of the embodied activation of a choteo of memory across dis-membering, I am drawing on the significant example of such negotiation in the work of a U.S. Latina contemporary of Troyano, the artist Laura Esparza, and her 1991 performance I DisMember the Alamo: A Long Poem for Performance. I wish to digress briefly into the particular dis-membered body in performance of this solo piece, as a means to later apply its negotiation of body and mise-en-scène to Carmelita’s particular iteration of dismemberment as a choteo of memory. Esparza’s utilization of dismemberment as a choteo of autobiographical memory plays with the various histories that have informed her autobiography. The official national, historical narratives are interwoven across the family, personal narratives, forcing a revisiting, revising, and active re-membering process. For Esparza, the process of re-membering becomes an embodied practice of dis-memberment; an identity “battle,” what Esparza calls “my private Alamo”, taking place within her body:

My body is the battlefield of
the colonized self. The battle of the Alamo
will be staged inside my sternum
As long as I remain I
under the lie
of conquest.
I will be the battlefield
in the war, the profane war
of lies.
The Indian in me will battle my Spaniard.

My Spaniard will battle my Mexican and

my American will have its own internal Alamo with my Chicana.

My family changed nationalities four times

without ever leaving the neighborhood.

Repeated colonization was the gang-rape of my language. (87-88)

Performatively, Esparza offers a vivid embodiment of this, at times violently painful, restitching/reworking/realigning: dis-membering her body in performance as a means to complicate representation of multiple identity. Esparza’s body in performance is variably staged across the play. At the top of the play, she appears partially obstructed by a large screen, with only her eyes and legs visible (74). She then reveals her full body in the next scene, but this revelation is intertwined with a making “invisible” of the artist’s complex body through a stereotyped Texas showgirl costume (76). Esparza later morphs into the historical body of her grandmother, appearing with her body covered under a rebozo—a traditional Mexican shawl, worn by Indigenous Mexican women, prior to being appropriated by “white” Mexican upper class women in the 1980s and 1990s—and accompanied by a Spanish voiceover (79). Here, Esparza’s body is at once a visual echo of her grandmother’s—through the emblematic wearing of the rebozo—and a body unable to literally “echo” her grandmother’s, through its inability to speak Spanish. Esparza later elaborates on the dissonance of being an Anglo-monolingual of Mexican descent, and its ensuing dis-memberment. The most direct staging of this dis-memberment is described in the following stage directions: “A DisMembered version of the Alamo theme song returns. Slides of the Alamo, my body, and of dismemberment, while stage is bathed in red light. Through a hole in the screen, mouth only appears” (86). I see this situating of the performer’s mouth through a hole in the screen as a further play on the impossibility of
embodying identity without also being compromised. In this staging, the negotiation of finding one’s voice, when one has lost her mother tongue, is captured in a mouth whose Anglo-monolingualism must transpose through translation the ancestral narrative. I read Esparza’s utilization of dis-membering as a representational resistance to reductive representation, specifically through its portrayal of various juxtapositions of a decentred perspective on the body in performance. I suggest that a similar process of dis-membering the body in performance is constructed in and through Carmelita’s embodied choteo of memory in Milk.

The piece Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia was written and performed by Carmelita Tropicana, with the direction and dramaturgy of her biological sister and frequent collaborator Ela Troyano. Milk was commissioned by Performance Space 122, and had its premiere there in 1994, as part of a benefit for Las Buenas Amigas, a support group for Latina lesbians in New York City, and the Lesbian Avengers, the direct action group (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). Milk has been lauded by Muñoz as “the artist's most sustained and in-depth excursion into these [Cuban-American, queer] complicated cultural waters” (“No es fácil” 77). The piece is a solo performance in which Carmelita Tropicana embodies various characters:

The familiar romp of characters from earlier pieces—Pingalito, the self-inflated Cuban man; Arriero, Cortez's whining horse; and the now notorious Carmelita herself—roam the stage in a 70-minute performance piece best described as a difficult but joyous reclamation of identity. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

A significant addition to the “familiar romp of characters” is the unique insertion of a new entity: the writer. The body in performance of Carmelita Tropicana performs thus not only as herself and as persons distinct from her persona, she also takes up the complex embodiment of the writer: an iteration of the autobiographical identity of Alina Troyano, who is, arguably, also the artist’s performing body that is embodying Carmelita Tropicana in the first place. This solipsistic
representational embodiment of artist-as-persona-as-artist is dramaturgically underscored across the piece by the interwoven narrative of the writer and Carmelita’s parallel struggles to re-member themselves. What David Román describes above as “the difficult but joyous reclamation of identity,” is then an exploration of the intersectional subject posited across its multiple positionality, and tasked with constructing its identity in the face of not only amnesia but also the dramatic slippage between Carmelita Tropicana as persona and the autobiographical figure of Alina Troyano. Moreover, the body in performance of the performance text further metamorphoses across its multiple identities as it seeks to re-member itself: embodying and dis-membering the persona of Carmelita, as well as the writer/Troyano.

*Milk*’s dramaturgical structure rests on the loss and recuperation of memory, wherein memory is a key factor in the construction of identity. In *Memorias*, the representation of re-membering was structured through a layering of clichés of cultural memory with subversive twists, which positioned Carmelita as an irreverent amalgam of stereotyped, intersectional identity. In *Milk*, the problematics of representing intersectional identity are mined further by taking as a starting point the loss of memory and, in turn, the destabilizing of the identity position. Carmelita and the writer navigate the no-where space of amnesia, specifically retrograde amnesia—that is, the loss of pre-existing memories, towards an attempt at re-membering their identity/ies. This posits the intersectional subject as not only multiple in its representational constructions—as it sutures the various dimensions of itself—but also highlights the very precarity of identity as an entity.

**Re-membering Amnesia**

Where *Memorias* extended Carmelita across key sites of exilic memory, *Milk* locates Tropicana, as well as the writer, in the no-where space of amnesia. As the artist explains:
Unlike earlier, more colourful and flamboyant work, Ela wanted *Milk* to be subdued, intimate, and she suggested we hire Kukuli Velarde, a Peruvian sculptor, to design the show. [...] Kukuli translated milk and amnesia into white; she wanted everything painted white, including the theatre. This had to be scaled down at Performance Space 122, where we premiered the show, to a white cube and white costume. (*I, Carmelita* xxii)

The minimal set of *Milk* is further subdivided across two occupants—Carmelita and the writer. As the stage directions note:

The left is the writer’s space, and is dimly lit. It has a music stand with makeup, costumes, hats. This space simulates a backstage area where the artist will change clothes, put makeup on, and read. The right side is painted white, resembling a white cube. This space is a defined performance space (the dimly lit space is the private space; the white cube, the public space). (*Milk* 52)

These demarcations in the space are significant in how they position each of the characters. Carmelita, and the familiar set of characters she performatively embodies, inhabit the white cube, public space. Across her amnesia, Carmelita is thus still clearly a persona, existing in relation to her audience. The writer, in contrast, is primarily relegated to the private space, wherein she is mostly a body-less voice over. Yet, significantly, while the dramatic and performance text at once bifurcates the writer and Carmelita, it also continuously interweaves the two. This is done across both plot echoes and through the making visible of the body in performance of the

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98 All *Milk of Amnesia* citations are taken from the version published in *I, Carmelita*, unless otherwise noted.
actress\(^{99}\) as co-inhabiting both private and public spaces. These three primary bodies in performance are variously re- and dis-membered across the amnesiac space of *Milk*.

The dramatic text of *Milk* positions Carmelita Tropicana as an amnesiac who struggles, across the course of the play, to regain her memory. The first appearance of Carmelita comes after the audience has already been introduced to the writer—via voiceover—as well as to Pingalito.\(^{100}\) As such, Carmelita is the second physical body on stage, specifically within the public space of the white cube. When we first see Carmelita:

Carmelita is sitting on a chair inside the cube, wearing a hat made of helium balloons. A square spotlight resembling a film close-up is on her face. As the scene proceeds more light bathes the stage. (*Milk* 58)

The excessive couture of the Carmelita persona has been limited to her hat. The actress has transitioned from Pingalito’s costume to a simple white shorts and white T-shirt (*Milk* 57), and so, Carmelita’s costume is, for her, at her most “tame”: absent are the plastic fruits, colourful boas, and fiery red fabric that otherwise adorn and mark her persona. Notably, juxtaposed with

\(^{99}\) While the stage notes above designate that the private space also serves as the “backstage area where the artist will change clothes, put makeup on, and read” (*Milk* 52), I am specifying the body of the actress here to distinguish between three primary bodies in performance, all of whom are embodied by the artist’s performing body: Carmelita Tropicana, the writer, and the actress. I want to suggest that it is this actress that is seen changing clothes and preparing to go on in the public space, as she is distinct as a character from the performing body of the artist more generally.

\(^{100}\) In keeping with Pingalito’s *choteo* of the Cuban macho stereotype, Pingalito’s entrance in *Milk* coincides with the famous mambo by Damaso Pérez Prado. His deployment of mambo at once marks him as Cuban and performs a *choteo* on the act of “marking one’s self” as Cuban. As Manzor notes, “Although the mambo is now considered to be one of the most typical Cuban rhythms—in Cuban culture, especially outside Cuba, it occupies the same position that the tango does in Argentina—its musical development and eventual commodification is typical of the processes of transculturation. Furthermore, the mambo, both as musical form and dance, is usually chosen as an example of the syncretic African presence in Cuban culture. […] When Pingalito enters the stage walking to the rhythm and singing the tune and lyrics of Pérez Prado’s mambo, the song becomes as emblematic a marker of Cuban-ness as his/her attire and body language. The song plays a double role in the performance. On the one hand, it is used to underscore the fact that Pingalito, like all Cubans, regardless of racial phenotype, is culturally connected to a hybridized African tradition. On the other hand, however, Pingalito’s gestures, which accompany the song, present a critical comment on U.S. Cubans’ redeployment of certain types of music as markers of Cuban-ness” (“Two Tropicanas” 388, emphasis my own).
the minimalist staging and general costume, are what Lillian Manzor has described as “limited but excessive” stage props (“Two Tropicanas” 384). Carmelita’s helium balloon hat is the first of these excessive pieces, which were also created by sculptor Kukuli (I, Carmelita xxii).\(^\text{101}\) The balloon hat soon reveals itself as a quirky concretization of her various kinds of memory: from musical, to linguistic, to libidinal.

Carmelita’s amnesia locates her not only in a white cube, and in a white costume, but also as a body whose multiple dimensionality has been dangerously corroded by the effects of amnesia. This is specifically illustrated through a *choteo* of Carmelita’s loss of the “mastery of her tongue.” As Carmelita attempts to understand her situation, she describes the following:

> The doctors they tell me my name is *(pronouncing the name with an American accent)* Carmelita Tropicana. I’ve had a terrible accident. I hurt my head when I was chocolate pudding wrestling. I don’t remember a thing. (*Milk* 58)

Hearing Carmelita struggle to articulate her own name immediately breaks from prior embodiments of Carmelita. Carmelita traditionally rattles off her name with a thick Cuban accent, as part of her customary linguistic mastery: as she often verbalizes in her performances, “you’ve got to be multilingual. I am very good with the tongue” (*I, Carmelita* ix); and elsewhere, “[w]e love the tongue. And we are good with the tongue” (“Carmelita Can Be a Beast” 6:03min).\(^\text{102}\) By locating the loss of linguistic “heritage” in the tongue-twisting challenge of pronouncing Carmelita for an Anglo-speaker, this moment performs a *choteo* version of

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\(^{101}\) A photograph of Carmelita wearing this hat is available in the version of *Milk* published in *TDR*, p.99. For a brief (fast-forwarded) series of images of Carmelita performing in the helium balloon hat in 1994, see “Carmelita Tropicana with Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé: Performing Que(eries) Series Part 3” 43:52-43:55min.

\(^{102}\) “Carmelita Can Be a Beast: A Performance Lecture by Carmelita Tropicana,” was delivered by the artist Alina Troyano at the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center (CSRC), on April 18, 2014.
linguistic loss. The larger crisis around linguistic mastery is here dragged down to its
synecdoche: the failed mastery “de la lengua” (of the tongue) reduced to an anatomical tongue’s
poor pronunciation. With this displacement of context, the choteo performs its irreverent
subversion of its content: the purported significance of such a loss. The potential loss of the
mother tongue is sent-up as the stereotypical moment of an Anglo-American’s “trying” to speak
Spanish. Notably, this choteo of linguistic fluency embodies its subversion through enacting
Carmelita’s dis-membering of herself. Not only has Carmelita forgotten how to speak, and
therefore how to pronounce, in Spanish, she also has lost the physical control of this “member”
of her body: the muscle of the tongue.

Significantly, the amnesia that Carmelita experiences is primarily centred around her
exilic, ethno-cultural identity. Carmelita has “forgotten” her name, her thick Cuban accent, and
possibly lost her mother tongue. But Carmelita has not forgotten her sexual orientation. When
she speaks about the balloon that is her libido, an extra large balloon, she explains that it “pops
 uncontrollably” when she thinks of her nurse giving her a sponge bath (Milk 58). The language
of lesbian desire can be said to be as inherent to her as the ability to speak at all, a firm
rootedness not afforded to the Spanish language. It is her Cuban linguistic register that has been
made strange to her in her amnesia. Significantly, Milk’s portrayal of Carmelita’s sudden lack of
fluency in Spanish, or more specifically ‘Cuban-ness,’ disrupts the representational stereotypes
that have become the core of her persona. Milk dares to display this persona as she struggles to
re-apprehend her stereotypes. In this way, Milk raises the question of how identity is dependant
on representation. Who Carmelita is depends on how she re-members—and then performs—her
body in performance. Moreover, by disrupting any received exilic memory, Milk creates the
necessity for re-orienting the terms of exilic identity, not only against a mainstream “forgetting”
of exilic self, but also against and across ascribed, homogenous accounts of Cuban exilic identity and positionality.

The audience first hears about Carmelita’s amnesia through the character of Pingalito, who, as in *Memorias*, serves here again as a kind of narrator. He explains:

Pingalito: When I heard of Carmelita’s tragic accident I rush right over, hoping a familiar face can trigger something in the deep recessed cavities of her cerebro, cerebellum, and medulla oblongata. You see, people, the doctors have their methodologies for curing amnesia, and I have mine. (*Milk* 54)

Pingalito thus becomes the first to set out to help Carmelita in the recovery of her sense of self. Notably, the means to re-membering within the play take the form of various exposures of Carmelita to her past, but it is Pingalito’s first attempts that are the most parodic; stymied as they are by the impossibility of reducing Carmelita’s intersectional dimensions to one dominant identification:

Pingalito: I think what, above all, is Carmelita? I tell you. Cuban. Cubanita. One hundred fifty percent. So I decide to tell her some facts about Cuba. See if it jiggles something. (*Milk* 54)

When this fails, Pingalito changes track: “So I decide to change route. […] So I ask you people, what is Carmelita above all? Eh? Above all she is an artist. One hundred fifty percent. So maybe a song and a poem will do the trick” (55). Significantly, as Pingalito shifts to focusing on Carmelita as an artist, the relationship to art remains rooted in her Cuban-ness. As Pingalito continues: “Poetry is something we Cubans have in our souls. It is our tradition.” (55) While neither Cuban facts nor poetry awaken the memory of Carmelita, Pingalito’s failure to re-constitute/re-member Carmelita by attempting to awaken singular dimensions of her identity
underscores the tightly-woven intersectionality of Carmelita as a subject, and enacts a displacing choteo of the conventions of ethno-cultural re-memembering.

Just as memory has been dis-membered through Carmelita’s tongue that has lost its linguistic agility, soon too it is dis-membered through the process of (in)digestion. Milk takes up the trope of “feeding memory,” and subverts it through an irreverent choteo that re-members it through an aching stomach. Where Pingalito fails to rekindle Carmelita’s memory, the doctors try to trigger Carmelita’s memory with familiar things, specifically food items. In a choteo retelling of Swann’s involuntary memory episode in the first volume of In Search of Lost Time, Carmelita describes how the doctors attempt to force her memory by bringing her an assortment of “Cuban” food:

they tell me to eat the food they bring, because the French philosopher Proust ate one madeleine cookie and all his childhood memories came rushing back to him.

(Picking up a can of goya beans) Goy…Goya? Black beans. (Picking up a beverage bottle) Malta Hatuey or is it Hatuey? Is the H aspirated or not aspirated? Is he the chief Indian Hatuey or the Native American Hatuey? Oh, these labels are so confusing. (Picking up a yuca) Is this a yuca or a yuucka? […] Oh, to be or not to be. But who, that is the question. (Milk 59)

Carmelita attempts to negotiate these three (in)digestible “Cuban” pathways to recovering her identity, interwoven with other cacophonous referents: Goya beans resonate with “goy,” the Yiddish word for non-Jew; and even Hamlet’s soliloquy is reformulated to capture the identity crisis of Carmelita, our “tragic” heroine.

Carmelita’s choteo begins by replacing the fragrant madeleine and its ensuing reminiscences with two commercially packaged, nominally “Cuban” foods: Goya beans and Malta Hatuey. By exchanging the freshly baked morsel with mass produced products, this choteo
irreverently drags down the pretences of a European and Anglo-American literary tradition invested in an elitist, upper class privileging of individual quiet reminiscence. Instead of a freshly baked madeleine that seduces Swann to recall his very personal—and presumably highly valuable—childhood experience, Carmelita is asked to rediscover herself across a packaged iconography that portends to be the founding “content” of “Cuban” subjecthood.

The Goya beans are a referent to the popular Cuban “moros y cristianos”—literally, “moors and Christians”—rice and beans dish. Moreover, Goya is the brand name for, “America’s largest Hispanic-owned food company and the premier source for authentic Latin cuisine” (Goya website). Simultaneously, the reference to Goya is also a reference to the Spanish artist. For Manzor:

Carmelita obviously trivializes the European artistic tradition by ‘bringing it down’ to the mundane level […] what could be a better sign of contemporary Cuban-ness than a can of black beans whose label constantly reminds us of our Spanish colonial past—Goya—and our diasporic present—made in Miami? […] Tropicana incorporates Cuban and European sources, underscoring that both are part of her tradition. (“Two Tropicanas” 389)

Carmelita’s referencing of Goya beans as an item that might direct her to recall her ethno-cultural identity thus reveals this marker of an “identity” to be itself forged through intersecting hybridizations: from the creolization of Spanish colonial and Caribbean indigenous peoples, to the U.S. industrialization of these as a product.

The Malta Hatuey likewise dis-members the history of Cuba into a non-alcoholic malt drink produced by the Bacardi beverage company. Like the Goya beans before it, the Malta Hatuey beverage—while implying a Cuban heritage—is not made in Cuba. In fact, while
Bacardi was originally founded in Cuba, the company relocated its enterprise to the Bahamas after the Castro regime confiscated the company’s Cuban assets in 1960. Notably, Bacardi drinks are no longer sold in post-revolutionary Cuba, and yet continue to use the Cuban imaginary as a means to sell their product. As an example of this, in *Bacardi: The Hidden War*, Hernando Calvo Ospina relays how Bacardi began to label one of its drinks “Cuba Libre” after 1998, and the Spanish Association of Advertising Users took them to court for misleading the public to believe their products came from Cuba (Calvo Ospina 79). By referencing a product that is invested in this Cuban demarcation for sales purposes, *Milk* activates a *choteo* of the value of Cuban ethnocultural heritage. This “marking” is particularly constituted across an Amerindian Cuban heritage. As Pingalito notes in his fifth fact of Cuba in *Milk’s* predecessor *Memorias*:

Cuba did not forget her Indians, no. She names her ice cream after the beautiful Indian maiden, Guarina—better than Haagen Daz. She names her national beverage after the Indian Hatuey—malta Hatuey (*Memorias* 399).

The Amerindian reference in the beverage’s title is to Taíno Indigenous chief Hatuey, who in 1511, after having fled to Cuba from neighbouring Hispaniola, pursued by the Spanish colonizers, took up arms against them, and was burnt alive. Notably, Aviva Chomsky posits that, “Cuban revolutionaries, and Cuban historiography, emphasize a long tradition of anti-colonial struggle on the island leading up to 1959,” and so have venerated Hatuey’s anti-colonial narrative with a “statue of Hatuey in Baracoa, Cuba, proclaim[ing] him ‘the first rebel of America’” (Chomsky 15).

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103 Significantly, later on in the play, Carmelita further negotiates this colonial history, when Hatuey’s final moments are re-membered through Arriero’s narrative, in one of Carmelita’s memory attacks (*Milk* 62).
After searching to find herself within the labels of these two products, Carmelita turns to a possible third pneumonic: the yucca. While this root vegetable presents the first, non-commercially-packaged item, its *choteo* of memory is a play on the yucca as root, as well as on its homonym, “the acronym YUCA (for Young Urban Cuban American)” (*Life on the Hyphen* 15). Peréz Firmat elaborates on the “YUCA” position as follows:

> We Cubans have a particular relationship to our roots: we eat them. [...] You take your favourite aboriginal roots—*malanga, ñame, yucca, boniato*—and you cook them until they are soft and savory. [...] You eat them in the knowledge that such conspicuous consumption will let you remain faithful to—what else?—your roots. [...] A YUCA is a self-consuming vegetable. (*Life on the Hyphen* 14-15)

The play of yucca-to-YUCA here performs a multidirectional *choteo* of heritage. Firstly, the complexity of Carmelita’s ethno-cultural roots is reduced to a singular yucca root. Carmelita is invited by the doctors to consume her own “roots” as a means to discover herself, and yet they present her with the yucca in its raw, inedible form, making it impossible for her to digest this root. Moreover, the consumption of the yucca, as Peréz Firmat signals in his wordplay on YUCA-yucca, is also a form not only of re-membering but also of a dis-membering self-cannibalization.

Moreover, the *choteo* reworking of attempting to “feed memory” with these somehow less-than-appetizing edibles is even more poignant in the context of the Cuban “Special Period” in the early 1990s. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, “Soviet aid and trade, on which the economy had depended, abruptly ended” (Eckstein 29). As a result, the Cuban government “publicly announced a ‘Special Period in Peacetime,’ a euphemism for crisis and a justification for policies it deemed necessary even if not ideologically defensible” (Eckstein 29). This period
of time was marked by extreme poverty, and a growing internal disenchantment with the Castro regime. As Troyano quips about her use of food imagery in *Milk*,

> Whether or not Cuba is familiar to you, I want to give you a taste of it. That's why I have so many images of food. There's so little food in Cuba and food images are pervasive in Latino culture. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

Feeding the (U.S.) audience’s imagination with references to Latino food culture is at the same time an indirect critique of the lack of food in Cuba, as a result of the U.S. embargo. Across *Milk* there are also direct references to food shortages, though always also cased within *choteo’s* irreverence. A key example of this is when a voiceover delivers the following joke:

> Did you hear the one about the eggs and the fried steak? There are these eggs running through the Malécon Boulevard in Havana. And they’re running because they are being chased by a million hungry Cubans [...] And as the eggs are running they pass in front of a fried steak [...] very relaxed. And the eggs yell at the steak, ‘The Cubans are coming, the Cubans are coming! Aren’t you afraid they’ll come and get you?’ The steak says, ‘No way, these Cubans don’t know what a steak looks like.’ (*Milk* 64)

In this voiceover, Carmelita performs a *choteo* staging of the “Special Period”: the audience is asked to view, in their imagination, the personified, cartoon bodies of eggs and a fried steak, as dragged-down exemplars of Cuban bodies “in struggle.”

> While the first scene featuring Carmelita begins with these *choteo* attempts to feed her memory back to her, *Milk*’s opening scene begins with a complete inversion of utilizing food as a trigger for lost memory. The play opens on a dark set, except for “a blue light bathing the chair inside the white cube,” accompanied by the writer’s pre-recorded voice-over (*Milk* 52): “a female voice speaking in English with no trace of a Spanish accent” (“Two Tropicanas” 384). The writer’s voice has an Anglo-American accent, and describes her emigration from Cuba to
the United States as a child, and the experience of the U.S. “melting pot” as a kind of enforced cultural amnesia:

I never drank my milk. I always threw it out. Except this time when I went to throw it out, the container fell and spilled on the floor. The nun came over. Looked at me and the milk. Her beady eyes screamed: You didn’t drink your milk, Grade A pasteurized, homogenized, you Cuban refugee./ After that day, I changed. […] If I closed my eyes and held my breath, I could suppress a lot of the flavour I didn’t like. This is how I learned to drink milk. It was my resolve to embrace America as I chewed on my peanut butter and jelly sandwich and gulped down my milk. This new milk that had replaced the sweet condensed milk of Cuba. My amnesia had begun. (Milk 53)

In the writer’s narrative, drinking “Grade A pasteurized, homogenized” milk is used metonymically for the forced assimilation into mainstream U.S. culture. The process of integration is marked here not only by the acculturation of learning how to drink milk, but with its attendant deculturation: the process of forgetting the sweet condensed milk of Cuba. The white milk, and its extension across the white cube of the set, which literally references amnesia’s “blankness,” can also be read as referencing the forced “whitewashing” of the subject. Muñoz contextualizes the amnesia in Milk, and the search for recovering memory as, “analogous to the larger exilic project of staving off a mode of assimilationist forgetting that plagues exiles. Dominant culture is suspicious of the exile's double residency both inside and outside the nation. The safe house of exilic memory is often raided by this mode of forgetting. Nations, especially the U.S., require that the pledge of allegiance constantly be recited. As a rule, the nation understands the ambivalence, indeterminacy of exile and hybridity as a threat to the fiction of national unity and cohesion” (“No es fácil” 77). Furthermore, for Manzor, this parody on the construction of nationality is complex in integrating “the element of sexuality” in its subtext
(“Two Tropicanas” 386), combining as it does “[c]ompulsory homogenization into American-ness and compulsory heterosexuality” (“Two Tropicanas” 385). *Milk’s choteo* exploration of the amnesia inherent in diasporic subjecthood plays across this highly political critique of forced assimilation and homogenization, by staging amnesia literally. Carmelita’s ethno-cultural amnesiac negotiation of Cuban-Americanness is thus at once reduced to a brain condition and multiply redirected to question the political forces at play in the valuing of different axes of identity. As Muñoz elaborates, there is “a profound sense of displacement that marks the exile subject’s ontology” (“No es fácil” 78), and this displacement is one that majoritarian culture seeks to erase through “assimilationist forgetting” (81). In countering this amnesia, and reasserting her multiple positionality, Carmelita/Troyano eschews the normative, hegemonic “desire for a sanitized citizen” (81), for “an ideal and homogenous citizen” (80-81): maintaining the “abode” of “exilic memory that is not spatially overdetermined but instead engenders an ambivalent and nomadic relation to the national body politic” (81). The exilic subject is thus re-membering its multiple, and at times conflictual, allegiances, ones that are further complicated by her intersectional position. Moreover, *Milk’s choteo* of the process of identity construction goes further to not only subvert cultural amnesia, but also its counterpart: cultural reclamation.

**Re-turning “Home”**

*Milk* performs a choteo of the site of return and the bodies enacting this process of “homecoming,” with Carmelita as the first body to lead the audience back to Havana. After finding no pneumonic trigger at the hospital, Carmelita decides that return is the sole means of recovery. As Carmelita ruminates, after all other memory aids have failed:

> Pingalito […] he tells me I’m from Cuba. / Maybe there is only one way to find out. To go back to the place I was born in. My homeland, the place that suckled me as a newborn
babe. In the distance, I hear the clink, clink, clink of a metal spoon against glass. It is my mami stirring condensed milk with water. She holds a glass. The milk beckons me to her.

I hear a song: ‘How Would You Like to Spend the Weekend in Havana?’ (Milk 59)

It is noteworthy that while the dramatic text implies a somewhat straightforward, nostalgic valorizing of a subject’s return to the “Cuban homeland” as aiding their identity formation, the play also supplies a sharp choteo of the “grounds” of this return.

Pingalito’s very first attempt at triggering Carmelita’s memory takes the form of a simulation of a past environment. As Pingalito explains:

I think of a childhood memory she used to tell me about. Her grandfather who smoked a cigar, would take her for a drive in his Chevrolet […] She would get so carsick. So I decide to simulate this memory. By blowing smoke in her face, playing with the controls of the hospital bed […] I am playing her like a big accordion when a doctor comes in and says I gotta go. (Milk 54)

This ridiculous parody of re-creating a past environment may be read as a clever send-up of the efficacy of (re)(trans)planting someone into a past positioning. It is the first instance in Milk that queries the validity of (re)“locating” Carmelita as a means to (re)discover herself, within Cuba.

The process of Carmelita’s homeward journeying is constructed as an irreverent subversion of the directionality of re-turn. Carmelita’s first arrival in Havana proves to be a brief one. As she recounts:

I go to the counter in the airport holding on to my Cuban passport, my American passport, and a fax saying my visa is waiting for me here. Names are called for people with visas but mine is not one. The immigration guy says I gotta go back […] I am returned. Back to El Norte. (Milk 59-60)
This failed attempt at return introduces the difficulty of intersectional positionality. Carmelita is a holder of not only a Cuban passport, but also of a U.S. citizenship. Her dual nationality, while on the one hand “authenticating” her presence in both the U.S. and Cuba, also excludes her from having a permanent position in either. Specifically, as Carmelita is a body that permanently resides in the U.S., she is required to have a visa in the early 1990s to visit Cuba. This visa is necessary for remaining in Cuba, but, more importantly, for being able to leave Cuba at the end of her stay. Carmelita’s documentation as a dual citizen requires an additional “licence” to sojourn in Havana. In stating that, lacking a visa, she is “returned. Back to El Norte,” Carmelita highlights the complexity of her “belonging.” The Cuban officials “return” her to her official home: the U.S., wherein she resides permanently. And yet, Carmelita at once returns to the U.S. and distances herself from this place by dubbing it, in Spanish, as “The North.”

*Milk’s* *choteo* of an ethno-cultural “dressing the part” to be allowed “back” into home reaches the greatest apogee from the venerated original, through Carmelita’s donning of an “authentic” travel hat. After having been thwarted on her first attempt at return, Carmelita decides to return, this time suited up like “her people”: in this case, a member of the Cuban diaspora. In her description of the other people making the trip to Cuba, Carmelita has detailed:

The Cuban diaspora that is going back, holding on to plastic bags with medicines and the most magnificent hats […] The gentleman in front of me, an octogenarian, has his head down. I don’t know if it’s age or the weight of his three hats. I discover my people are a smart people […] The layered look is in. (*Milk* 59)

The “layered look” is the result of travellers finding ways around the luggage weight restrictions. When Carmelita re-attempts her return, she too has adopted “her people’s” attire:

I go back especially now that I know how to dress. I go in style. I make myself a magnificent hat. Check it out. (*Carmelita models hat.*)/ Soy una tienda ambulante. In my
Easter bonnet with toilet paper on it. I’m a walking Cuban department store. Tampons and pearls, toilet paper, stationery supplies. What a delight. (*Milk* 60)

The travel hat[^104] that Carmelita wears in performance was one the artist originally commissioned Uzi Parnes to design for her piece in the New Museum of Contemporary Art’s exhibition entitled the *Bad Girls Show*, performed in the spring of 1994. This extraordinary, *choteo* send-up of a hat then went on to become the first “prop/costume piece for the show [*Milk*]” (*O Solo Homo* 19). This prop also marks the introduction of colour into Carmelita’s attire. Carmelita has progressed from donning the all-white helium balloon hat of cultural amnesia to the hat of cultural reclamation. When Carmelita here frames her body underneath this excessive travel hat, she is re-membering herself through a crude *choteo* of the Cubans layering themselves with supplies—primarily medical—to bring back into Cuba under the Special Period. Carmelita replaces the highly valued, life-protecting properties of medical supplies with a “lowered” down version of drug-store goods: toilet paper, tampons, stationery. *Milk’s choteo* re-telling of the kind of goods being brought back by diasporic Cubans is at once a critique of the problematic conditions of Cubans living under the Special Period, and a critique of how these dire conditions are represented to a U.S. audience. In the published version of *Milk* in *TDR (The Drama Review)* in autumn 1995, the photo of Carmelita wearing her absurd travel-hat is accompanied by the following caption:

> In *Milk of Amnesia*, Carmelita Tropicana goes back to Cuba wearing a hat (designed by Uzi Parnes) like the ones worn by returning Cubans who decorate them with hard-to-find consumer goods, from tampons to pearls. (101)

[^104]: A photograph of Carmelita wearing the travel hat is available in the published version of *Milk* in *TDR*, p.101.
Carmelita’s *choteo* act of cultural reclamation and re-turn through the donning of the travel hat is multilayered. In the performance, Carmelita walks to the corner where her hat is sitting on a chair, picks it up, puts it on, and turns around to model it for the audience:

Check it out. Going back to Cuba hat, circa 1993. I am a walking Cuban department eh-store. *Una tienda ambulante*. Check it out. Check it out. *(Breaking into off-key singing, and with arm gestures that echo a slow flamenco)* in my Easter bonnet, with toilet paper on it. *(Stepping out towards the audience, and assuming the abrupt directness of a street vendour)* Check it out, tampons and pearls, toiletries, stationery supplies, you want it, I got it, *condon*, lollipop. *(Switching to a lower, sexually suggestive tone)* Ey, baby…*(“Carmelita Tropicana Sample” 5:25-5:55min)*

The particular juxtaposition of objects decorating this travel hat offers an irreverent *choteo* of supplies that intersect high and low value, and do so along and across class, gender, sexual, and cultural axes. The first such contrast is the pairing of tampons with pearls. The upper class femininity of pearls—with the accompanying presumptions of muted etiquette and propriety of the hetero- and cis-normative woman wearing them—is dragged down by its linkage to tampons. Tampons, while also implying a woman as user, call attention not to the woman’s gender but to her sex: lowering down from the pearls’ elegant enrobing of the female body to the tampons revealing of its corporeal fluids. Moreover, when intersecting tampons across Cuban Catholic “sensibilities,” the tampon is further perceived as a potential threat to the woman’s virginity.105

The tampon thus not only connotes the female body’s menstruating sex organ, it specifically

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105 Notably, Tampax tampons launched customized ad campaigns in reaction to this possible resistance to their product. One such campaign, aired in South America in the 1990s included the tag line: “Of course you’re not going to lose your virginity [by using tampons]… that will happen in a much more romantic way” (McDonough 582).
might “threaten” its sexual sanctity. A second such juxtaposition of objects is of *condon* (condom) and lollipop. Like the toilet paper before them, both these items are a *choteo* of the medical supplies that might be needed in Cuba under the Special Period; but they also drag Carmelita’s list of items further down into the sexual and, hence, transgressive. By vocalizing condom in Spanish, Carmelita overlays this drug-store product with the exotic “threat” of Latino/a sexual desire. Moreover, the coupling of *condon* with the childish lollipop transposes the candy into an item of illicit sexual import, finally propelling Carmelita herself to descend lower still from the matter-of-fact marketing of the commercial vendor to the sexual solicitation of a street pick-up artist. It is this hat, intersecting across all of these identity axes, that finally becomes Carmelita’s “ticket” home. Outfitted to “fit in” with the other returning Cubans, she is warmly received: “When I go back, the immigration guy is so friendly. ‘Back so soon? I like your hat.’ So I give him a couple of tampons” (*Milk* 60).

Yet, on this “homeward” path, Carmelita’s *choteo* of re-membering Cuban identity takes an additional deviation. Just as Carmelita is celebrating her reclaimed Cubanness through modeling her hat, the dramatic text breaks to confront—and defend—its own irreverent subversion as “accurate.” In the clip of Carmelita’s 1994 performance of this scene, she interrupts her hat modelling to deliver the following text:

Now this is a part of the show, okay ladies and gentlemen, that you say, I love her hat, but she is making fun. This is not the true. Honey let me tell you: New York Times—Sunday New York Times—article a couple of months ago they had pictures of the women who go back to Cuba with these hats. When I went back, I had competition. Next to me there was a woman with a pressure cooker on her head. A pressure cooker. This is a tough competition. These people are going to survive. (‘Carmelita Tropicana Sample” 5:56- 6:34min)
Notably, in one version of the published dramatic text, this text is reframed not as Carmelita commenting on the hat, but as the actress’s direct address:

(The actress steps out of the white cube and, dropping Carmelita’s Spanish accent, addresses the audience.) Now this is the part where you think it’s performance art, a joke. Truth is stranger than fiction. The New York Times in 1993 had a photo essay of women with these hats. And when I went back the competition got tougher. Next to me was a woman with a pressure cooker on her head. A pressure cooker. These people are going to survive. (As she returns the microphone, she resumes the Carmelita persona.)

(Milk 60)

Before turning to an analysis of this latter version’s “shedding” of the Carmelita persona, I want to assess the grounds of the text’s “defense” against being deemed a choteo portrayal of an appropriate Cuban travel outfit. The terms of defending this claim are grounded in referencing a purportedly non-fictional article. The New York Times article that most closely fits such reference is Jo Thomas’ photo essay: “The Last Days of Castro’s Cuba: Scenes from a restless nation waiting for the end—however long it may take,” with photographs by Gilles Peress, published on March 14, 1993. Yet, unlike Troyano’s claim, this photo essay does not depict the returning Cuban diaspora in their “travel hats.” The photos themselves depict people waiting in line in Havana, due to bus shortages and outside government-operated stores. Nevertheless, Thomas’ account does confirm the layering of goods, which the ‘travel hat’ excessively enacts. Thomas begins his essay:

106 This dramatic text is from the version published in I, Carmelita (2000). Notably, this self-referential text is absent from the other two published text versions of Milk, namely its earliest publication in TDR’s autumn 1995 issue, and its publication in Latinas on Stage (2000). I am analyzing the version of the text in I, Carmelita, as it offers a richer complexity to the representational negotiation across Carmelita’s body in performance and the body of the actress/Troyano.
My flight to Cuba checks in at 5:30 AM at an obscure desk marked Haiti Transair at Miami International [...] It’s a three-hour wait for a 30-minute charter flight. Because the 44-pound weight limit on baggage doesn’t include medicine, all about me are people holding clear plastic bags filled with antibiotics, aspirin, vitamins, milk of magnesia, and first-aid supplies. (Thomas 34)

Thomas’ account echoes the beginning of Carmelita’s account, with “The Cuban diaspora that is going back, holding on to plastic bags with medicines” (Milk 59), but Carmelita’s adds the playful addition of reducing these medicines and first-aid supplies to toilet paper, tampons, condoms, stationery and lollipops, as well as, “the most magnificent hats” (Milk 59), as the vessel for these supplies. In her “defense” of her travel hat as “non-fictional,” the body in performance—Carmelita, and/or the actress—at once grounds the narrative in the non-fictional restrictions of the Special Period and reasserts the “authenticity” of the fictive icon that excessively points to these restrictions. By re-claiming the hat as part of the “real,” this defense does not discard the choteo at play, but rather enacts a second layer of choteo: dis-orienting the terms of the representational space, as at once negotiating fiction and non-fiction. Moreover, unapologetic in its irreverence, the text concludes with an even more absurd assertion: “Next to me was a woman with a pressure cooker on her head” (Milk 60). The pressure cooker metaphor of the tensions of Cuba’s Special Period is dragged down to the absurd and re-placed atop the head of a fellow traveler enacting the journey of re-turn.

Last but not least, the “defense” of the travel hat is finally also mapped across the question of who is its speaker. As noted earlier, the performance text performs Carmelita as speaking the text, while the version of the dramatic text that includes the scene assigns the “defense” to “the actress.” Who is this “actress”? While the character of the actress is—as with all the embodiments in Milk—layered upon the performing body of the artist Alina Troyano,
whom is she portraying? Having shed its portrayal of the persona of Carmelita, is the “actress” performing as the artist Alina Troyano? The actress’s voice is identical to the pre-recorded voice of the writer/Troyano in the opening of the play; yet, up to this point, the character of the writer/Troyano has been physically absent in the performance, existing solely through pre-recorded voiceover. Hitherto, the physically present body of the actress on stage has performed as: first, the character of Pingalito; then, been visible while changing costumes from Pingalito to Carmelita; and finally, as the character Carmelita. Notably, across these three modes, the body of the actress has only spoken as either the character of Pingalito or Carmelita, each with their own distinctive, accented vocalization. She has otherwise been a voice-less actor’s body, transitioning from character to character. In the moment of interrupting Carmelita, and stepping out of character to address the audience, the actress is taking up her voice for the first time. But who is this entity? In other words, which identities constitute her embodiment? Is this the voice of the artist Troyano—the performing body that underlies the representations across actress, the writer, and Carmelita—taking the stage to “portray” the purportedly extradiegetical “real” beyond representation, to subvert and decentre the representational strategies at play in performance? If so, what is the implication of the artist breaking into direct address in order to “defend” what might be “misconstrued” as Carmelita’s choteo with/through her travel hat? I propose that this extradiegetic artistic defence against an accusation of choteo is itself a choteo on the act of representation and its negotiation of truth. As mentioned above, the text of this defence speech claims to be accurate in its depiction by linking itself with the photo essay from the *The New York Times*. Yet, its travel hat is clearly an excessive fictional portrayal of the actual Cuban travellers layering of supplies. And yet, again, as this travel hat is performing a choteo of the non-fictional situation—dragging down its context and content through an irreverent excessive reposition—the travel hat is not only fictional, but rather, a negotiation across fiction and non-
fiction. Moreover, the artist speaking the defence is similarly negotiating the “truth” of representation. The artist is a liminal figure: at once the performing body that has “hosted” the choteadora Carmelita; as well as the writer, who has written Carmelita and makes an appearance in Milk as at once interwoven across and against Carmelita. In the artist’s defence against a choteo within the dramatic text, a solipsistic choteo is taking place: subverting the framework of representation not only across the diegetic, dramatic text’s axes of fiction and non-fiction, representation and identity; but also out and across the extradiegetic context of artistic representation; and potentially further still, out across the perpetual negotiation of identity vis-à-vis representation. In other words, the artist’s defence against an accusation of Carmelita enacting a choteo of the Cuban “situation” enacts an even more multidirectional choteo of artistic representation in general; and, moreover, a choteo of the groundlessness of any identity—be it personal, historical, fictional or non-fictional—as already woven across the re-/dis-membering process of its representation.

(Auto)biographing Return

Milk’s choteo of memory and identity takes up its subversion by not only forcing Carmelita to re- and dis-member herself, but also by forcing Carmelita to find herself while in a choreographic pas de deux with her physical/psychic “double”: the writer/Troyano. The choteo of identity soon begins to bleed together not only memory and amnesia, but also identity and the self-as-other. Milk presents the first ‘autobiographical’ appearance of the artist as a key character in her own work. The choice to insert into the piece an iteration of the artist that is at once apart and alongside Carmelita at once integrates Troyano’s autobiographical return to Cuba into the play’s narrative, and subverts the terms of this (auto)biographic process.
Troyano’s autobiographical return to Cuba took place in 1993. Troyano’s journey was funded under the “Suitcase Fund: A Project of Ideas and Means in Cross-cultural Artist Relations” (*I, Carmelita* 52), with a goal of sending her “to participate in a dialogue between Cuban and Cuban American artists” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). This trip was Troyano’s first visit to Cuba since her family’s emigration to the United States, when Troyano was seven years old. As she recalls, “I knew that if I returned to Cuba, I knew that this was, since I hadn’t been since I was a kid, I knew that this was so important that I would create work” (“Carmelita Can Be a Beast”).

To better understand the terms of Troyano’s autobiographical act of return, I refer to the work of Susan Eva Eckstein and her highly influential study on Cuban and Cuban-American relationships, *The Immigrant Divide: How Cuban Americans Changed the US and their Homeland* (2009). Eckstein posits that the opportunity for a diasporic Cuban to visit Cuba in the 1990s was one taken up by many of the 1.5 generation, who had left Cuba as children, as an opportunity to rediscover the Cuba of their imagination, and that of their parents’ recounting (153). This choice was in clear contrast to their parents’ generation, which operated on a strict no-travel taboo to Cuba—especially before the 1990s, with the rare exception of visiting family. A visit to Cuba offered the opportunity for Cuban-Americans of the 1.5 generation to break down some of the conceptual boundaries about Cuba, which they had formed through the lens of their parents’ exilic perspective and the negative depictions of Cuba in the U.S. media (161-163). Often, through reconnecting with relatives in Cuba, these visitors created new bonds with Cuba, “exposed to other-than-the-exile points of view” (163).

For Troyano, questions behind her autobiographical return visit to Cuba, included the following ruminations:

What if I didn’t like Cuba? What if I did? I started thinking about my life and the choices
that were made for me and the ones I made on my own. It was scary seeing what could have been, what might have been, and what wasn't. I had to face these questions head on. Would I remember my time in Cuba? What would I remember? This is what I mean about amnesia. Amnesia is about loss. Sometimes this loss is voluntary, when one chooses to assimilate into another country or culture, for example. Sometimes it's imposed […] For me, it was a little of both. I've always regarded myself as very Cuban. You couldn't take that out of me. And yet, if I went back, would the Cubans living in Cuba think that I wasn't Cuban? Would I have an accent? Would I be too American? All these things actually happened when I went to Cuba. At first, they would wonder: But who are you? I spoke Spanish, but other factors of my identity didn't register as Cuban for them—my gold knapsack, my high-top sneakers, my leopard Day-Glo shorts! They were confused about my identity. Identity really depends on where you are at, it's so much about geography. In New York, I am a woman of color. In Cuba, I was labeled white. All these shifts of identity depend upon who is doing the seeing. ("Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged")

Muñoz elaborates on the particular complexity afforded by Troyano’s return to Cuba, or rather, more particularly, on Troyano and Carmelita’s interwoven return, when he writes:

Going back to Cuba for anything but a family visit marks the traveling Cuban as one who is sympathetic to the revolution. Carmelita Tropicana's return is a search for the lost referent of exilic memory. We can infer, from the history that the performance enacts, that the referent of exile memory was smothered by the two over-determined options or paths that seem available to Cuban Americans: joining the ranks of white Marxists who fetishize the island in an uncritical fashion as a utopian site, or following the path of reactionary right-wing Cubans. It is obvious that such possibilities are moot ones for
Carmelita Tropicana. Carmelita decides that she must return to Cuba if she is ever to regain her memory. By returning to Cuba she insists on finding her own past, or, more nearly, assembling her own past. (“No es fácil” 80)

Muñoz posits the “search for the lost referent of exilic memory” as staking out a need to personally engage the complexities in which the diasporic relationship to home is embroiled. Rather than take up either of the binary, hegemonic narratives of Cuba available to Cuban Americans, Troyano/Carmelita wants to explore the in-between zones, allowing for the complex, and contradictory, to arise. As Manzor—who was also in Havana during Troyano’s return visit in August 1993—recounts,

> We talked about the oddity of feeling like tourists in what is supposed to be our own country. We commented on the incongruencies of contemporary life in Cuba. I even ‘translated’ jokes and gestures for her, because I had arrived two weeks earlier than she had; I had thus been able to get a ‘head start’ in the joyful and painful game of return. (“Two Tropicanas” 383, emphasis my own)

As Troyano reflects, the play is:

> trying to play with the realities that I found in Cuba, trying to go back and see something. And that's no longer so much of a parody perhaps; it's dealing with more personal or autobiographical materials in a different way. It's more scary because it's doing something that I haven't done before. It's a little bit more scary than the others that are spectacle, that are humor full-blown. This piece is something else and it's riskier material. You always have a feeling that if you do comedy you get a reward right away; people are laughing and they get it. But this other stuff — you kind of go like, ‘Am I boring people, or am I not?’ (“Memories and More Memories”)
Notably in this quote Troyano reflects that *Milk* moves past the realm of comedy. For me, her observation is a reflection of the sharpness of the subversive *choteo* she enacts in the play; one that is nonetheless grounded in an irreverent humour.

In crafting *Milk*, the artist does more than solely draw on her autobiographical return to formulate a fictionalized narrative of return for the persona of Carmelita. She expands the thematic of nostalgic return and re-membering into the formal structure of the piece: presenting the autobiographical voice as a character who negotiates alongside the Carmelita persona. As the artist notes, “Basically both of them are telling a story from two different points of view” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”). But what makes *Milk* a dramaturgically complex work is not a simple bifurcation of a story, but a deeply interwoven one. As she explains, in relation to developing the piece with her collaborator and sister, Ela Troyano:

Ela, who acted as director and dramaturg, was invaluable in the creation and development of the piece. She urged me to combine the more personal autobiographical style with the campy satire of earlier work. With *Milk* my schizophrenia blossomed, and I was able to combine the voice of Carmelita with mine, that of the writer. (*I, Carmelita* xxii)

Significant in Troyano’s comments is the highlighting of the inclusion of the writer not as creating a “real” foil to the “fictive” persona of Carmelita, but rather as continuing to explore the “schizophrenic” slippage of various iterations of identity. This experimentation with “a different style of writing” allows the artist to “let my schizophrenia surface, turning it into art” (*O Solo Homo* 19). Locating the character of the writer/Troyano within the world of *Milk*, and

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107 The slippage between Carmelita as persona and Troyano as artist is one that bleeds over into the non-theatrical. In her 1994 interview with David Román, the artist constantly shifts between speaking as Carmelita and speaking as Alina (Troyano). In discussing her autobiographical return to Cuba, she states: “The opportunity to return to Cuba was scary for Alina. My family left Cuba in the 1960s, when I was seven. […] Carmelita wanted to go back to Cuba, but Alina was hesitant about this trip” (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”).
alongside the persona of Carmelita, significantly complicates the dramatic and performance text. The writer/Troyano is not only a new addition, differently echoing the thematics proposed in Carmelita’s amnesiac struggle; rather, by representing the artist “directly,” the writer/Troyano upturns the dimensionality of the Carmelita persona. The persona of Carmelita has, hitherto, been the most proximal representational identity in performance of the artist Troyano. The writer/Troyano and Carmelita’s ability to jointly occupy the world of *Milk* may be simply read as a reduction of the Carmelita persona to an excessive double, a *choteo* copy of the already present writer/Troyano. But, more complexly, the co-inhabiting of *Milk* by these at once same and different bodies in performance dis-members the grounds of the artist’s identity, scattering the signifiers of identity across multiple representational layers. Where Carmelita as persona has been the representation of the artist in performance, the writer as Troyano is now also the artist in performance; and yet, Carmelita and Troyano are not reducible to the same identity. The dramatic narrative’s theme of the recovery of lost identity is thus strung across a matrix of intersectional representational subjectivities that performatively explode “identity” as a coherent concept.

The writer/Troyano in *Milk*, while being the first character to make an appearance in the play, is primarily performed through pre-recorded voiceover. As a pre-recorded voice, the writer’s narration relays the experience of coming of age as a Cuban in America, as well as, later on, of visiting Cuba as an adult. While the narrative of the writer shares many similarities to that of Carmelita, the “body” of the writer’s voice is marked by a distinctly Anglo-American—and, more specifically, a broad New York—accent, which immediately separates this voice, and its

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108 Henceforth, while the published text of *Milk* refers to this character as “the writer,” I will refer to her as “the writer/Troyano” to emphasize the relationality of one to the other.
body, from the persona of Carmelita. Yet Manzor is quick to point out that, while the writer’s
voice is “American” in accent, and “[a]lthough this female voice seems to speak perfect
English,” her construction of English bespeaks grammatical inconsistencies and collocations
attributable to a “foreign” fluency: “one of the first lines she delivers, ‘I was born in an island,’
already carries traces of another language, betraying her bicultural identity” (“Two Tropicanas”
385). I want to highlight that Manzor formulates this multiplicity as a “betrayal,” an upset of the
purported homogeneity of English. The body of the writer is further distinguished from the body of
Carmelita in primarily being represented by an absent physical body. The absence of a physical
referent in the first voiceover of the writer is emphasized by the ensuing entry of Pingalito as the
first visible physical body on stage. Troyano explains this dramaturgical choice as follows:

I like it when you're never quite sure. In Milk of Amnesia, we have this voice-over, a
woman's voice, and we expect to see a woman. But out comes Pingalito, a stereotypical
cigar-chomping Cuban man. What we see is a woman onstage in drag. (“Carmelita
Tropicana Unplugged”)

As Manzor elaborates:

The performance incorporates for the first time a more developed and more
personal, autobiographical voice, which seems to be the voice of the artist/writer as
opposed to the voice of Carmelita. This voice is literally a voice, because it
generally appears as pre-recorded. (“Two Tropicanas” 384)

Manzor’s assumption that the voice is not Carmelita’s can be attributed to her prior knowledge
of the Carmelita character in performance: specifically, as we have noted, across the
characteristic of vocal accent. While the character of the writer is labeled as such in the dramatic
script, an audience experiencing the play in performance is never conclusively told whose voice
they are listening to. Yet, as noted in Chapter 1, the performance context of Milk implies an
audience familiar with both the off-stage demeanour of the artist and her performance persona Carmelita.

It is in the writer’s second voiceover that new axes of her identity take the stage. The writer recalls how, “[i]n the eighties, that’s when my amnesia started to show cracks,” as she “became a civil servant and a thespian on the side” (*Milk* 57). The ensuing description of the writer’s theatrical endeavours—including her work at WOW—locate the writer as the artist Alina Troyano. The writer’s second voiceover also clarifies the relationship between her and Carmelita, echoing what might be understood as the off-stage relationship between the artist Troyano and her performance persona Carmelita. As the writer explains:

I couldn’t stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who pencilled in her beauty mark, she who was baptised in the fountain of America’s most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana’s legendary nightclub, the Tropicana, she could. She was a fruit and wasn’t afraid to admit it. She was the past I’d left behind.

She was Cuba. Mi Cuba querida, el son montuno…(57-58)

In this voiceover, the writer posits herself as Troyano: the artist and creator of the persona of Carmelita Tropicana. It aligns her physical absence with the larger omnipresence of the artist Troyano, overseer of the entire world of the play. It also recognizes the co-dependency of Carmelita’s excessive physicality on Troyano’s absence. For it is the writer/Troyano’s stage fright that has birthed the body in performance of Carmelita.

Significantly, over the course of *Milk*, the characters of the writer/Troyano and Carmelita begin to intersect across not only parallel narratives but also their split-yet-joint body in performance. The dramatic arc of the piece “progresses” as the writer/Troyano reclaims herself, and her body; as does Carmelita. *Milk* explores this joint reclamation through both dramatically echoing the process of memory in both characters and creating ever more moments of slippage.
and intersection between the character’s representational body in performance and the performing body of the artist. As the next section of analysis will show, by situating the process of an expansive intersectional self-enactment across the interwoven and yet distinct bodies of Carmelita and the writer/Troyano, Milk finally activates a choteo of identity construction as always also operating across, and entrapped within, the fictions of representation.

**Re-/Dis-Membering the “I”**

In Milk, both the writer/Troyano and Carmelita go in search of their exilic identity. They are seeking to carve out their own path to self-discovery, attempting different enactments of re- and dis-membering as a means to create and negotiate their own memory, towards identity. As the following analysis shall show, the process of self-discovery through return is one of a growing re-constitution of the presence of these identities on stage, but always also accompanied by dis-orientation and loss. Milk weaves together the parallel narratives of the writer/Troyano’s cultural amnesia and Carmelita Tropicana’s chocolate pudding wrestling-induced amnesia. After establishing these two characters and their loss of memory, both plots soon intersect in the proposed means of re-membering their respective lost subject: a return to Cuba. Acknowledging the layers in Troyano’s complex re-counting of what constitutes an “authentic” experience of Cuban return is necessary for recognizing the intersectional, and non-homogenizing position she affords the identities in Milk, as they seek to recover their memory.

Notably, the performance space across which these bodies find themselves maintains its split minimal staging throughout. Inhabiting either the dimly lit writer’s space on the left, or the white space designated for Carmelita’s performing body on the right, these bodies continue to negotiate their identity across the mise-en-scène. Both Carmelita’s body and the
writer/Troyano’s body slowly reclaim their memories on their return visit to Havana, each
enacting this rediscovery of self in radically distinct ways.

Carmelita successfully arrives in Havana, on her second try, with her colourful travel hat
(Milk 60). Returned to the supposed “source” of her missing memories, Carmelita now
undertakes the intense process of re-membering her own identity. Specifically for Carmelita,
driven by her “want to remember so much,” she begins to “get these false attacks. In
desperation, I appropriate others’ memories” (Milk 125). Carmelita’s reclamation of her identity
is thus characterized by sudden attacks of “stolen” memory, marked by physical transmutations,
wherein she personifies other beings. These “Collective Unconscious Memory Appropriation
Attacks”, or CUMAAs (Milk 63), are an irreverent choteo of both the individual act of
reminiscence and Jungian philosophy. This choteo of collective memory particularly “lowers
down” through two instances in which Carmelita recalls the traumatic experience of non-human
figures. The choice to arrive at Carmelita’s recuperation of identity through an amalgamation of
animal memories provides a distinct entry point into what defines collective cultural memory.
Carmelita’s re-/dis-membering process thus reveals itself as a choteo that decentres the
individual ego and her drive for identity reclamation, and instead allows for the incorporation of
a negotiation the collective socio-political realities.

Through Carmelita’s journey of re-membering through collective memory
appropriations, Milk becomes far more complex than a personal search for identity, and broadens
past the assumptions of a human-centric history. As Troyano notes, “I was able to combine the
voice of Carmelita with mine, that of the writer, and sprinkle it with assorted animals whose
voices gave us a glimpse of Cuban history” (I, Carmelita xxii). Elsewhere, Troyano elaborates:

What I wanted to deal with in Milk of Amnesia was to bring to life an entire culture—
Cuban culture. I wanted to write a piece that would reference Cuba continuously—
through the horse who came over from Spain, through the references to Columbus’s description of Cuba as paradise. I wanted to give people Cuba. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

Muñoz reads this as a critical, political negotiation:

It would be short sighted to understand this search for memory as being nothing but an individualistic quest to ‘find oneself.’ Rather, it is important to understand the odyssey of Milk of Amnesia as being as much about collective memory as it is about individual memory. The return to Cuba offers Carmelita Tropicana a chance to engage the Cuban condition on the island. (“No es fácil” 81)

In turning to Carmelita’s CUMAAAs, memory becomes a site of individual and collective negotiation. The first CUMAA that overtakes Carmelita, as she is searching for her ancestors at the Havana cemetery, is a key historical memory, but one witnessed through the marginal position of the non-human figure of Arriero, Hernan Cortez’s horse (Milk 62-63). The passage narrated by Arriero in Milk is a recycled piece of material, premiered in The Conquest of Mexico as Seen Through the Eyes of Hernán Cortés’s Horse,\(^{109}\) co-written by Troyano and Uzi Parnes, and originally performed in 1991 in Performance Space 122 (Tropicana “About”). Carmelita’s personification of Arriero is performed without a costume change, but rather with the aid of recorded sounds, including “the sounds of a stampede, horses neighing, flamenco music, and crickets” (Milk 62), and a red spotlight. In the passage, Arriero witnesses the murder of chief Hatuey at the hands of the Catholic priests. While the history of Chief Hatuey’s murder is one of the many marginalized by official historical narratives, here it is reasserted as central through

\(^{109}\) Parnes and Troyano originally wrote the piece for a grant that sought artistic work responding to the quincentennial of Columbus’s coming to America. Troyano explains that they didn’t get the grant, and muses that it was “probably because the grant people thought we were making fun…” (“Carmelita Can Be a Beast” 9:49min).
Carmelita’s personification of Arriero. Positing this experience of colonial violence as one of Carmelita’s key recollections of collective unconsciousness cements the significance of the problematic colonial legacy to the Cuban identity. Moreover, as it pertains to Carmelita’s direct search for ancestry, this scene highlights the plural origins of Cuban ethnic identity, displacing the tendency to only identify with and hierarchize Spanish ancestry, while denying indigenous as well as African ancestries. In reasserting the racial variety of Cuban cultural identity, the intersectional aspects of Cubanness and, by extension, of Carmelita’s identity as a Cuban, are brought to the fore.

Carmelita’s second CUMMA attack multiply redirects her identity even further, as it combines a pig’s experience of slaughter with Carmelita’s memory of having her tonsils removed. The traumatic experiences of the animal and Carmelita fuse to enforce the connection between political and personal consciousness. The scene begins with Carmelita going to the Hotel Nacional, and once there, becoming sick at the sight of the blue tile (Milk 66). Feeling ill, she orders a pork sandwich, but soon the piece of pork comes to life. Cochinito Mamón, the personified pig, whose name literally translates as “suckling pig” or the more colourful “filthy sucker,” becomes a voice for the suffering experienced under the Special Period. The pig’s narrative points to the actual fact of farm animals being kept in Havana homes, due to the lack of other sustenance. The pig relates his experience of being taken from a farm to a cramped home in Havana, and finally slaughtered by his owners (67-69). Sitting in the Hotel Nacional, with its blue tiles, Carmelita is overwhelmed by the memory of her tonsil operation—which took place in a clinic with blue tiles. Her memory and her process of re-membering this event is fused with Cochinito Mamón’s memory of being slaughtered, in a place with blue tiles (69). Unlike the first CUMMA, wherein Carmelita appropriated the singular memory of Arriero, in this second CUMMA, Carmelita both appropriates the pig’s experience and weaves her own trauma into it.
Specifically, in this process of joint re-membering, an irreverent juxtaposition of the weight of collective trauma is linked with absurd visual elements. Through this scene, the elements of excessive spectacle trickle back into the otherwise minimalist staging. While Carmelita’s first CUMAA was staged with a simple red spotlight, in this second transformation, Carmelita’s voice becomes that of Cochinito Mamón but the body of the pig is represented with an additional element. In the stage directions, the pig’s entrance, cued in by Carmelita’s description of the pork sandwich’s “slice [that] falls, no, it jumps […] [p]ig flies in and hangs above Carmelita’s head. On tape is the sound of a squealing pig” (Milk 67). At its most extravagant, in the first production of Milk in October 1994, Cochinito Mamón was represented as a six-foot-long papier-mâché piñata of a pig, created by set designer Kukuli Velarde (O Solo Homo 20). This set piece offers one of the most colourful scenes in the play. The piñata flies about over Carmelita’s head, with “blue tiled mosaic painted on its back” and “the expression of one who is about to be slaughtered” (20). Then, at the climax of the passage, as the pig retells how his vocal cords are cut, “Carmelita pulls on a string attached to the pig’s neck (a tampon acts as a cork or stopper), and when she does, a stream of red glitter flows from the pig’s throat” (20). As the artist elaborates:

Just like the piñata bursts open and candy spills on the ground, so too, our pig had a tampon. When it was pulled, glitter gushed from its neck, forming a puddle of glittered blood on the white linoleum floor. […] The red glitter blood is a stolen homage to Jack Smith [in his adaptation of Ibsen’s Ghosts] where a little stuffed animal went across the stage and spilled glitter from its body. (I, Carmelita xxiii)

The visual extravagance embodied in the papier-mâché pig infuses the passage with kitsch humour, a nod to queer performance history, and a powerful narration of the trauma of the forced silencing of subaltern voices—all through a choteo restaging of the celebratory, Latino piñata
Moreover, this choteo has been activated across diverse production conditions. As Troyano explains:

The pig, though magnificent, is too big to travel. Improvisation is necessary. In Barcelona the pig substitute was a whole ham—jamón Serrano, with a hoof and everything. In London it was a can of Spam. The last pig sighted was a two-foot-long Mexican piggy bank used at the Milk performance at Highways in Los Angeles in 1997. (O Solo Homo 20)

With each of these dramaturgical adaptations, the human-like subjectivity of the subaltern pig is critically thwarted by the reductive stereotype of his portrayal. In other words, the pig’s ridiculous embodiment as layered with Carmelita’s recollection of collective trauma displaces any linear attempts at cathartic empathy. The representation chafes at its own appropriations, calling attention to the difficult negotiation required in verbalizing, and witnessing, trauma.

Moreover, while Cochinito Mamón is represented by this additional prop—be it piñata or can of Spam—the second CUMAA also positions the pig’s appearance as being co-embodied by Carmelita herself. As Carmelita narrates the pig’s experience and interweaves it with her childhood operation, the narration is always delivered in first person. This passage reveals Carmelita’s intersectionality as also locating her within a community of the vulnerable, whose axes range across race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as the deprivileging of their humanity. Both Arriero and Cochinito Mamón are non-human voices that, respectively, witness and suffer human violence. Intertwining animal memories with those of Carmelita re-enforces the co-constitution of individual and collective identity, through a choteo exaggeration that takes collective experience to also include the non-human. It is through Carmelita’s two CUMAAAs that she is able to recover her own excessive presence, a re-membering of her intersectional identity.

As Carmelita comes out of her second CUMAA she states: “I remember. We are all connected,
not through AT&T, e-mail, Internet, but through memory, history, herstory, horsetory. I remember” (*Milk* 69).

Immediately after remembering herself, as a connected entity, Carmelita begins to shadowbox and recite a bilingual poem:

_I remember/ Que soy de allá/ Que soy de aquí/ Un pie en New York (a foot in New York)/ Un pie en La Habana (a foot in Havana)/ And when I put a foot in Berlin (cuando pongo pata en Berlin)/ I am called/ A lesbische cubanerin/ A woman of color/ Culturally fragmented/Sexually intersected/ But I don’t split/ I am fluid and interconnected/ Like tie-dye colors I bleed/ A Cuban blue sky into an American pumpkin orange/ Que soy de allá/ Que soy de aquí._ (Milk 69-70)

In the vein of Esparza’s performance text of *I DisMember the Alamo*, this poem dis-members across its intersectional axes in the process of re-membering them back to her subject: she is at once “from there” and “from here”—at once from New York and Havana—but also that her identity is negotiating across gender, race, and sexual orientation. Carmelita’s identity is thus not only an embodiment of the diasporic experience of cultural fragmentation, but also an intersectional subject negotiating her orientation. As Muñoz elaborates:

Carmelita Tropicana can be a beast. In the past she has been a horse, a pig and even a bear. In short, we can describe Alina Troyano’s performance persona Carmelita Tropicana as a queer assemblage. Assemblage is not simply characters or personas, instead there is something else, something multiple. An assemblage […] also [consists of] lines of flight and movement, of deterritorialization and destratification. We can think of the assemblage known as Carmelita Tropicana as a body without organs, which is a body
that is constantly dismantling the organism. [...] This queer assemblage\textsuperscript{110} is always becoming. (Muñoz qtd. in “Carmelita Can Be a Beast” 8:35-9:45min)

I want to highlight Muñoz’s descriptors of Carmelita’s body as “deterritorialized,” “lines of flight and movement” that are “always becoming.” I understand this constant destabilizing motion as the \textit{choteo} enacted by Carmelita’s body in performance, as she intersectionally disidentifies across an excessive plurality of axes. Moreover, as this analysis has tried to show, the dismantling and destabilizing that Carmelita activates is specifically a pulling down of context and content, decentering it and thus opening it up to critical interpretations. Carmelita has traversed multiple embodiments across \textit{Milk} to return not to a singular entity, but to her excessive plurality. Carmelita has traversed her amnesia, including the forced cultural amnesia of singular identity, and celebrates that she can now, “drink two kinds of milk”: “the sweet condensed milk of Cuba and the Grade A, pasteurized, homo kind from America” (\textit{Milk} 71). As she concludes her poem, the stage is bathed in bright light, and Carmelita, for the first time in \textit{Milk}, greets the audience with the persona’s signature, spit-fire hello: “Hello people, you know me. I know you. I don’t need no American Express card. I am Carmelita Tropicana, famous nightclub entertainer, superintendent, performance artist” (70). Carmelita has re-membered herself, after a thorough process of dis-membering. Once again though, as at the end of \textit{Memorias} (Chapter 3), Carmelita’s \textit{choteo} of memory inhabits and subverts its points of orientation. Carmelita has at once exploded the terms of identity through memory, and also continues to identify through this representational terminology.

\textsuperscript{110}As I have posited in this dissertation’s introduction, I do not wish to engage the concept of assemblage directly, and am instead drawing from Puar and her suggestion to couple intersectional methodology with the assemblage’s understanding of identity as “event-ness” (“IAA”).
Re-Presencing the Writer/Troyano

Carmelita’s re-turn “home” and to herself is paralleled in the interwoven return of the writer/Troyano. In turning to the re-/dis-membering process of the writer/Troyano, the bittersweet “game of return” is echoed in the haphazard and not quite linear materialization of the writer/Troyano’s body in performance: from disembodied, to indirect, to formally present. As already noted, the presence of the writer/Troyano throughout the piece is primarily presented through a pre-recorded voiceover. The artist has explained the various depictions of the writer as follows:

Alina [Troyano] is the writer, Carmelita is the performer. In Milk of Amnesia Ela and I set out to explore different ways of writing, performing, and staging. The writing is at times theatrical and at times autobiographical. It varies in tone depending on which persona I am performing. I perform these roles in different styles. The autobiographical sections are on tape, they tend to be serious and pensive. The voice I use in this section is closest to my own. Carmelita and Pingalito interact with the audience; I perform their roles in a more theatrical style. They are also quite campy and humorous. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

Not only is the writer/Troyano’s voice most often played upon an empty stage (Milk 52, 70-71), the disembodiment of this voice is further emphasized in two instances, wherein the actress’s body is made visible, and positioned as distinct from that of the writer/Troyano’s voice. These stagings leave the writer/Troyano effectively body-less: an uprooted voice, recorded in a distinct other space and time, played back in a room that instead presents the artist’s performing body as the voiceless actress. The first instance of this de-stabilization of the writer/Troyano occurs during the second voiceover of the writer (Milk 57). While this second voiceover is played, the physical body of the actress takes the stage. The actress’s body is visible in the dimly lit half-
space, which has been designated as the private space of the writer, wherein she changes out of
the Pingalito costume and into Carmelita’s (*Milk* 57). Prior to this scene, the actress’s body has
only been visible while “layered” by her performance as Pingalito. Here, the actress’s body is
literally shedding one character and preparing to perform as another. Moreover, this transition
from one representation to a second is layered with the tension of the third: the actress is also an
iteration of the writer/Troyano. Not only is the performing body of Troyano “equivalent” to that
of the actress’s, but also the actress’s body enacts her costume change from within what has been
prescribed as the “writer’s space.” This embodiment is in direct contrast to the actress’s
embodiments of every other speaking role in the play, which all take place within the
performance space—the white cube section of the stage. In this way, the coinciding appearance
of the actress’s body in the writer’s space, alongside the writer’s recorded voiceover, resists
rather than portends a possible embodiment for the writer/Troyano. The body of the actress and
the writer/Troyano in voiceover are diegetically out of sync and representing distinct roles, even
as they represent the singular, solo performer extradiegetically. Similarly, in the third voiceover,
the body of the actress is again present within the writer’s space, this time putting on lipstick
(*Milk* 60). In this scene, the actress’s physicality is not a transitional one, but rather a reference to
the lipstick mentioned within the writer/Troyano’s narrative. Specifically, the writer/Troyano
relates that she gave her Revlon “Love that Red” lipstick to a fourteen-year-old Cuban girl,
whom the writer/Troyano later sees entering a hotel lobby with a man (*Milk* 61). This
juxtaposition provides an interesting mise-en-scène for staging the writer/Troyano’s negotiation
of identity. The scene itself relays the writer/Troyano as ill at ease in her position as a foreign
tourist, and the awkward negotiation across this discomfort. When a fourteen-year-old Cuban girl
is awed at the beauty care product that the writer/Troyano has been able to purchase in the
United States without a second thought, the writer/Troyano decides to gift it to the teenager.
Whatever transformative effect the writer/Troyano may have hoped to achieve by passing along her Revlon—perhaps the assuaging of her U.S.-based, non-embargo position and its accompanying class privilege—she then sees the teenager entering the hotel lobby with a man: denoting that the teenager is most likely working in the tourist sex trade, servicing visiting tourists in exchange for a dinner at the hotel or possible money. The writer/Troyano must negotiate her position as a wealthy *Gringa* (U.S. tourist) who is a patron of the hotel; as well as her disidentification with this position through the desire to share her wealth with the Cubans in Cuba, as well as be critical of the tourist sex trade, and generally not take advantage during her visit. The mise-en-scène captures the tug of war of disidentification by paring down the physical enactment to the actress’s putting on lipstick. In this way, the scene simultaneously stages the writer/Troyano’s putting on of lipstick and the teenager’s putting on of lipstick. It does not indicate one body over the other, but instead layers the two—linking the red substance as a bloodline across both characters. The image at once connects and disconnects these bodies: for while they are both “Cuban,” the myriad other intersectional axes around this positionality place each of them miles apart. This link with a difference is suggested by Manzor, in her proposition that the play’s echoing of the phrase “No es fácil” (It is not easy) interweaves the island Cuban and the diasporic Cuban. For Manzor, *Milk* “follows a clearly designed objective of tactical intervention: to initiate a dialogue between two contradictory histories and trajectories, the diasporic Cuban and the island Cuban” (“Two Tropicanas” 391). Manzor posits that, “Carmelita’s and Troyano’s appropriation of ‘No es fácil’ [is] an insinuation that, albeit the many differences, life is not easy for either the Cubans on the island or the diasporic Cubans” (“Two Tropicanas” 391). The writer/Troyano is at once not the body of the teenager, and somehow also interwoven with and against her.
While the above examples position the writer/Troyano’s relationship to the actress as a shifting disembodiment, the writer/Troyano can also be read more broadly as and against the transmutable body of the actress. While the writer/Troyano and the actress are two distinct bodies within the dramatic text, they share the same body in the performance text. While this collapse is true of all the characters within the play—as embodied by the performing body of the actress, unlike the other, more physically present characters in the play (i.e. Carmelita, Pingalito) the writer/Troyano’s very absence of physical attributes make her “body” more proximally the actress’s. Moreover, extradiegetically, all of these characters are fragments of Troyano’s imagination, and the diegetic character of the writer is somehow also a representation of Troyano as the writer. The plural positioning of the body of the actress, as she embodies all the myriad characters across the play, can be read as the writer/Troyano negotiating across her multiple positionalities, and an indication of the writer/Troyano’s fragmentation as she navigates what constitutes her identity. The actress’s body—as fragmented across Milk’s parade of characters, becomes a constellation that maps the (only seemingly) absent body of the writer/Troyano.

Alongside the ambiguity of the writer/Troyano’s and the actress’ physical co-presence, there are also a few marked instances of the writer/Troyano taking the stage, if somewhat indirectly. In the preceding discussion of the defence of the travel hat text, the actress-as-the writer/Troyano made an abrupt appearance. While this chapter will later turn to exploring a second interruption by the actress-as-the writer/Troyano, the which concludes the play, I will first analyze a key scene that dwells in the slippage between the writer/Troyano as the body-less voice of the artist herself, and as a concrete presence, thus negotiating the multiple and fragmented searching that is the eventness of identity. Around two-thirds of the way into the play, the stage is dark, lit only by a slide projector, showing photographs of Troyano’s actual visit in 1993 to Havana, as “[t]he writer reads into the mic” (Milk 64). The writer is physically
present, if only in the semi-darkness; delivering her lines live for only the second time.\footnote{111} This scene discloses an outline of the body of the writer, overlaid by the projector’s images. The body of the writer is extended across these slides, as they depict iconic images of Havana, but, most poignantly, as they turn to show Troyano’s old house in Havana. When the slides of her old house come on, the writer/Troyano, “stops reading and speaks into the mic, pointing out the different parts of the house” (Milk 64). Not only are these slides photographs of Troyano’s actual return visit to her childhood home, several of them also capture Troyano \textit{in situ} (Milk 65). In performance, the projected images of Troyano in her house are layered on top of the semi-visible presence of the writer/Troyano on stage, as the writer speaks into the mic, describing the details of her visit. The staging of this scene, with the live body of the writer/Troyano outside of the photographic mementos, at the same time as captured within them, highlights the body’s re-/dis-memberment across retrieved Cuban artefacts and the present “no place” of the stage. In this way, the obfuscation of the body of the writer/Troyano stages the multiplicity of its identity. As the artist herself reflects:

The only\footnote{112} time you actually see Alina onstage is when I do the slide show which, of course, is dimly lit. At this point, she's speaking live. But even here the issue is complicated. The slides are projected on a wall, half of which is painted white and forms part of the cube. This staging forces the audience to confront the issue of multiple identities and perspectives. I think this mixture of writing, performing, and staging styles works well to bring forth the issues I am addressing throughout Milk of Amnesia.

\footnote{111} The writer’s first appearance is her previously discussed interruption of Carmelita during the travel hat scene, \textit{Milk} 60. \footnote{112} In this summary, Troyano overlooks two exceptions to this within \textit{Milk}, wherein the writer/Troyano appears in full-bodied presence: the defence of the travel hat (Milk 60), and the final moment of the play (Milk 71).
This dramaturgical choice multiplies and fragments the writer/Troyano’s presence. She is at once concretely present in the mementos of her visit, but also ambiguously navigating their recollection. The shadowy presence of the writer/Troyano presenting the slide show masterfully highlights the ambiguity of return, and the lingering inaccessibility to one’s one process of remembering, which co-exists alongside recognition. While Troyano recognizes her old house, the space does not affirm her identity and connection to it. As the writer/Troyano muses in this scene:

I have this urge to recognize and be recognized. […] I want a crack in the sidewalk to open up and say, yes, I saw you when you jumped over in your patent leather shoes holding on to your grandfather’s index finger. But it doesn’t happen. There is no recognition from either the tree or the sidewalk… (Milk 64)

The writer/Troyano is thus at once within and re-moved in the space of return, and, all the more so, in this iteration of re-membering it for her audience. The scene captures the bittersweet navigation that continues to take place within the action of re-turn.

The navigation of this process of re-constructing one’s place of origin along with the trace of one’s self within that space is also sent-up in an unsparing choteo of its clumsy attempts at identity formulation. The raw material that is sent-up within the scene came from Troyano’s actual visit to her childhood home. As Manzor recalls about her travels in Havana with Troyano:

I told Alina that we were going to be very near where I thought she had lived. Do you remember your address? I asked her. She spat out ‘319 de la calle 8, entre quinta y tercera.’ Do you want to stop there, see if we can find it? She responded ‘Claro! But I’m not sure if I’m ready. It’s all so quick!’ […] We finally arrive at the house and find that it is under construction. [Troyano] jumps right out of the car, hurls herself into the house,
and bolts upstairs, looking for her bedroom. I advise her to slow down, ‘Let’s explain and ask if we can come in.’ But it is too late. She is already in the middle of an air-conditioned office. The house is now a construction company, a joint Italo-Cuban venture. She looks everywhere, takes a deep breath, and then proceeds to take pictures: the stairs, the bathroom with the same toilet and bidet, the door to her room, now an office. I offer to take pictures of her. ‘You never know,’ I say naively, ‘you might need them for a performance.’ (‘Two Tropicanas’ 383-384)

Manzor’s account of Troyano’s return to her childhood house underscores several key points: the address still engraved in Troyano’s memory; the unease at the idea of re-entry, shortly reversed with an irreverent transgression through another’s space in search of one’s past dwelling: bedroom, toilet with bidet; and the value of recording the visit for re-performing its action on stage. Within Milk, Troyano’s visit is mapped using these actual photographs, and layering them with a theatricalized narration of the experience of return. Troyano notes that bringing in photographs to the theatrical representation was an experiment. As she explains,

In January of 1994, Lillian Manzor Coates invited me to the University of California at Irvine to present the work in its infancy. I was surprised to see during that presentation that the slides of Cuba worked really well. In taking those photographs, I had questioned myself, ‘Would people really want to see slides of my house, my bathroom?’ (O Solo Homo 19)

Within Milk, the re-performance of this return is layered with a choteo that irreverently asks these questions and expands them: not only, “will the audience care to see these personal reminiscences?”, but further to query, “what is the value of personal reminiscence?” Across the scene, as the photographs are projected, the writer/Troyano speaks into the mic, explaining the details of her childhood home, and also constantly subverting her intimacy with the space.
through the position of an outsider. The intimate portrait of childhood recollection begins with, “There was a patch of dirt here and in this corner there was a slug. I used to poke him with a stick. The slug, he’s gone” (Milk 65). The juxtaposition of actual photographic mementos with this generic childhood memory plays against a nostalgic pathos.

Most irreverently, the writer/Troyano then offers a *choteo* of home, reduced to its most low corner: the bathroom. After Troyano has barged into her childhood home-turned-office, with the office secretary following her, she finally enters this most ‘intimate’ of locations. With the projection showing a slide of the bathroom, the writer/Troyano narrates how in this most personal of spaces, she is at once at home again and painfully made aware of her displacement:

> Oh my bidet, my toilet. She [the secretary] says, ‘Hey, you’re not one of those Cubans who plans to come back and take over their house.’ I say, ‘Oh no, we only rented.’ The moment I say this I feel like I’m not like one of those Cubans who left—who never would have said they rented. They wouldn’t have said they owned just the house. Are you kidding me, we owned the whole block.’ (Milk 65)

This passage explodes the re-turn home across an intersectional *choteo* of its coordinates. Firstly, home is reduced to the bathroom, the place where all the lower-order functions occur, a classic *choteo* lowering down of the elevated imaginary of the hearth of one’s “Home Sweet Home” to its very *culo* (buttocks). Moreover, the contents of this bathroom relay a particular class position. Not only did the writer/Troyano live in a two-floor home surrounded by a garden, their bathroom had a bidet: the cultural marker of upper middle class Cubans, with aspirations towards French (i.e. European) standards of hygiene. Here, in the epicentre of her “home,” lies this *choteo* of a royal throne, “farting” its *trompetilla* against the class valuing of possessions and entitlement. This upset is further marked by the dramatic text’s positioning of the secretary’s question of re-possession within this low site, wherein traditionally things are discarded (specifically, bodily
wastes). The final bite of the choteo is the writer/Troyano’s berating of herself for having confessed so easily that her family did not own the space. This critiques the Cuban-American diasporic tendency to over-aggrandize its past positionality in performing; as well as revealing the writer/Troyano as U.S. acculturated. Not only has she lost the Cuban’s verbal bravado, she had also, arguably, gained the brashness of U.S. invasion: breaking with Cuban class propriety, to trespass into the formal decorum of an office and enter its bathroom without permission. The writer/Troyano’s return “home” leaves her standing inside a bathroom, and feeling out-of-place. The writer/Troyano is not able to simply reclaim her sense of belonging to Cuba: she is at once “from here” and no longer “from here.” Where the impetus for the return visit was in order to remember, and reclaim, her Cuban cultural identity, part of the process of return is not only her having to admit that, “I was born here, but don’t remember much” (Milk 64), but also that even in the process of re-membering, the “I” is left outside.

Significantly, the multiple perspectives on belonging and being an outsider are even more richly plotted across not only Cuban ethno-cultural identity, but also across the intersection of sexual orientation. As the writer/Troyano recalls her visit to her house, and immediately after referencing the slug she used to poke with a stick, she also shares a childhood “epiphany”:

She had long hair tied into a ponytail, red lips, and dreamy eyes like a cow. I ran to her and jumped on her and kissed her creamy cheeks. […] We looked at each other for an instant. I ran and hid by the mango tree. My heart was beating fast, I was sweating. I knew then that that was no ordinary kiss. That kiss would mean a lot more in years to come. (Milk 65)

Locating this first experience of lesbian sexual desire in the yard of her childhood home, the writer/Troyano confirms the yard as a site of “originary” lesbian identification. The childhood home has at once complicated her identification as a “traditional” diasporic Cuban, and it
reaffirms her sexual orientation as “locally grown.” This affirmation is politically subversive as it inserts Troyano’s homosexuality as cultivated within a space, which normatively excludes homosexuality as a possible part of its identificatory narrative. The writer/Troyano thus plots her home space across an intersectional identity. In her return visit, the writer/Troyano finds certain aspects of her identity reaffirmed through the process of return, while other aspects—like her “Cubanness”—are complicated. The writer/Troyano’s intersectional identity is thus positioned in its negotiation across its multiple aspects, as they weave across each other. And yet, again, even this “outing” of herself as the writer/Troyano is performed in semi-darkness. As Troyano has posited elsewhere, about a different performance, she notes:

> without the Carmelita fruits I felt naked, which is why I did the monologues in the dark, for after all, as a born and bred ex-Catholic our confessions take place in the dark. (*I, Carmelita* xxii)

I read this admission of shyness less at face value, and more as an underscoring of the terms of representation. The writer/Troyano’s presenting of herself to the audience, and diegetically also back to herself as a re-membering, in the half-light of the projector screen in this scene at once reveals and obfuscates her identity. This again calls attention to identity as constantly having to negotiate with the terms of its representation, here literally, the embodiment struggling with and against the mise-en-scène.

After her physical absence and half-presences, the writer/Troyano finally shows up at the end of *Milk* in a long, body-less deliberation coupled by a last bold entrance. Following on Carmelita’s re-materialization to her full excessive persona, the lights fade down, and the empty stage is filled with the pre-recorded voice of the writer/Troyano. As a voice, she discloses the growing tension she feels between her U.S. and Cuban perspectives, particularly as she tries to “evaluate” the conditions in Cuba. She wonders: “Am I looking at Cuba from an American
perspective? No es fácil. It’s not easy to have clear vision” (Milk 70). Not only are the internal conditions in Cuba not easy, with “no es fácil” (It’s not easy) as a common phrase uttered by Cubans during the Special Period, but also, for the writer/Troyano, as a diasporic Cuban, it is similarly not easy to take up either of the binary political positions on the situation. As Eckstein explains, during the Special Period, there remained a bifurcated “blame game” for the severity of the crisis in Cuba, with the Cuban-American diaspora primarily supporting the embargo as a means to force Castro’s deposition, and Cuban authorities singularly blaming the U.S. for the blockade. While many pre-revolutionary Cuban-Americans saw the crisis as added proof of the need to depose Castro, “the Cuban authorities blamed the economic downturn on the US blockade, the bloqueo,” choosing to avoid inculcating the collapse of the Soviet Union, for fear that this might become a harbinger of a potential collapse of the socialist system on the island (Eckstein 165). How then might the writer/Troyano negotiate a non-binary reading of culpability and responsibility around the situation? As she muses, “I don’t want to keep score. It’s not a competition. Cuba vs. the U.S. I’m at a loss as to who to root for,” and yet, she continues, “No, not really. I root for Cuba” (Milk 71). But this too is quickly followed by a recognition of a bifurcated loyalty: “Is it that […] if I’m in the U.S. I am more Cuban and if I’m in Cuba I’m more American?” (Milk 71) The performance context of Milk within the United States positions the writer/Troyano within the U.S., therefore already “aligned” with it; choosing to reaffirm her loyalty to Cuba rebalances her double-loyalty. By representing this unstable

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113 Manzor notes that, “no es fácil was the phrase we [Manzor and Troyano] heard most often during our stay in Cuba, because Cubans on the island use it to refer to their present survival conditions” (“Two Tropicanas” 391).

114 As Eckstein elaborates, terming the US sanctions a blockade, rather than an embargo, is revealing, as “[a] blockade implies a deliberate externally imposed wall, whereas an embargo implies a morally sanctioned cut-off of ties” (Eckstein 165).
negotiation of one’s loyalty, both national identifications become dislodged and unstable, even as
one—the Cuban—is (re)claimed. Arjun Appadurai suggests the term “delocalized transnation,”
as best suited to characterize the space of a Latino’s binational negotiation. Yet, for Appadurai,
this negotiation finally reveals the Latino as “doubly loyal to their nations of origin and thus
ambivalent about their loyalties to America” (Appadurai qtd. in Flores 190). In *Milk*, the
negotiation of loyalty takes up the “delocalized transnational” position suggested by Appadurai,
but plays across and against a “doubly loyal” position to Cuba as also a “double-loyalty,” one
that positions the subject as ambivalent in her relationship with either and both. For Muñoz, the
dialogue that *Milk* enacts across the island and diasporic Cuban not only “underscores exactly
how complicated such negotiations of a past and present are,” it also:

asserts that such negotiations are absolutely necessary. *Milk of Amnesia* offers us a
Cuban American way that contests reactionary politics and makes available a world
of possibilities where the play of identity and memory supersede models of
assimilation and the devastating force of cultural and political amnesia. (“No es fácil”
81-82)

Just as Carmelita has learned to drink both kinds of milk, so too the writer/Troyano, in
highlighting the negotiation at the core of exilic memory, makes sure that one aspect of identity
does not wash away the other, but allows for the deterritorialized, displaced and multiply-placed
subject.

The writer/Troyano is but a disembodied voice during this final voiceover narration of
her attempt to overcome the divisive political binary of the embargo. And yet, shortly after this
last rumination, she makes her final appearance at the end of the play, in her second full-bodied
interruption of Carmelita. Carmelita has just been recounting an encounter with Pedro Luis
Ferrer, a famous Cuban composer, who “will play me his songs, but first he tells me, ‘The
embargo is killing us’” (Milk 71). Immediately following this—the play’s first direct indictment of the embargo—the writer/Troyano steps out of the Carmelita character and addresses the audience. In doing so, the Carmelita persona is shed for the last time, and it is the writer/Troyano who remains to conclude the piece:

I agree with Pedro Luis, and I want to leave you with a song by him called ‘Todos por lo Mismo,’ a song that says it best: Everybody for the same thing/Between the pages of colonialism/ Capitalists, homosexuals, atheists, spiritualists, moralists/ Everybody for the same thing. (Milk 71)

In agreeing with Pedro Luis Ferrer’s position on the embargo—“the embargo is killing us” (Milk 71)—the writer/Troyano is positioning herself in support of the Cuban islander position, while also not calling the embargo a blockade. Arguably, she is “rooting for Cuba,” where “Cuba” is conceived as the Cuban people, not necessarily the Cuban government. For Manzor, “The end of Milk of Amnesia/Leche de amnesia brings to the fore different voices in coalition—not only Cuban voices from both sides, but U.S. voices as well” (“Two Tropicanas” 391). Manzor points to the singing of the lyrics in English, and playing the Ferrer song pre-recorded in Spanish, as the means to unite both Cuban and U.S. voices. Moreover, Ferrer’s lyrics open up to a community that is broader than any national identity: bridging across colonial legacies, social systems, religious persuasions, and sexual orientation. As Lawrence M. La Fountain-Stokes points out, drawing on his experience as a gay Puerto Rican visiting Cuba in 1998, during the Special Period, “Lo que más me chocó de Cuba fue cuán profunda es la crisis política y económica y

115 “Everybody for the same thing.”
cómo esto afecta todas las esferas, incluyendo la homosexual y la transgénero.”

La Fountain-Stokes found Cuba lacking in public spaces for the queer body, outside of prostitution and the arts; and so reads the conclusion of Milk, as a call for change and hope towards an inclusive solidarity that accounts for queer bodies as well. The writer/Troyano’s final position is then a call for an intersectional coalition: across national, racial, cultural, gender, and sexual orientation axes.

With this final interruption, the writer/Troyano reasserts her position as the play’s primary narrator. The writer/Troyano began the play in body-less voiceover, and now concludes it in a fully embodied address. Where Carmelita’s and the writer/Troyano’s journeys have been intertwined throughout Milk, the final return to the writer/Troyano’s presence seems to break out of the theatrical space of Carmelita, and towards the larger, prescient socio-political sphere. But is there a choteo at play in this final appeal? As in Carmelita’s receiving her calling in the boat-crossing in Memorias [Chapter 3], is this earnest desire for coalitional unity and political solidarity too “pure” to be taken at face value? Or, is this final moment indeed the counter-narrative that Milk’s choteo over the course of its 90 minutes has tried to make new room for?

The Scope of Choteo

To begin to unravel the potentialities of this final appearance by the writer/Troyano, it is useful to reconsider the terms of the speaker’s identity/identity negotiation. As this chapter has elaborated, I posit that the persona of Carmelita and the entity that I have pluralized as “the writer/Troyano” are variously embodied and work to complicate and make visible the process of

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116 “What most shocked me in Cuba was the depth of the political and economic crisis, and how this affected all spheres, including the homosexual and transgendered.”
reclaiming cultural identity. However, my analysis differs from previous readings of *Milk* by theatre scholars Alicia Arrizón and Lillian Manzor. Specifically, my analysis situates itself within the course of the dramatic and performance text, where the interplay and slippage between Carmelita and the writer/Troyano constantly complicate and destabilize claims to a singular, “real” identity. In contrast, Arrizón seems invested in reading *Milk* primarily as an autobiographical text, and Manzor posits the appearance of the autobiographical voice as only occurring midway through the piece.

For her part, Manzor locates the moment of split as occurring from out of the Carmelita persona, whom she sees as the primary actor in *Milk*. Manzor’s analysis of *Milk* only reads “Troyano,” or the autobiographical voice, as appearing in the materiality of the photographs during the slideshow, but attributes all the earlier text that is designated as “the writer” in the published dramatic text of *Milk* as being spoken by Carmelita (“Two Tropicanas” 390). This causes Manzor to read the appearance of the autobiographical voice as only arriving once Carmelita has gone to Havana. This incongruity could be the result of Manzor’s having seen an earlier version of the performance.

More problematic is Arrizón’s decisive claim that the play’s “writer” is equivalent to the identity of the artist Alina Troyano. Arrizón explains the primary thematic of the play as follows: At stake in *Milk of Amnesia* is the relationship between the real signifier of identity, Alina Troyano, and the performative simulation of real experience, Carmelita Tropicana, the performance artist. Tropicana has the courage necessary to confront her lost memory; Alina does not. Tropicana is Alina’s invention: she is a metaphor, providing proof of the underlying split of the self into two tropes. As one speaks, the other fears; however, the existence of both makes possible both separation and memory, essential for the fictional union of identity. (*Latina Performance* 153)
While Arrizón notes the co-constitutive nature of both the “real” identity that is Troyano and the “performative” identity of Carmelita for the play’s negotiation of what constitutes identity, in positing Troyano as a non-fictional entity, outside of the theatrical/performative realm, Arrizón fails to account for the dramaturgical and critical richness of Milk. By reducing the writer/Troyano to the “real” identity of the artist, Arrizón does away with the possibility of reading the choteo in Troyano’s narrative. As I have described, the play’s choteo of memory and identity across and against the positionality of what and who is “real” activates a decentring of fixed identification and opens up to multiple directionality, in such examples as Carmelita’s travel hat, and the writer/Troyano’s bidet-as-home. Moreover, it opens out and against the category of “real” as clearly demarcated.

Arrizón’s reduction is surprising considering that she espouses the non-essentialist understanding of a “performative” subjecthood, drawing on Sue-Ellen Case’s work on “performing lesbian,” which highlights the performing subject as one in flux. Moreover, Arrizón echoes Heddon’s intersectional understanding of identity that “the performative subject cannot be constructed separately from her sexuality, race, and ethnicity” (Latina Performance 136). Nevertheless, when Arrizón turns to analyze the work of Alina Troyano, she appears to reduce it to a non-performative act of self-representation. Arrizón situates Milk as a self-representative work that posits two distinct, oppositional selves: the author as equivalent to the “real,” and “Carmelita” as the antithesis to the author and a “wholly invented identity” (150). As Arrizón explains: Troyano creates, “a wholly separate self—the outrageous Carmelita Tropicana—to provide the freedom and space she needs to fully explore and accept both her ethnic self and her sexuality” (148). By setting up this binary, Arrizón takes the script at face

117 See Case’s article “Performing Lesbian in the Space of Technology: Part 1.”
value; reading the writer/Troyano’s description of her “invention” of Carmelita\textsuperscript{118} as enabling a clear distinction between one and the other; instead of an implication of what Troyano has termed the “schizophrenia” of “combining the voice of Carmelita with mine, that of the writer” (\textit{I, Carmelita} xxii). Arrizón positions a literal division between the self that is Troyano and the persona that is Carmelita, even while she cites Leah Gilmore’s complex position on feminist self-representation:

\begin{quote}
The technology of self-representation allows the artist to create and sustain a metaphorical resonance of reality, ‘a metaphor that functions as a trope of truth beyond argument, of identity beyond proof, of what simply is.’ (Gilmore qtd. in \textit{Latina Performance} 135-136)
\end{quote}

Instead of engaging with Gilmore’s layering of identificatory possibilities, as enabled through an artwork’s metaphorical resonance, Arrizón positions only Carmelita as the metaphor, pointing back to Troyano who is wholly non-fictive. In this way, Arrizón’s reading of autobiographical self-representation fails to acknowledge the performative possibilities therein. Arrizón’s autobiographical reading of \textit{Milk} misses the opportunity to engage with a more complex relationality between autobiography and performativity.

In contrast, if we apply Sidonie Smith’s reading of autobiography to \textit{Milk}, we find the autobiographical highlighted as the echo of re-/dis-membering, and always too as a multiple, performative constitution of identity:

\textsuperscript{118}“I couldn’t stand in front of an audience, wear sequined gowns, tell jokes. But she could. She who pencilled in her beauty mark, she was baptized in the fountain of America’s most popular orange juice, in the name of Havana’s legendary nightclub, the Tropicana, she could. She was a fruit and wasn’t afraid to admit it. She was the past I’d left behind. She was Cuba” (\textit{Milk} 57-58).
Autobiographical narration begins with amnesia, and once begun, the fragmentary nature of subjectivity intrudes. After all, the narrator is both the same and not the same as the autobiographer, and the narrator is both the same and not the same as the subject of narration. Moreover, there are many stories to be told and many different and divergent storytelling occasions that call for and forth contextually-marked and sometimes radically divergent narratives of identity. In each instance, then, narrative performativity constitutes interiority. (Smith 18)

In this way, the autobiographical subject is involved in the very process of re-/dis-membering that Milk further complicates by positioning it also across the theatrical, representational frame. The subjects of narration—Carmelita and the writer/Troyano—are both the same and not the same as the artist Troyano. The political power of their embodiments is thus not undercut by their ambiguous navigation between the “real” and the fictive. Instead, Milk’s body in performance variously maps itself across a multiple, intersectional identity, continuously resisting the violences of simplistic categorization.

Notably, Arrizón’s stake in affixing the writer as equivalent to the identity of the artist Alina Troyano seems to be driven by a grounding of the political nature of artistic self-representation to the realm of non-fictional aesthetics. In keeping with the work of renowned feminist autobiography scholar Deirdre Heddon, Arrizón posits self-representation as a political act. For Arrizón, “[w]hen the performance artist functions as the representor of ‘herself,’ she is simultaneously placed in a position of power as she articulates her ‘identities’ through a process of self-definition” (Latina Performance 135). She concludes her chapter on artistic self-representation with the following:

119 See Heddon’s Autobiography in Performance.
Queer identity politics and performativity within politics of visibility reside in the commitment to ‘perform’ our lived experience as Latina lesbians. By definition, this commitment is political as well as artistic. Coming out as a Latina lesbian means publicly laying claim to an identity that is simultaneously ethnic and sexual, subversive and strong. (164)

While I do not at all disagree with Arrizón’s call to arms for the queer Latina artist, I do not see why this appeal cannot allow for critical, artistic representation that engages the problematics of representation and forges sites that negotiate the parameters of the political within the representation. And with this question I return to the final moment of Milk.

Does the play, in keeping with Arrizón, attempt to break from the representational framework—with its irreverent threat of choteo—in order to deliver its political message “without” the interference of the theatrical? Is the writer/Troyano here trying to step out of the theatrical frame all together? Is this even possible? Or, can there be a political critique to highlighting the impossibility of breaking out of the framework of representation? Can the limitation of identity as always framed across and against representation serve to enlighten the political intersectional, disidentificatory, pluralist call to arms as relevant in its very negotiation of the constraints of fixed identity? Finally, what if I read this final act—this attempt to break free from the confines of representation to solicit a political call to arms from the spectator towards an intersectional identity—as a choteo of political theatre?

Notably, to imagine this final moment as a potential irreverent subversion of the political cri de coeur elevates the play’s dramaturgy to open up, again, to the negotiation of identity and representation. I allow myself this whimsical reading, despite the dramatic structure of Milk, which, while undertaking an intersectional choteo of the process of re-turn, nevertheless ascribes a “successful” re/discovery of self to Carmelita and the writer/Troyano. More significantly, in
Carmelita/Troyano’s other performance work, she often ends with the stepping out to deliver a political message, a straightforwardly genuine plea, that is nevertheless still always also in dramaturgical relationality to the preceding negotiation of representation. As an example, in a recent performance at the Hemispheric Institute’s Montreal Encuentro, I watched Carmelita/Troyano drop her poignant *choteo* of representational negotiation and deliver a final political message straight to her audience, and then weave her way back in and through the representational negotiation of character-persona-artist. At the end of her performance—a kaleidoscope of various bits of her renowned performance art skits—Carmelita/Troyano decided to read a quote from Muñoz’s posthumously published work, *Cruising Utopia*. This section of her performance went as follows: after mentioning Muñoz, and his insistence that she should add a rubber chicken in her piece to complete her comedic act (*a rubber chicken is extracted from the Hemi tote, and proudly displayed*), Carmelita continues: “The other day in the Trasnocheo I got too emotional so you couldn’t hear the *cri de Coeur* that is one of the beautiful language *cri de Coeur* that José Muñoz has. Hold on, I am going into my Cuban bank.” (*She reaches into her shoe and extracts a slip of paper.*) She resumes speaking into the mic, this time, having dropped Carmelita’s distinct accent: “This is from *Cruising Utopia*. You can see the similarities between the two Josés [José Muñoz and José Martí]: ‘Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of the moment. But we must never settle for that minimal transport. We must dream and enact other pleasures. Other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.’ I love José, I love, and I say it in the present because I know that he is still here with me.” She weaves this segment back into Carmelita’s heavily accented speech, slowly transitioning back into positing herself as the

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120 I was audience to Carmelita Tropicana’s performance of “Manifest Destino” on June 22, 2014, at the Phi Centre, and have also referred to the video of the performance available on the Hemispheric Institute’s website for help with re-membering its contents.
“Cuban songbird” who will now lead the audience in a “Kumbaya” moment, “because we need it.” Specifically, she leads the audience in a rendition of Martí’s *Guantanamera*. The audience joins in with Tropicana during the chorus, and she repeats the chorus a second time, and then concludes “thank you for joining me. La lucha continua” (“Manifest Destino” 21-33min).

In this performance, the tone negotiates between the gravity of its content, and the representational play of its context. The artist code-switches out of her Carmelita accent to read Muñoz’s favourite quote: the act feels incredibly intimate, like watching an actor backstage wipe off makeup and unpin her wig. I am also struck by the strength of her presence, due in large part by the strong shift in tone. Tropicana in performance is outlandishly funny, with a buoyant humour that links one set up with another like hi-hat one-liners. Yet when Carmelita’s accent is dropped, the tone shifts into a grounded seriousness. In reading the quote in “her” own accent, the performer-artist’s sincere, passionate plea for a more humane—a more inclusively human—world resounds past the humour and transforms the audience into not only a community of queer performance aficionados, but also a community of human rights advocates. Yet just as I think she had dropped the representational play, she soon reactivates Carmelita to lead the audience in a collective sing-along to the stereotypical song of identity and home, with which she also concluded *Memorias*. Once again, the performance resists simplification, and sharply (re)turns.
Conclusion

Critical Choteo

This dissertation has undertaken an analysis of Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance as it enacts “self” across the intersectional disidentificatory strategy of choteo. My work has offered the first thorough account that charts the specifics of choteo as a representational strategy (Chapter 2). I have then read Carmelita’s activation of this strategy in her two long-form performances—Memorias de la Revolución/Memories of the Revolution and Milk of Amnesia/Leche de Amnesia (Chapters 3 and 4). I have posited Carmelita’s acts of representation as ones that open up to a negotiation of representational politics: at once presenting stereotypical iconography and querying it through an irreverent subversion of its context and content. Particularly, I have further suggested that the choteo employed across these pieces turns its bite onto itself, enacting a choteo of choteo. In other words, the choteo also subverts and questions the act of representation and its ability to negotiate across and through the congealment of identification. As noted in Chapter 3 and 4, both these works conclude with a moment that turns to, and around, the confines of representation, embodying the intersectional negotiation of identity as always taking place in and against its means of representation. My reading of the choteo employed by Carmelita thus points to a perpetual self-choteo, re-membering and dis-membering the frame of its performance; and pointing out, while always also restricted within, the site of representation.

Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance is for me an exemplar of a complex engagement with representation: resisting and acknowledging the violences of fixed identity by representing herself in and across its axes. Carmelita calls attention to the confinement of representation by performing and presenting the majoritarian cultural constructions that are
ascribed to an intersectional subject such as herself. By presenting these with the choteo’s irreverent reconfiguration, she at once performs and disidentifies with these representations, opening a space for critical agency. As noted at the outset of this project, Crenshaw defines the category of “representational intersectionality” as “the cultural construction of women of color” (Crenshaw 1245). The intersectional subject is at once mapped across a matrix of intersectional representational ascriptions, and can be further formulated as an agent disidentifying “on and against” them (Disidentifications 11). In this way, the material, socio-political reality is the framework in and across which the intersectional disidentifying subject performs her agency. Similarly, within theatrical representation, the representational strategy of choteo disidentifies on and against the representational framework itself. It challenges its confines, while at the same time remaining necessarily within it, etymologically “with an end.” In other words, choteo’s displacement of context and content is a negotiation towards the liminal, up to and with the very limit of its frame.

My reading of the choteo activated within Carmelita’s work is grounded within an application of the intersectional, disidentificatory hermeneutic onto Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance. My decision to apply this optic is rooted in a commitment to engaging and elaborating on critical scholarship and spectatorship that opens up to the socio-political potential of artistic practice. Having invested across this dissertation in querying the frameworks of representation, I conclude by turning to assess the limitations of my study. Specifically, what are the politics of reception at play in my act of critical scholarship?

Politics of Reception: Of Spectators & Performance Scholars

My project proposes that Carmelita’s body in performance and its embodiment of choteo makes visible the problematics of representation and constructs non-hegemonic modes of negotiating
self-enactment. Necessarily, this process of “making visible”—in other words, the critical engagement of representational politics within a theatrical performance—is activated not only through the body in performance, but also through the spectator’s act of reception. As Chon Noriega notes in his editor’s introduction to I, Carmelita, the representational identity of Carmelita is always also constructed in tandem with her audience. As Noriega playfully suggests:

consider the title of this book […] it declares ‘I, Carmelita Tropicana’ with an almost Cartesian certitude. But its two homonyms point in another direction, revealing the reaction of others to the self-proclaimed identity. The first homonym registers shock, exasperation, or sexual pleasure as an interpersonal expression (‘Aiiiiy, Carmelita Tropicana’); the second conjures up the flip side of identity, the act of being seen and identified, the surveillance imperative […] (‘Eye Carmelita Tropicana’). Identity is no simple matter here: what the self proclaims, another both authenticates and challenges by the very fact of a response, while the state and marketplace ‘eye’ this interaction for their own purposes. (ix-x)

What Noriega characterizes as the spectatorial “fact of a response”—the “Aiiiiy” and “Eye”-ing of Carmelita, is inherent to the act of representation. Noriega’s assertion that the act of reception is the “flip side of identity” positions the necessity of an audience as the active partner in Carmelita’s self-enactment.

When turning to the work of Carmelita, the individual spectator’s activation of its intersectional disidentificatory potential likewise depends on the spectator’s positionality. As mapped in Chapter 1, the works I have examined took place within the 1990s East Village club scene—a public made up primarily of fellow outsider artists and the alternative residents of the East Village. Carmelita’s public might be better termed a counterpublic, succinctly defined by
queer theorist Michael Warner\textsuperscript{121} as “an alternative public aware of its marginal stance” (qtd. in Rivera-Servera 63). As C. Carr reflects, Carmelita’s performance may have been perceived as part of a fluid series of performance events across different venues:

The East Village clubs created a milieu that was unique in performance art history. They began naively and precariously, run by artists for artists. They began for the fun of it—for incandescent evenings of incongruous acts—and since the clubs were a short walk apart, audiences and performers alike sometimes migrated from space to space. If you started at the wow Café, that ‘home for wayward girls’ featuring (mostly) work by lesbians, you might see the resident Split Britches company doing \textit{Upwardly Mobile Homes} on a stage just wide enough for the three of them. Or maybe there’d be a theme party like ‘I Dreamed I Paid Rent in my Maidenform Bra’ with a comedienne directing audience members in love scenes from \textit{Cat on Hot Tin Roof}, while a woman in Maidenform longline played the accordion. Perhaps the reigning Miss Losaida, Carmelita Tropicana, would make a brief regal appearance before moving on to her own show at Club Chandalier. You might follow her over there and still have time to make it to the 2 A.M. performance at the Pyramid. It was all very fluid and playful and little seemed at stake. Few critics went to see shows that kept them out till four in the morning. Playing to crowds of friends, other artists, and drunks, performers experimented, even dared to fail, and worked for the joy of it. (xvi-xvii)

Significantly, Carr notes that this counterpublic was invested in “[p]erformance dealing with sex, sexism, and sexual identity, […] where what worked best on an often-tiny stage before an often-

\textsuperscript{121}Michael Warner, drawing from Jürgen Habermas’s conceptualization of the public sphere, suggests the possibilities of a distinct queer public in \textit{Publics and Counterpublics} (2005).
drunk audience was something short, sharp, and raunchy” (xviii) and race was not explicitly addressed (xviii). As Troyano has elaborated, during the 1990s, the WOW Café in particular, while invested in creating a diverse space, “mirrored the segregated gay community and New York City at large” (First Ten Years 13) In order to read an intersectional representational politics into and out of Carmelita’s performance, her audience might need to be engaged in or allied with an intersectional negotiation across “marginal stances.”

Troyano points out that the lesbian, predominantly white audience at WOW was able to respond to her performances in a way that engaged what I have termed its intersectional, disidentificatory *choteo*. As Troyano states in an interview with Kate Davy in 1994:

> To say ‘white’ already means, to me, up there in the mainstream. WOW is such a subculture that even when you’re white, you’re not getting a piece of the pie; well, it depends, but you’re almost not white anymore. (qtd. in Lady Dicks 147)

As Davy explicates, Troyano here, “is emphatically not suggesting that WOW’s white women are somehow women of colour; rather, she claims for them a certain distance from institutionalized whiteness” (Lady Dicks 147). Significantly, Troyano does note that certain white feminists misread her work:

> some white feminists were offended by my performance; they thought it was too much of a stereotype. They didn't get it. […] But for the record, WOW wasn't a racist space. The white feminists who had problems with my work were people outside of WOW. (“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

Troyano has also described other readings of her persona of Carmelita that thought, at least at first, that she was engaging in an uncritical stereotype. As Troyano elaborates:
It is hard to believe, but I’ve encountered times when Carmelita has been persona non grata. It must have been las frutas, which Enrique Fernández, a critic, referred to as ‘dangerous fruits.’ […] It was after my performance at ‘The Decade Show’ that my girlfriend of two months, a politically liberal woman, confessed to me that the fruits I wore made her ill. Latina stereotype, she thought. But now she understood and liked what she saw on stage. The same happened to a photographer I met at the taping of the TV show Cristina on nightclubs in New York City. […] The photographer said when he saw the fruits he thought I was a crazy stupid woman, but after listening to me talk he liked what I had to say. (I, Carmelita xxiv)

Notably, in both these examples, the spectators change their position once they see the full performance in action. For me, this underscores the link between the action of choteo and its dragging down of the performative context. For the spectator to be able to read the act of choteo she must be aware of the context that is being dragged down and subverted. An image of Carmelita in costume does not activate this choteo; it needs to be her body in performance, actively engaging the representational stereotypes she embodies with a difference. Yet, significantly, Troyano also relates a third reading of her work, which did not critique it for its stereotyping, but rather took it as face value. As she relays:

And there was that other incident that caused me to ponder how the persona is received. It happened riding a limo with an upper-class Cuban couple after a gala I

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122 Enrique Fernández’s 1990 review of Carmelita read as follows: “Carmelita aparenta jugar con los estereotipos Latinos, pero en realidad es con la cabeza de uno con quien está jugando. Es una terrorista cultural, una Carmen Miranda ataviada con frutas peligrosas” (Fernández 14). (“Carmelita appears to play with Latino stereotype, but in actuality, she is playing with our perception. She is a cultural terrorist, a Carmen Miranda draped in dangerous fruits.”)
had entertained at. Even though I said I was Cuban in my routine, the Cuban couple
still could not believe it and asked: ‘You are Puerto Rican, aren’t you?’ They did not see
the fruits, the accent, the loud behavior reflected in their own Cuban mirror. (I, Carmelita
xxiv- xxv)

In this incident, the upper class Cuban couple reads Carmelita as an “accurate” depiction of
Puerto Rican behaviour. Carmelita’s representation of stereotype has been taken at face value, as
the ascription of an Other. The violence of the representational simplification has not been
queried, but rather accepted. For me, this third example highlights the variability of reception,
and points to the circumscribed optic of my dissertation: one that activates a particular spectator
perspective. In positing the potential of Carmelita’s work to engage with intersectional
disidentificatory identity negotiation, I must also recognize that this potential might not be read
by a spectator, and, moreover, that Carmelita’s work—in playing with stereotype—might at
times be activated by a spectator in a way that reduces the body in performance to this
stereotype.

On the other side of this spectrum of reception, there is the possibility of a spectator able
to encounter herself and Carmelita within a matrix of intersectional disidentification. As Troyano
remarks in relation to her performance of Milk of Amnesia:

Latina lesbians really get it. They don't think Carmelita is a derogatory stereotype.
Latinas relate to Carmelita and the various issues raised in the piece. Non-Latina lesbians
appreciate it, because it was the first time I was doing Alina. They haven't seen her
before, they haven't had access to that side of me. […] they know my history [at WOW]
and support my work. Cubans—nongay—relate to it in a completely different way.
(“Carmelita Tropicana Unplugged”)

To conceptualize the potential intersectional spectator of/for Carmelita’s performances, I draw
from Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, who investigates the politics of production and reception of what he broadly terms “queer latinidad.” Rivera-Servera proposes that in order to investigate “queer latinidad as and in performance,” we need to attend to its “dual function” as “a set of expressive techniques” and a “social situation” (Rivera-Servera 32). The “social situation” of “queer latinidad as and in performance” not only positions the spectator as a participant in queer latinidad (36); it creates the site for this counterpublic to encounter each other. The spectator is engaging in an “inter-Latina/o encounter in performance” (37), which “insist[s] on the possibility of intersubjective intimacy or convivencia diaria” (71), where the performance then allows and points to a broader “daily-life interaction” (38). I understand Rivera-Servera as underscoring the intimate encounter between performer and spectator, within the counterpublic sphere, wherein these bodies recognize each other and themselves as engaging in a similar negotiation of and against institutionalized violence. Specifically, Rivera-Servera recalls his viewing of Arthur Aviles’s performance of *Puerto Rican Faggot from the South Bronx Steals Precious Object from Giuliani’s East Village* (1999). He relates:

My two companions—both Latino gay men—and I found ourselves in tears throughout the whole performance. We could not speak to each other at the time. We silently made our way to the subway station en route to our neighborhood in Brooklyn. I was touched by the performance. Despite the absence of an explicit critique of Giuliani, perhaps more so because of it, I was forced to encounter my own anger. I had to surrender to the sheer beauty of the flowing fabric and the simplicity of Aviles’s movement. […] I now think it was the simple experience of being there in the South Bronx, participating as members of a queer public witnessing the beauty of a Latino gay man’s assertive performance of self in all his nakedness that truly took us. (36)
In his act of witnessing Avile’s performance, Rivera-Servera co-constructs the socio-political potential that this intersectional, disidentificatory performance weaves through its choreography. Significantly, Rivera-Servera highlights that the co-construction of alternate modes of self-enactment between performer and spectator is not a tension-free process. As Rivera-Servera recognizes, these sites are also filled with “tensions and frictions” (37). Moreover, Rivera-Servera notes that, while performance can offer the possibility of critical engagement, it is not essentially progressive (40).

What are the politics of reception when we turn to the spectator as performance scholar? Performance scholarship suggests a critical spectatorship, and one that is positioned from within the field of Performance studies. Specifically, Performance studies has been lauded as a discipline that particularly allows for reading performance as a liminal act, and one engaged in multiple negotiations. In 1995, Dwight Conquergood posits:

Performance studies is a border discipline, an interdiscipline, that cultivates the capacity to move between structures, to forge connections, to see together, to speak with instead of speaking about or for others. Performance privileges threshold-crossing, shape-shifting, and boundary-violating figures, such as shamans, tricksters, and jokers, who value the carnivalesque over the canonical, the transformative over the normative, the mobile over the monumental. (137-138)

Conquergood’s formulation of Performance studies as a site of liminal negotiation extends itself to the understanding of how performance scholars construct their critical spectatorship. Turning to the activity of the performance scholar within Performance studies, Stacey Holman Jones asserts that:

performance trains our attention on cultures and identities as embodied, relational accomplishments; on knowledge as interpretive and experientially grounded; and on
scholarship as a process of questioning on the way to creating more accessible, more just, and more human ways of learning and living together. (267) Both these scholars posit a utopian vision for the engagement of performance scholarship, as a space in which the spectators/scholars read and construct progressive potentialities from the performances they encounter. Yet, notably, the scholarly position of reading alternative potentialities is distinct from the communal encounter described by Rivera-Servera, as the scholar is not necessarily a member of the artist’s counterpublic. Moreover, while Rivera-Servera also points to the potential tensions within this encounter, Conquergood and Holman Jones posit a utopic ideal. The dangers of this idealization of scholars as able to engage and read the potentialities of performance—regardless of the scholar’s position as within or without of the artist’s (counter)public—are the potential violences of not recognizing one’s own reading and its imposition of a framework, as well as the power dynamics implicated in a scholarly reading as a “key” reading.

I follow in the footsteps of many scholars who suggest that Carmelita’s performance opens up a key site for alternative self-enactment (among them José Esteban Muñoz, Alicia Arrizón, Lillian Manzor, Jill Dolan, and Kate Davy). For Muñoz, the activity of co-constructing an alternative “worldmaking” practice (Disidentifications 198) is one wherein the critic can specifically apply the hermeneutic of disidentification onto the work. As Muñoz describes:

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123 For Muñoz, this co-construction is one in which audience and performer are “equally integral components” (Disidentifications 196).
For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. (Disidentifications 25)

Muñoz’s particular hermeneutic—and the one which I have mapped in my Introduction as an intersectional disidentificatory optic—are meant to position the scholar as taking the optic of the most vulnerable body in the representational politics at play. In this way, the scholar, while holding a position of power, nevertheless takes up a reading that ideally gives voice to, rather than excludes, marginalized positions. Ideally, this optic allows the scholar as spectator to move past her individual position, and actively engage with an intersectional disidentification in the representational framework. The scholar can thus read the greater potentiality in the work. The scholar ideally becomes a willingly decentred spectator. As Holly Hughes has noted: “In the work of […] Carmelita Tropicana […] queerness and ethnicity are woven together so tightly that white audiences can find their eyes starting to cross” (O Solo Homo 9). The scholar allows herself the distance to see even in this “dizzying” matrix. Similarly, as cited in Chapter 1, Manzor notes Carmelita’s decentring of various kinds of spectators:

Carmelita Tropicana ‘pretends to play’ not only with stereotypes of Latin(o/a)ness but also with both Anglo and Latino stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. She does so in the lesbian address of her performances, which decenters the Latina heterosexual spectator as well as the Anglo lesbian spectator. As a gay self-parody of Carmen Miranda, then, Tropicana’s performances open up the space for a different kind of self-representation, one that constructs female bodies that resist fetishization while undermining traditional ethnic and gender representations. (“Two Tropicanas” 374-375)
In Manzor’s analysis, the scholar as spectator is then speaking from the position of being able to read from the decentred position, across and through Carmelita’s negotiation of intersectional identity.

As I examine my own engagement with this dissertation’s performance scholarship, I must also question my positionality as a reader of Carmelita’s work. While I constantly engage in an active disidentification of myself as a Latina Jew, I also position myself as a queer Latina ally, and enact this from within the privileged positionality of engaging in scholarship from within an institutional framework. Moreover, my reading of the myriad potentialities of Carmelita’s body in performance does not protect it from being a simplistic celebration of pluralism. Laura Edmondson offers an insightful wedge into the hyper-celebratory vain of North American performance scholarship, calling for the need to be self-aware of its reductionism. Notably, Edmondson is reacting in particular to performance scholarship that is undertaken by North American scholars on work done by non-Western artists/communities. Her concerns follow post-colonial critiques of ethnographic research, and its simplification into the celebratory. As she explains:

Theatre and performance scholars in the U.S. are an optimistic bunch. We are fond of concluding our analyses with a happy ending, in which we celebrate or at least comment upon, humanity’s capacity to create despite the various forces of oppression/exploitation/terror in which that particular group of humanity is caught […] But when do invocations of hope turn into academic sugarcoating? (7)

Edmondson’s critique thus queries performance scholarship’s inherent mandate to celebrate the potentialities of artistic creation, when this necessarily forces a particular reading onto the work encountered, and so obfuscates the tensions and complexities of the work. For Edmondson, her “aim is not to stop analyzing how cultural resilience is expressed through performance but to
question how we write about it” (8). I understand this to mean that the scholar ought to recognize that, necessarily, “an act of interpretation is an act of hermeneutic violence” (9), and so to be aware of the scholarly position as driven by its own agenda. My application of an intersectional disidentificatory optic to Carmelita Tropicana’s body in performance is driven by my agenda of recognizing the socio-political value of artistic practice. This goal has propelled me to attend to the particular potentiality of choteo as a representational strategy to open up a site for recognizing identity negotiation and alternative self-enactments. Specifically, I have hoped to avoid the simplifications of a celebratory agenda, by attempting to eschew claims that the body in performance is enacting a certain form of subjectivity or “reclamation.” Instead, I have attempted to open up to the continual negotiation at the site of self-enactment, as an eventness, that is not only joyful and potentially progressive, but also painful and necessarily restricted within the terms of its representation. I have hoped to read Carmelita’s body in performance as an agent that at once fights across and against, and is caught within, the inescapable limits, and potential violences, of representation.

Perhaps my own desire for socio-cultural empowerment through artistic practice has led me to focus on the moments wherein Carmelita’s works are best able to activate identity as eventness. I may not have attended equally to the potential failures and tensions in activating this negotiation; that is, to those moments where Carmelita’s works might reify and affix identity. A potential extension to the dissertation at present would involve extending this work to dare to attend to its shortcomings, more specifically, to the points at which it does not activate a critical choteo. A present limitation for me in undertaking such a task was both the personal joy in delving into the moments wherein the choteadora is at her finest, and a fear that to point out moments of artistic “failure” would dishonour the performance scholar’s commitment to
bringing important artistic work into the academic sphere. Jill Dolan ruminates on the scholar’s critical dilemma when she notes:

Yet I'm struck by how much I, too, worry that what I write will be read as condemnation or disparagement of an artistic project I admire very much. How can I (how can we) work to shift the limitations of such critical discourse? Writing about any performance is a form of respect and even love, especially when you're someone who's not employed to pass judgment or to offer consumer advice. I wouldn't (I won't) take the time to write about a performance (or a film, television show, novel, or any other form of cultural expression) unless it moves me in some way, enough to take the time and the care to craft a response. (“Some Femme”)

Notably, Dolan posits the act of writing about an artwork as imbedded within a respectful admiration of that work. She sees her position as a critic and scholar as grounded—and dare I say, legitimated—in bringing attention to work she admires. Any “critique” in her scholarship is here framed within a larger honouring of that work. I hope to be able to likewise ground my scholarship in a respectful admiration of the artists I write about, and to formulate this respectful admiration as one that must also acknowledge and assess the artistic work’s shortcomings, and not, patronizingly, shy away from such a discussion. In my artistic practice, as an actor and dramaturge, I work to develop my ability to engage in critical feedback. As a scholar, I hope to be able to grow to do the same.

**Artist/Scholar**

In assessing the limitations of my project, I finally turn to its foundational act: I, as a scholar, positing the intersectional disidentificatory hermeneutic onto Carmelita’s body in performance. My reading is circumscribed by my access to Carmelita’s work being primarily achieved through
the published dramatic texts, grainy video clips, and the live viewing of Carmelita in
performance in some of her (re)performances of her work in the last decade. Specifically, as my
dissertation has chosen to focus on Carmelita’s earlier work—for reasons of its rich choteo—this
means that I am limited in my ability to directly engage the work. In carving out a site for
engaging queer latinidad in and as performance, Rivera-Servera suggests conceiving of
performance studies, “as a model for conducting, analyzing, and reporting scholarship about
queer Latinas/os that invests in the interpretation of culture as experienced embodiment” (45). I
have indirectly attempted to gauge this aspect of performance as experienced embodiment
through building upon existing scholarship on Carmelita. Particularly, each scholar on her work
has a different relationality to the work, its perceived counterpublic, and the artist Troyano. An
extension to my current dissertation would be to unpack the different receptions of Carmelita’s
body in performance through the particularities of the different scholar-artist relationships at
play. One key example would be Muñoz’s relationship with Carmelita/Troyano, as they have co-
constructed alternative worldmaking.

Specifically, across Muñoz and Carmelita/Troyano’s particular relationship, the
boundaries of the artist-scholar binary are reformulated; and the terms of this reformulation are
useful for rethinking my own act of scholarship. At the outset of Muñoz’s Disidentifications, he
lays out a specifically non-binary understanding of the relationship between theory and artistic
practice, and, by extension, between artists and scholars. He notes:

part of my aim in this book is to push against reified understanding of theory. The
cultural workers whom I focus on can be seen as making theoretical points and
contributions to the issues explored in ways that are just as relevant and useful as the
phalanx of institutionally sanctioned theorists that I promiscuously invoke throughout
these pages. […] [C]ultural workers such as Carmelita Tropicana […] are considered
here as not only culture makers but also theory producers […] Counterpublic performances let us imagine models of social relations. Such performance practices do not shy away from the theoretical practice of cultural critique. (Disidentifications 32-33) Muñoz here affirms Carmelita as engaging in theory through her practice, and, moreover, establishes the necessity of practice for theory. As Muñoz notes, “for me, the making of theory only transpires after the artists’ performance of counterpublicity is realized for my own disidentificatory eyes” (5). He thus positions his act of theorizing both alongside Carmelita’s performative act of theorizing, and as being the result of having first engaged in the performance directly as an embodied experience. Theory, or more specifically performance scholarship, is conceptualized as an engagement with the artist’s practice and theorizing. This reformulation shifts the assumed relationship wherein the artist and her intentions are considered as subjectively circumscribed, and the scholar offers an objective, “accurate” reading. Significantly, however, how might one engage with the artist’s theorizing without reducing it to artistic intentionality? How does one build a critical relationship between artist and scholar that recognizes the creative and critical agencies of both, and queries the terms of each? Moving past this binary in scholarship is a site of negotiation I am interested in learning to navigate in the future.

This dissertation has hoped to interrogate and momentarily upset the process of congealment—the freezing into a fixed identity of the body in performance. While the project has looked back to Carmelita’s work from the 1990s, the relevance of methodologically applying an intersectional disidentificatory hermeneutic to reading performance remains vital. Just this past year in Toronto, in March 2016, charles c. smith was commissioned by the Theatre Centre’s Franco Boni and Ravi Jain to write a review of the press reviews of the Theatre Centre’s November 2015 production of Jackie Sibblies Drury’s play, “We Are Proud to Present a
Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884-1915.” In his article, smith addresses the press reviewers’ complete dismissal of the negotiation of representational stereotype within the production, and their critique of the piece on the basis of its “stereotyping” (smith). I suggest that smith was hired by the Theatre Centre to try and address the dismissive white “mansplaining” that had taken place in the press reviews of the piece. The play is an exploration of racial conflict within the United States, and the difficulty of representing that conflict in theatrical production. Many of the Toronto reviewers, who also happen to be white males, read the representational style of the piece as reifying stereotype. Without opening to the possibility of representational subversion within the employment of stereotypes, the press dismissed the piece as simplistic. I saw the performance, and thought that it was a critically playful work, exposing the tensions of representation, and, to me, that negotiation seemed at the forefront of both the dramatic text and the performance text. Without entering too specifically into the particularities of the Toronto theatre scene, or demanding any level of scholarly engagement from its press reviewers, I cite smith’s article as underscoring the co-constitutive relationship between the artwork’s potential for alternative worldmaking and the spectator’s perspective. For the body in performance to open up as a site for the negotiation of identity as eventness, the spectator must also allow for the intersectional, disidentificatory hermeneutic. Otherwise, the representational negotiation remains invisible, and so, fails to activate across the theatrical space. It is then not only the body in performance that may labour to create these sites, but also the contemporary spectator that ought to continue to cultivate the ability to engage as a disidentificatory counterpublic. As a spectator and as a scholar, I hope to continue to open up these sites, taking up the labour of negotiating on and against the politics of representation.
Afterword

This dissertation has been driven by a theoretical and practical investment around the question of identity and theatrical representation. More specifically, as an actor, dramaturg, and scholar, I wanted to study the embodiment and performance of the multiply minoritarian subject on stage. I remain committed to the question: how does the body in performance engage critically with the politics of her representation?

As I was seeking and researching distinct artistic examples of bodies in performance critically negotiating representational politics, I arrived at the work of Carmelita Tropicana. Her embodiment of a “queer Latina heroine” offered an exemplary case study of subversive self-enactment. It took up stereotypes across a wide-matrix of identifications and critically and comically exploded the terms of their representation. Discovering that there was no extensive analysis of her early work, I decided that this would be an opportune site of research.

This project has allowed me to carve out a close-analysis of Carmelita’s early work and to establish a study of the intersectional representational strategy of choteo. Looking to the future directions of this project, I see two primary extensions, namely, a monograph on the artist, and a project on intersectional choteo that examines various hemispheric artistic case studies.

To expand this study of Carmelita Tropicana into a monograph would allow me to honour the exemplary qualities of this body in performance and its significant contributions to engaging queer, feminist, Latinx politics of representation. To undertake this expansion, I would begin by placing this dissertation’s analysis of Carmelita’s early work and its activation of choteo in deeper conversation with 80s and 90s feminist, lesbian, and queer aesthetics and their
performance of excess. Specifically, engaging *choteo* alongside Rebecca Schneider’s work on “literality” in *The Explicit Body in Performance* would open up and complicate the existing discussion on the political potentiality of excessively rendering imposed iconography. A further engagement would expand on Peggy Phelan’s theorization on the significance of the “unmarked,” and draw out how the conceptualizing of the subject as a site of identity as event-ness might allow for a way to make visible a resistance to fetishization. Moreover, to broaden this work into a monograph, I would place the artist’s early milieu and performance in conversation with the work she has made since and continues to create. This extension would trace the developments of this work, the shifts in its aesthetic over time, its place within the Hemispheric Institute’s performance “circuit,” and incorporate new interviews with the artist, as well as her collaborators.

The second futural extension of this research is to posit the analysis of Carmelita Tropicana’s use of the intersectional strategy of *choteo* into a broader study of several hemispheric artists, analyzing how each engages key representational strategies to negotiate a multiple identity in performance. This would allow me to underscore the existing project as forming part of a larger hemispheric performance studies discourse, which recognizes artists as critical practitioners. It would also allow me to query the conceptual traction of the intersectional, disidentificatory framework I have set out here (Chapter 1). By engaging different artistic case studies across translocal sites, and mining how each body in performance activates a negotiation of identity through key representational strategies, I could begin to build a body of work that can serve as an archive of methods of artistic critical practice. Ideally, this archive would be a useful resource for academics, activists, and artists.
Across both these futural directions, I look forward to continuing the investigation of performance as a key site for critically engaging the politics of representation, and the fostering of a spectatorial and scholarly hermeneutic of intersectional disidentification.
Bibliography


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