



Art and Community

Tilt West Journal
Vol. 2 — December 2020

*Wisdom Amouzou, Gio Barabadze, Stephen Brackett, Gregg Deal,
Asia Dorsey, Cory Feder, Anthony Garcia, Sr., Cory Minkah Montalvo,
Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales, Kai Lee Mykels, Shelsea Ochoa, Kim Shively,
Dujie Tahat, and Motus Theater*

Tilt West Journal
Vol. 2 — December 2020

Art and Community

**Wisdom Amouzou, Gio Barabadze, Stephen Brackett, Gregg Deal, Asia Dorsey,
Cory Feder, Anthony Garcia, Sr., Cory Minkah Montalvo, Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales,
Kai Lee Mykels, Shelsea Ochoa, Kim Shively, Dujie Tahat, and Motus Theater**

<http://journal.tiltwest.org/vol2/>

Tilt West, Denver

JOURNAL EDITORIAL

Managing Editors

Kate Nicholson

Brandi Stanley

Issue Editors/Curators

Brandi Stanley

Derrick Velasquez

Brenton Weyi

Copy Editors

Sarah McKenzie

Ashley Mingus

Kate Nicholson

Brandi Stanley

Designer

Sarah Wambold

Digital Editors

Greg Albers

Sarah Wambold

journal.tiltwest.org

TILT WEST

Denver, CO

Tya Anthony

Sarah McKenzie

Bianca Mikahn

Kate Nicholson

Gretchen Schaefer

Geoffrey Shamos

Marty Spellerberg

Brandi Stanley

Derrick Velasquez

Sarah Wambold

Brenton Weyi

tiltwest.org

All inquiries to:

info@tiltwest.org

Contents

Editors' Note	5
Blending and Belonging with Yellow Dock — <i>Asia Dorsey</i>	8
Invisible Loss Movement — <i>Gregg Deal</i>	14
The Afrofuturism Chop Shop: What is Freedom? — <i>Wisdom Amouzou, Stephen Brackett, and Cory Minkah Montalvo</i>	17
unoccupied — <i>Kim Shively</i>	26
Shoebox Stories UndocuAmerica Series: Stories From Our Undocumented Neighbors — <i>Motus Theater</i>	28
EVIL MAY LOSE THE BATTLE FOR HISTORY BUT WINS THE WAR OF AESTHETICS — <i>Dujie Tahat</i>	35
WHILE RECORDING BARS IN THE STUDIO THAT IS REALLY JUST A SOUPED UP BALIKBAYAN IN HIS MAMA'S BACKYARD I TRY EXPLAINING TO THE HOMIE WHY FILIPINOS LOVE CHAKA KHAN WHICH IS HOW I KNOW THE SAMPLE TO KANYE WEST'S "THROUGH THE WIRE" — <i>Dujie Tahat</i>	37
Musical Response to "Evil May Lose" — <i>Gio Barabadze</i>	39
Musical Response to "While Recording Bars" — <i>Gio Barabadze</i>	41
Drag is Tranquil Chaos — <i>Kai Lee Mykels</i>	43
Test — <i>Anthony Garcia, Sr.</i>	50

Crush — <i>Anthony Garcia, Sr.</i>	52
Portal — <i>Anthony Garcia, Sr.</i>	54
Thoughts on Social Equity in Mass Media — <i>Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales</i>	56
Bridge — <i>Cory Feder</i>	62
I'm Burning Down My Own House — <i>Cory Feder</i>	64
I Have Gone Feral, and I'm Not Going Back — <i>Shelsea Ochoa</i>	66
Contributors	72
About	79
Acknowledgments	81

Editors' Note

What is a community?

This question has permeated the deepest recesses of our hearts and minds for much of our lives. The three of us come from different backgrounds, different experiences, different worldviews; and we've collectively had many years to grapple with an answer.

Now, as we reach the end of 2020—a year that has included a global pandemic, an international uprising in support of Black lives, and a national election—the concept of “community” is more fraught than ever.

Despite this challenge, the three of us have come together to humbly offer a response. At its best, we believe a community is a place to experience deep vulnerability. A place to laugh. To cry. To mourn. To celebrate. A place to safely explore the full depth of what it is to be a human being.

So it is perhaps fitting that we begin this second volume of the *Tilt West Journal* with an essay. As poet Ross Gay explains, the word essay is derived from the Old French *essai*, meaning a trial, an attempt. With this publication, we curators—in partnership with our many contributors—have *attempted* to give some artistic form to the word “community.” We have *attempted* to put language around both a topic and a year that might only be truly understood by having lived through it.

When we initially met in the spring of 2020 to discuss this volume's theme of *Art & Community*, we were intent on including as many voices as possible—representing a colorful tapestry of experiences. As the months rolled on, however, the tenor of this theme took on an even deeper significance.

Over the course of this year, we have attended protests and rallies, both peaceful and violent; we have gathered at a distance; we have mourned lost lives; we have voted; we have listened; we have watched; we have cried. We have tried to find a sense of normalcy while unearthing the ways in which previous understandings of “normal” have fallen short.

This kind of upheaval is confusing. It's painful. It's difficult to rationalize. And yet, it's an opportunity. It offers us a chance to shift our perspective as our world tilts in a new direction. Our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation: each is a community trying to reach the full depths of itself. We've seen those depths—in peaceful vigils, in people confronting their own wounds, in strangers coming together for a common cause.

A community is also a living, breathing entity. Breath is what keeps it alive. But, for a long time, some of our fellow community members haven't been able to breathe because of the knees on their necks. They haven't been able to breathe as they've been turned away at the ER. They haven't been able to breathe because of the stress that they endure simply by existing. And yet, they still often make a way for others, even if they have none of their own. They make art. They redefine and remake community.

For all of us who want to aid with this process of transformation, it's time to look upon our community again. With empathy. With hope. With commitment. With accountability. We believe that every artist, writer, and community leader in this issue will help us all *attempt* to gain a new perspective.

As you dive into the depths of this journal, we hope the spirit of community will be stirred within you.

We leave you with a Congolese proverb:

If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

Brenton Weyi, Brandi Stanley, and Derrick Velasquez,

Art & Community Issue Editors

Blending and Belonging with Yellow Dock

Asia Dorsey

I tread lightly through an abandoned lot, an in-between place at the edge of a kidney dialysis center and an apartment complex. Half of the lot, the medical side, is perfectly subdued and manicured, while the other half runs wild. The contrast beckons me. The chaos of this place feels like me. It speaks a language of kinship that says *come hither*.

The site is home to a prolific family of Yellow Dock (*Rumex crispus*), and it offers the potential for a rich understanding of her companions, her soil medicine, and the wisdom of community. So to the lot I go, making this community of plants—of beings—my study. Let us begin.

SISTER DOCK

Yellow Dock (she/they) takes root in acidic soils, and her height reflects the degree of acidity present (Pfeiffer 2016, 34). Acid-loving minerals that abide in a lower-pH soil, especially iron, can be found here. When one understands these patterns of nature, they can be used to nurture the body.

Yellow Dock roams the body with the same intelligence with which she roams the earth. She makes herself available for many ailments, but

especially to nourish those who need to build their blood. As a digestive tonic, she can release the iron stored in our livers out into our bloodstreams. Her bitter action encourages the proliferation of probiotic microorganisms who produce beneficial acids for the body. These acids lower the pH of our internal environment the same way they lower the pH of soil, making the extraction of iron from our foods more efficient. Where one has an excess of iron, Yellow Dock helps to move it out through the bowels with ease.

Folks who regularly lose blood through menstruation and those who are actively building bodies through pregnancy will find a strong ally in Yellow Dock. Those who refuse nourishment from animals and those who live at high altitudes where oxygen is in short supply will also find support from her. The iron that Yellow Dock makes available is essential to the proper functioning of our respiratory systems because of its leading role in oxygen transport, a point of particular relevance for those of us who live in the Colorado bioregion. The peoples who have lived in this region for hundreds of years, especially the Cheyenne, from whose unceded land I write, use Yellow Dock as a respiratory agent.

COMMUNITY MEDICINE

As I sit side by side with Sister Dock, I look upon the abandoned lot and the punctured leaves of her children, consumed by pests. This ravaging of her progeny has disturbed me for weeks now. I ask her what it is to see her children distressed.

My question draws a comparison between these plant bodies and Black bodies and acknowledges the ways that human societies have intentionally and disproportionately positioned Black bodies in “sacrifice zones” (Bullard 2011, A266). Environmental racism exposes Black people to more respiratory distress than any other group. The labor of Black bodies is disproportionately deemed essential for frontline work, but—paradoxically—these same essential bodies are treated as worthless. They are targeted by parasitic police. Punctured. Made breathless. So I come to Yellow Dock looking for instruction.

“Sacrifice is a human construct,” she replies. “It assumes an Other. It assumes that becoming food is somehow an imperfection, a marring. It forgets the ways that death begets more life. The beings that you see as broken and battered are part of the abundance that we have to offer. They are a perfected aspect of our wholeness and the service that we stand for in this community. We are not your metaphor. We are not beholden to your social constructs of supremacy, oppression, revolution, or counterrevolution. There is no Yellow Dock with a discernible identity or ego. We are a community of beings, moving together as a coordinated force with a beauty that you have yet to discern, Little One. We have been here long before you. And we will be here long after. Spend time under our service and protection. Learn our ways; we are so much more than what meets the eye.”

“Look at me,” Yellow Dock petitions. And I do.

Her ruffled, spear-like leaves dance. I see her, an elegant, bioaccumulating, phytoremediating plant with origins in Europe, fulfilling her sacred contract, restoring the torn landscape as she is torn up herself. I see her dancing in her divine design, even though I can’t fully comprehend that design.

“What else do you see?” she entreats.

And there at her feet is Dandelion, beaming and shining up at me. Oh, Dandy, my love, my ally, my greatest healer! She is another being who restores disrupted ecosystems. In fields where you find Yellow Dock, Dandelion can always be found nearby. These plants form a symbiotic plant guild, amplifying each other’s power and their potential benefit to the soil and to our bodies. While Yellow Dock’s roots act as releasing agents for the body’s iron, they hold a surprisingly sparse amount themselves. Dandelion’s leaves offer equilibrium, as they contain the highest edible source of iron in the plant kingdom (Walters 2006, 205). In this way, Yellow Dock and Dandelion are complementary medicines. I see them as siblings, bound by their shared love and shared service.

Sister Dock sees my expression soften and my resistance release. She muses, “Weave me into the love that you have for Dandelion. I want you to love us as a community.”

HERBAL SIMPLES

My praxis as an herbalist focuses on simples: tinctures and infusions that contain a single plant instead of a combination of many plant allies. I'm committed to unearthing the power and uniqueness of each plant, one at a time. Through this study, I learn how each plant acts on the body, and I can relay that information to others. From this position, I am able to build a relationship so deep that—even without plant matter in hand—I can call upon the plant's spirit for support.

While there are many benefits that come from working with herbs one at a time, I acknowledge that this practice also reflects how I live my life. I see myself as whole and complete. I want to always be enough. I don't want to second-guess, double-check, or seek affirmation from others. I want to believe that there is a "me" that exists apart from the context of others, and that this "me" owns her power. But who I am is influenced by the memories and affections I share with my loved ones. My power emerges and arises from those relationships. And it's often the checking and affirming that I receive from others that molds this "me" into something more beautiful than I could have created alone.

IRON TONIC

Part 1:

Dandelion marks the arrival of spring. She is our first food and makes her body available for our nourishment. Dandelion gives us a rich source of iron and packs a heavy dose of vitamin C, a family of beneficial acids. Years of making love with Dandelion have informed me that her preference is to be used whole: leaves, roots, and flowers. And I abide by her. I harvest her fresh. I pack her into my Mason jar, filling it to the brim with her wonder. I fill in all the spaces with vinegar and allow the mixture to macerate for six weeks in darkness. The acids will pull forth her minerals.

Part 2:

I harvest the entire body of Yellow Dock in early spring or late fall. She is biennial, not perennial like Dandelion, so I must catch her before she seeds

and gives way to another two-year cycle of life and decay. I labor to dislodge the clay soils entangled with her thick, yellow taproot. I work the soil around her, tugging until she releases. And when she comes, I carry her home in my arms—microbes and elation my prizes. Her leaves make a tangy cooked green that I enjoy on harvest day, and they, too, are packed with vitamin C. In my kitchen, I work the roots, slicing them like carrots to preserve the patterned beauty of their rings. I fill another Mason jar, pouring 100-proof vodka over the roots to call forth her plant purpose. Like Dandelion, she will rest in darkness, undisturbed for six weeks.

Part 3:

After six weeks, I recombine Dandelion and Yellow Dock, bringing them back into relationship with each other. They have gained experience and wisdom through their time at rest. Together, Dandelion and Yellow Dock will work the soils of my body, so I combine them to taste, trusting that my body knows what it needs. To this combination of bitter tincture and sour vinegar, I add the sweetness of honey and the metallic flavor of molasses. Finally, I add a squeeze of lemon to brighten the brew. I needn’t worry about proportions; nothing in the tonic can cause harm.

I step back and look at my creation, marveling at its relationship to these more-than-human beings and take up my place as a steward of their medicine.

DIVINE ORCHESTRA

Though I might have infused the Yellow Dock leaves in vinegar and recombined them with the rest of the plant for an independent potion, powerful in its own right, her instruction is interdependence. Yellow Dock reminds me that the individual exists within a community. She wants to be known as part of an ecosystem, as one musician in an orchestra of healing. The power of Yellow Dock is activated by her relationships with others. The same is true with people, and it’s true for me.

And so I can call on Yellow Dock to release the collective trauma stored in my blood. I can call on Dandelion to give me courage to continue when I

inevitably falter. Such is the power of community. We don't have to do the work alone.

As I imbibe the iron tonic, I am transformed. I cease to be an observer and become a participant in Sister Dock's community. I join in, one more instrument in her divine orchestra, and I play my part by listening and responding to her perfect pitch. By incorporating her wisdom into my praxis, I feel the smallness of my self, but I am large and secure in my belonging.

REFERENCES

- Bullard, Robert. 2011. "Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 119, no. 6 (June): A266.
- Dorsey, Asia. 2020. "#13 Yellow Dock, the Grief Doula." *Patreon.com* (blog), April 30, 2020. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/36579502>.
- Dorsey, Asia. 2020. "Guarding the Gates with Yellow Dock." *Patreon.com* (blog), June 7, 2020. <https://www.patreon.com/posts/37973778>.
- Pfeiffer, Ehrenfried. 2016. *Weeds and What They Tell Us*. Edinburgh: Floris Books.
- Walters, Charles. 2006. *Minerals for the Genetic Code: An Exposition and Analysis of the Dr. Orlee Standard Genetic Periodic Chart and the Physical, Chemical, and Biological Connection*. Austin: Acres USA.



Invisible Loss Movement

Gregg Deal

ARTIST	Gregg Deal
YEAR	2018
MEDIUM	Performance
DURATION	Approximately 15 minutes
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

Invisible performance series by Gregg Deal:

Deal has developed his series of *Invisible* performances to comment on the status of the Indigenous community and Indigenous culture in America today. He intends these performances to function metaphorically. In each iteration, the actors (either Deal and his daughter Sage, or Deal alone) dress in Native powwow garments, but—whereas powwow clothing would typically be colorful—these garments are entirely black. In *Invisible Loss Movement*, the performers dance in sync with one another. Decorated with bells and aluminum cones, their clothing jingles, but no background music can be heard. As Deal explains, “The figures exist, but don’t exist; they are visible, but invisible; they occupy space both physically and with sound, but they are shadows.” In *Invisible Eulogy*, Deal appears alone. This performance begins with drumming, then transitions to spoken word.



Invisible Eulogy 1, 2019, performed at Rio Gallery in connection with the *Transcontinental* group exhibition, Salt Lake City, Utah. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Invisible Eulogy 2, 2019, performed at the Tacoma Art Museum, Tacoma, Washington. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The Afrofuturism Chop Shop: What is Freedom?

Wisdom Amouzou
Stephen Brackett
Cory Minkah Montalvo



<https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A//api.soundcloud.com/tracks/900179020>



Cory Minkah Montalvo (L), Wisdom Amouzou (C), and Stephen Brackett (R) recording the Afrofuturism Chop Shop. Photo credit: Jen Wood-Brackett

In June of 2020, Wisdom Amouzou, Stephen Brackett, and Cory Minkah Montalvo met up for a wide-ranging conversation on Afrofuturism, freedom, Black identity, cowboys, superheroes, and joy. The Transformative Resistance Framework, developed by LatCrit professors Daniel G. Solorzano and Dolores Delgado Bernal, informed their discussion.

Please listen to the audio recording to hear Wisdom, Stephen, and Cory's engaging and thoughtful conversation in its entirety. An excerpt is presented here, and some sections have been paraphrased for clarity or brevity.

Stephen: What would true freedom look like?

Wisdom: I always go to love. I've had the gift of experiencing true love, and that has actually set me more free than any book I've read or work I've done. The simplest way for me to describe it is that it's the kind of love that colors my memories in a golden haze. That kind of love feels free to me—and all sorts of things can be born from that. All sorts of public institutions can also be born from that, but I don't want to go there. True love and an environment where I can thrive: that would be true freedom for me.

Cory: For me it goes back to a Gordon Parks photo, *Boy with June Bug*. It's on my phone. It's a boy lying down in a field in the 1960s with a June bug running across his nose while tied to a string. For me that defines peace. I wish that for every Black and Brown child. I wish that for myself—to just be in a state of pure tranquility. Even if it's just for that moment. It's a state where you're not weighted with our history, with the state of our politics; you're not weighted with your own identity. You're just in your own existence, lying in a field, dreaming. That state of mind is what I think liberation is.

Stephen: I think freedom is the ability to dream without qualifiers. When I think of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children, it's not very often that we're able to say, "You can be anything that you want to be," because we don't believe that's true. But we add that if you are going to be whatever you want to be, it's going to be so much harder for you than it would be for a European-American child. So I think that precious frontier of being able to imagine without limit, without qualification—that would be an earmark of freedom to me. That's the freedom I would like to see.

Cory: I think what you're getting at is the state of an unmitigated self. I've talked to Wisdom about this a lot. We are framed as people, especially as Black folks, by our Black community and by our country. We have very little room to be us. My essential question for my life is: "What is Cory? What does that look like?" I'm still following some type of societal structure that's framing me. I think of Sun Ra and Thelonious Monk—what does it look like when you part from all of your constraints? When you transcend Blackness? I think Obama said it: "I am rooted in my Blackness, but I am not defined by it." So I think playing with that tension can lead to discovering what liberation means for us as individuals.

Stephen: If we are conditioned to be mitigated, what percentage of our identity do you think is already predetermined by society?

Cory: In my experience it is damn near 100%. It takes many forms. They can place the reductive narrative of the Black male on you, or they can place the exceptional Black male narrative on you. Either way, you are stuck. There is no average. I love to read the books that portray us as normal,

everyday, mundane humans. We can never be normal as Black humans. We can either be slaves or MLK. So for me, I ask, "What happens when I'm at the dinner table? What happens when I'm doing laundry? What happens when I'm simply inspired by a bird?" We can't ask those questions. And that's what bothers me. Everywhere you turn, you are constructed as a preconceived notion based on what people perceive as your history, even in our community.

Wisdom: I laugh because I think we've all had complicated interactions the last few months. I remember a recent one where I was meeting up with an old friend to catch up. I wasn't in the mood to talk about police brutality, but it was my fault because I didn't state that explicitly. In my mind, I have hope for many individuals and communities. But privately, there are also individuals that I have lost that hope for. This person happens to be one of those individuals. So I was asking about their family and their life. You got the sense that this person was chomping at the bit to talk about police brutality. But we were going on a walk through nature. I'm starting to really love nature because it's one of the few places where I can escape these feelings of heaviness and anxiety. So I was way more interested in looking at a smoke bush, which I have never seen, than in people being lynched. So my percentage is 98%. And in those moments of the 2%, I can always recognize that same distinct look on people's faces when they see me look at a smoke bush, when they see my full humanity.



Stephen: *What emotional technology is missing in order to get to freedom?*

Cory: Could you unpack that question a bit?

Stephen: I look at technology as a way to solve problems. If we were trying to create a society where a person was inherently free from the beginning, what are the pieces that are missing that would be able to get us there?

Cory: I'll answer the question from the frame of my own identity as a Black, Latino male in 2020. I don't think I can reach the level of what I see in that Gordon Parks photo in our current context. This land would have to undergo

a metamorphosis that I don't think is possible. So then I think I have to transport myself out of here. I believe that thinking about retro-futurism is important. I always go back to microsocieties and to doing everything small: focusing on your garden, focusing on your neighbor. That's the only way I could sort of attain that sense of freedom. But otherwise, I would have to leave. I've lived in South Africa; I've lived in Colombia. And those are the places where I've found the most peace in my life. They are certainly not perfect, but it isn't this intimate oppression. So a technology could be travel—or seclusion. I think about buying a ranch in the Southwest and having thousands of acres. I could seclude myself from society. I could have a space to live in my unmitigated self and lay in my field. But then you're in a bubble.

Stephen: So often the early Afrofuturism story would reinterpret the origin of our community. There was an EDM group who said they had descended from Black Atlanteans who had jumped off of slave ships and were advanced enough to create a new society.

Cory: I think reinterpreting your reality can be a mechanism as well. Who is to say that Sun Ra didn't travel to Saturn as a teenager? That's true for him, and he made the reality in front of him work within that frame. So I don't want to call it imagination, but I do think your perception can act as a technological means to influence reality.

Stephen: What about you, Wisdom? Especially when you spoke about the foundation of love.

Wisdom: I dig the philosophy that says we are born with the tools we need. I dig this sense of microsocieties. I keep getting ads for permaculture on social media and think to myself, "Don't ruin it for me! This has nothing to do with what you're trying to sell me." At the end of the day we're talking about the purity of dirt and seeds. I think we are born with the tools. It's the Wakanda that can shield us from the pain. I think of the quote: "Love is what we're born with, fear is what we learn here." We need to get out of *here*. And short of taking up arms or building the wealth to form a protective bubble, I don't know if we will actually create Wakanda. But I know that ideologically we can.

Stephen: I really like the framing that love is what we're born with. So what's the technology to unlearn that fear? And how do we pass that on to our young ones? When they went to Wakanda in *Avengers: Infinity War*, I started sweating. I thought, "Why are they coming here?" Whenever we have something, they always try to take it away. And if there's a shield in sci-fi...it breaks. Because if it doesn't break, then that's the end of the story. So here we are in the middle, and the super precious place that I've only seen in fiction was under threat. I was watching a movie about a fictitious place and I was literally sweating. That showed me how even in the imaginative plane I can be traumatized. Thanos had the anti-life equation, and I want to know what the anti-fear equation is. I would love to come up with alchemy for that. But I do suspect a lot of it has to do with being connected to the land that you're from. And that land still being yours.

Cory: A lot has to do with that.

Stephen: Can we create this world without that land?

Cory: No. I think it was Malcolm X who talked about how we got dumped in a wilderness. We got dumped into a wilderness that is not our climate. It's not good for our skin; it's not the environment we are designed for. It's designed for the natives who lived here. So I wonder how we create the environment that is conducive to our thriving. So many of us feel disconnected to that sense. And until you feel connected, you are not whole. The first time I went to Africa, I already felt like a brother from the moment I landed.

Stephen: I wonder about the fact that there are many groups in the world who have diasporic identities, yet are still able to hold on to their sense of culture. I have a great deal of envy for Judaism and its ability to craft stories that give meaning to Jewish oppression and power in the present day. And I think there are several other tribes who have been uprooted and have been able to find that sense of meaning. A friend of mine is talking about how *Thor Ragnarok* is an Indigenous story. Asgard is not a physical place; it's the people. And as long as the people are there, the place will never disappear. That's one of the tenets of Indigenous culture, and it takes someone from that culture to recognize that. In the African-American diasporic identity—

including people who have recently come from Africa—what is the story of us we can build that gives meaning to our place now? Especially since we don't have our spaceships or private wormholes...yet. That's something that I constantly think about. And when I sit through seders, I am absolutely filled with jealousy. I think, "Man, you all came up with a story that has been an *axis mundi* for you despite how the world has been treating you for thousands of years...Kwanzaa absolutely did not cut it!"

Wisdom: Haha. That should be the title: *Kwanzaa Did Not Cut It*. That should be the next book. That is real, though. When you were describing the wormholes...damn. Today is my mother's 55th birthday. Fives have always been a big deal to her, so I'm strongly reminded of the joy of home. I know at my most hopeless place, I still have the privilege of going to the place that my parents built before we came here. I think about the place it occupies in my mind. Every time I'm there, I immediately feel its energy. Still, the truth is that the last time I was back home—the first time in 14 years—I felt like a stranger in a familiar place. I always add the asterisk that it's a hundred times better than America—don't be confused. But it *is* where I first accepted that home is where the people are, and home is the individuals I call family. And yet, home still has that deep connection to the land. Regardless of the microecosystem I set up here, it won't ever replicate what I feel when I go into the wormhole with the people I love.

Cory: I think that the ability for the diaspora to feel rooted in something is the practice of creolization: you're in a foreign land; you've had to adopt the colonizers' language, culture, and religion. But this act of looking at that and consuming it and regurgitating it back out in your own likeness has a lot of power. You can start to say, "I've made this thing mine, this situation mine, and now I can start to weave it with my roots." But you have to have a strong connection to what those roots are. When you're undergoing constant systemic murder of your culture, it's really tough. From a young age you're taught the antithesis of where you come from. So I think the ultimate disruption is indeed leaving.

Stephen: There's this idea that I've been working on. When I look at the matrix of America, I wonder why this cultural stripping is so essential. And

then I start looking at whiteness. To be white in America is to be American without a hyphen. That's what it means to be American. That's why the rest of us have hyphens. But losing the hyphen comes with a price. When you become white, your family's migration is gone, because you're always American. Culture, language, food—all gone, oftentimes in half a generation. If you're Irish in America that means you drink green beer on St. Patrick's Day. If you're Italian that means you talk with your hands a lot. You end up with a tropified version of your European roots. That is the price of admission for everyone in America. And that's why people don't bat an eye when they ask it of us. Because they've already done it. But they haven't even processed that they've done it. But we are very aware and have a consciousness around that. We are conscious that our identities are taken and commodified. That's how things work here.

To hear more of this conversation, check out the complete audio recording (above).



<https://youtu.be/0xZBsytVo2I>

unoccupied

Kim Shively

ARTIST	Kim Shively
YEAR	2020
MEDIUM	Video (color, sound)
DURATION	04:45 min.
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

<https://youtu.be/0xZBsytVo2I>

This video was filmed in Denver on May 19th, 2020. The Radiant Apartments and the Arapahoe Square Apartments, which are featured in the video, are located in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of Five Points. In the first half of the 20th century, Five Points was known as the “Harlem of the West,” with a predominantly Black American population. Today, the neighborhood is majority white.

Shoebox Stories

UndocuAmerica Series:

Stories From Our

Undocumented Neighbors

Motus Theater

You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself.

—John Steinbeck

Shoebox Stories is Motus Theater’s community story-holding project, where we ask friends, family members, or strangers to gather together and stand in another person’s shoes, by reading their story aloud, saying their words, and holding—for a moment—the weight that they carry.

Through respectfully holding a story different from our own, we expand our understanding of what it means to be human. The stories we hold close impact our thoughts, our actions, what we prioritize when we vote, and who we see as part of “our community.”

Below is an excerpt from Motus Theater’s *Shoebox Stories UndocuAmerica Series*. You will have the opportunity to read aloud a story from the life of Alejandro Fuentes-Mena. We suggest you get together with one to three

additional people for a meal in a quiet location (or over Zoom, if you prefer).

Follow the reading instructions below, and read aloud the story. Then use the reflection questions to have a discussion. You will not only get to know featured storyteller Alejandro Fuentes-Mena, but you will also deepen your relationship with your fellow readers and yourself.

This excerpt is best read aloud by two to four readers. (*The script is divided into four parts, so two readers can simply double up.*)

Tania Chairez, national outreach & education director of Motus Theater
Kirsten Wilson, artistic director of Motus Theater

READING INSTRUCTIONS (TO BE READ ALOUD):

We are gathered to read an excerpt from Motus Theater's *Shoebox Stories UndocuAmerica Series*, where young people with DACA (Deferred Action for Child Arrivals) share personal stories from their lives.

Holding another person's story is both an honor and a responsibility. We are entrusted, for a moment, with their struggles, hopes, and dreams. By reading the words of another, we are not saying that we agree with them. We are simply agreeing to refrain from judgment. After the reading, we will have an opportunity to talk about the differences and similarities between their experiences and our own.

Here are a few suggestions for reading a *Shoebox Story* aloud:

- Read significantly more slowly and loudly than you normally would.
- Honor feelings that may arise as you read, but try not to add additional drama.
- Articulate the words, and pause with the rhythm of the punctuation.
- If anyone in the group asks you to read more slowly or loudly at any time in the process, please comply.

SHOEBOX STORIES UNDOCUAMERICA SERIES EXCERPT: "DEPORT ME"

Featured Storyteller: Alejandro Fuentes-Mena is a Motus Theater UndocuAmerica monologist. He was born in Valparaiso, Chile, immigrated to the United States at the age of four, and grew up in San Diego, California. He received a BA in psychology from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. Through Teach for America, Alejandro became one of the first two DACAmented teachers in the entire nation. He recently completed his seventh year of teaching in northeast Denver and will be moving on to get his master's degree in educational leadership in hopes of creating an arts integrated school, to be named the Radical Arts Academy of Denver (RAAD).



Alejandro Fuentes-Mena (L) and José Andrés (R) in the offices of Motus Theater. Photo courtesy of Motus Theater.

Reader 1: I was just a kid when I realized what being undocumented meant. At age eight, I started going to work with my dad so I could help him rebuild the entire outside of other people's homes, all the while not having a real home of our own. I would help my dad research what to charge and work out all the math. For example, I would discover that for one given job, contractors would charge \$20,000. But my dad had been screwed over so many times that he would only charge \$15,000. Clients would see his strength in Spanish, his lack of English, and his lack of documentation, and

they would give him about \$10,000. And that is who my father believed he was: half the man I thought he was, half the value of any other.

Reader 2: I witnessed as my mother would leave for an entire weekend—seventy-two hours—to take care of someone else's family. She was lured with the promise of being paid over \$300 for the weekend, but she would come back with only \$100 in her pocket. One hundred dollars that she saw as a blessing. One hundred dollars that I saw as an attack on our family.

All those rich families saw little value in everything my mom did. They would take her away, only to use her and spit her out. The money they paid was barely enough to put food on the table. It didn't cover the worry my mom had because she couldn't be home to take care of us when we were sick, help us with homework, comfort us when we returned to an empty house. One hundred dollars for a whole weekend away from her family—like she was worthless. But don't you understand? She was priceless to me!

Reader 3: Well, spending my weekends without my mom as she cared for other people's children, and spending those weekends working for my dad for free so he wouldn't lose money for the privilege of building a home for someone else's family, and witnessing this over and over and over again, I began to think that I wasn't worth much either. Despite the fact that I had been recognized at school as "Gifted and Talented." Despite the fact that I was a math wiz; that I had learned English—a completely unknown language—in less than a year; and that I was an engaged student. Despite the fact that I was the precocious worship leader at my church. I let those weekends of feeling worthless affect me.

Reader 4: I began making jokes rather than making plans for my future. Playing games rather than paying attention. Chasing girls rather than chasing my dreams. And, like all self-fulfilling prophecies, I got to the point where my grades reflected what society said my parents and I were worth: half-priced human beings.

But luckily, I had a teacher named Ms. Kovacic who worked hard to remind me of my value and helped convince me that what this society was telling me and my family was wrong. With her support, and that of many others, I

got myself out of that pit of self-deprecation—past the insecurities, past the hate, past the negativity, past that half version of me—and into a good college and into a position where I am now an educator who teaches math. And like my mentors, I teach young children their value, because all children are valuable, just as you and I are valuable.

Reader 1: As a teacher, I can't help myself. Let me take you to school for a few moments. Hope you're good with that? Let's start off with a little math lesson. My father is one man, one of the hardest workers I know. My mother is one woman, one of the strongest and most compassionate individuals in my life. My sister is one daughter, a brat, but a lovable one, and an American citizen. I'm one son, half of this country and half of Chile. And we are four whole, beautiful gifts, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Not the half-priced individuals that society has attempted to make us.

Reader 2: Moving to applied math and economics: If this country continues to deport the undocumented community, it is missing out on courageous, strong, intelligent, family-loving, hard-working people of great value. And that is not only our loss; it is your loss to miss out on us, not to mention the billions in taxes we bring in every year, which is billions more than large corporations are paying.

Reader 3: Lastly, moving beyond math to ethics: Paying an undocumented person half the value for their life's work; extracting all you can get to build your homes and take care of your families, and then deporting them, as if they had not brought value, is not just mathematically flawed; it is also an American math story problem gone wrong. It is criminal to treat us as subservient and less desirable.

Reader 4: I am living in this country undocumented, teaching your children, supporting them, engaging their minds in math and in their dreams. I'm 100% here and 100% committed to this country in which I was raised, this country that constantly seeks to spit me out. Lose me and you lose my value—not just the money I pay in taxes and the money I pay into social security that I will never benefit from, but you also lose my ability to inspire, connect, and engage. You lose my ability to bring an impact, and you lose

the knowledge I bring to my students, who are your children. This country would be foolish to lose me.

Deport me. But in the end, it's your loss.

This autobiographical story was written by Alejandro Fuentes-Mena in collaboration with Tania Chairez and Kirsten Wilson as part of a Motus Monologue Workshop.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Set an end time for your discussion. Consider using a timer to encourage participants to speak for no more than three minutes per question. Please allow each person to answer the question for themselves. This exercise is an opportunity to listen and reflect.

- What is the main emotion you felt while reading Alejandro's story and why?
- What part of Alejandro's story was most impactful to you? Why?
- In what ways can you or your ancestors relate to the experiences of Alejandro?
- Who in your community or family would you like to have hear Alejandro's story?
- Why is it important to listen to stories of people with a different experience than your own?

STORY SHARING OPTIONS:

- This *Tilt West Journal* excerpt
- Alejandro reading his own story on the *Motus Monologues Podcast*
- The great humanitarian chef and culinary innovator José Andrés reading Alejandro's story, with a musical response by Ozomatli, on the *Shoebox Stories Podcast*
-

The full *Shoebox Stories “Host Your Own” toolkit* (currently available with stories from women in sanctuary), which may be downloaded at ShoeboxStories.org

EVIL MAY LOSE THE BATTLE FOR HISTORY BUT WINS THE WAR OF AESTHETICS

Dujie Tahat

After Ta-Nehisi Coates

As in even the heroes'
narrative belongs to General Lee.
Banality is of the same order
of removal. It's the same rhetorical gesture
from victim to survivor. An act
by definition can never be
a state of being. If it remains
an identity, it never gets to end. The way it works
is the mics go out, the car in front
of you swerves, and we forget
we were talking about evil at all.
In the literature of the time—
which can be described as any time—
the supernatural is always present.
The truth: evil is easy. It's not

a layered story. Evil says this is what I'm going to do
and does it. Maybe at our best, we're okay
not knowing the villain is in our house or
on the ballot. We're approaching the point
of death where we turn to your questions.

Is this a period of hope? Why write
about anything at all in 2019?

Hasn't it all been said? What can I do
as a white person? The crowd in the symphony
hall murmurs when the Black author says
whiteness is a political idea. *I don't need*
to feel hopeful that the sun will come up
tomorrow. I have people I owe.

**WHILE RECORDING BARS IN
THE STUDIO THAT IS REALLY
JUST A SOUPED UP
BALIKBAYAN IN HIS MAMA'S
BACKYARD I TRY EXPLAINING
TO THE HOMIE WHY
FILIPINOS LOVE CHAKA
KHAN WHICH IS HOW I
KNOW THE SAMPLE TO
KANYE WEST'S "THROUGH
THE WIRE"**

Dujie Tahat

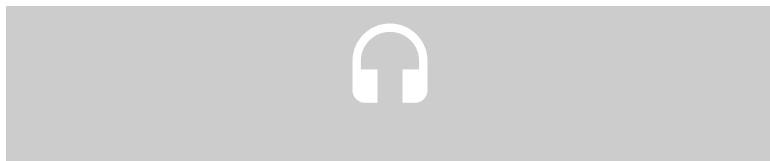
Got it from Dilla, go figure. Bass-creepin
ninja guerilla. I'm more ether than you think
& I got no greed card. Meanwhile, polis

bright lights ask who we are. This lyric not
for you, sir, more for both my diasporas—
those Arabicas & Filipinas—only a perm-
anent revolution will free us. Crusade new
place on a brutal, feudal Tuesday. My grand-
papa grandpapa ask his friend Ahmed, Who
they? Hellish mans with metal hands fetish
lands then forget it. My kasamas wear desi-
gner. My mama don't regret it. I said it so I
meant it. Maybe I might have embellished.

Musical Response to "Evil May Lose"

Gio Barabadze

Editors' Note: In the spirit of art, community, and collaboration, we invited Gio Barabadze to create original improvisations in response to the poems of another Tilt West Journal contributor, Dujie Tahat.



<https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F900184963>



Images courtesy of the artist

Thoughts on “EVIL MAY LOSE THE BATTLE FOR HISTORY BUT WINS THE WAR OF AESTHETICS”:

It seems to me that this poem explores feelings of powerlessness, yet these explorations don't suggest complacency. Instead, they reveal a decisiveness about what's right, by exploring darkness and the nature of evil. For this composition, I messed around with various chord progressions until I found one that sounded like it could go both ways: in a light direction or a dark direction. The poem has a contemplative tone, so I decided to articulate the chord progression in a way that would suggest gradual movement, as if following a narrative. I felt it was appropriate to have the progression twist and wind in a way that is unpredictable but still offers a distinct sense of direction and a clear destination.

Musical Response to "While Recording Bars"

Gio Barabadze

Editors' Note: In the spirit of art, community, and collaboration, we invited Gio Barabadze to create original improvisations in response to the poems of another Tilt West Journal contributor, Dujie Tahat.



<https://w.soundcloud.com/player/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fapi.soundcloud.com%2Ftracks%2F900184957>



Images courtesy of the artist

Thoughts on “WHILE RECORDING BARS IN THE STUDIO THAT IS
REALLY JUST A SOUPED UP BALIKBAYAN IN HIS MAMA’S
BACKYARD I TRY EXPLAINING TO THE HOMIE WHY FILIPINOS
LOVE CHAKA KHAN WHICH IS HOW I KNOW THE SAMPLE TO
KANYE WEST’S ‘THROUGH THE WIRE’”:

When I first saw the reference in this poem to J Dilla, I immediately thought of jazzy hip-hop samples and decided to use jazz progressions as the launching point for this improvisation. This poem speaks of a struggle that spans generations. Beyond establishing the jazzy vibe, I wanted to portray that struggle in the latter part of the improvisation. The poem doesn't seem to be written from a victim mentality; quite the contrary: it conveys a sense of empowerment. So, when choosing chords to portray the struggle, it felt right to articulate them in a way that would sound epic, building to a climax.

Drag is Tranquil Chaos

Kai Lee Mykels

I had no idea where to begin.

When approached about writing this essay, I knew I wanted to focus on drag entertainment and the idea of community, but these are broad topics to cover individually, let alone together. I couldn't seem to find a starting point. So I rode my bike to Washington Park here in Denver, Colorado to try to begin. I sat down on my rainbow towel and pulled my laptop out. Nothing would come. It was early afternoon, sunny, and quite warm out: a great day for writing. But nothing was coming to me. Rather than force the ideas, I decided to join the NAACP's eight-minute and forty-six-second moment of silence for George Floyd, a Black man murdered by a Minneapolis police officer just eleven days previously, on May 25th. I sat praying in silence and solidarity with people from around the world for all Black people and for the soul of George Floyd.

#BLACKLIVESMATTER

Suddenly, as if in tune with this moment of silence, the sky became dark, the wind blew wildly, and—as I looked across the park—leaves, grass clippings, and dust began to circle as if preparing for battle. It was utter chaos. The fighting between them raged on, until droplets of water began to fall

delicately from the sky. It was as if the rain was telling the leaves, the grass, and the dust, “We will get through this, and we will account for it, together.” The air cooled, and—BAM!—it hit me like the wind swirling through the park: this chaos is drag. This chaos is community.

Minority communities—Black, LGBTQ, drag—all share a common experience of being othered in our society. Queer people have been oppressed and have lived in the negative chaos of a heteronormative binary for centuries. We have been told what to wear, who we must love, how to live our lives, that we are sinners; this list could go on and on. It is our community that has gotten us through this chaos. While we have fought our own battles in the gusts of dark storms, we always seem to find that proverbial “light at the end of the tunnel” and come out even tougher when we reach it. The hardships that society has thrust upon our shoulders make us stronger, even when we do not see our own strength.

Now, how the hell does drag entertainment turn this chaos into a positive thing? First, one must understand a little of its history. Drag originated in a gender-binary society that provided the foundation for Western civilization and its gender structures: Ancient Greece. In Greek performances, masked “male” actors would play “female” characters, because female actors were not allowed to perform on stage. Due to the nature of Greek plays, in which actors wore masks and had to interchange roles frequently, it became necessary for males to take on a variety of characters, both male and female.

This tacit acceptance of performative drag culture in a strictly binary society was later incorporated into church services by the Anglican Church in England to help worshippers understand Christian rituals. As detailed in the book *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*, “Women played no active part in the services and the offices of the church, so the original acting was done exclusively by men, choirboys assisting the clerks and playing women’s roles when required” (Baker, Burton, and Smith 1994, 26). If we use contextual clues, this means that drag within the church was seen as an accepted social norm due to the prohibition of “female” participation in services.

In America, drag began to appear in vaudeville and minstrel shows in the 1800s, but the first true cultivator of the American drag culture that we know today was William Dorsey Swann, a former slave who identified simply as “The Queen.”

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Swann would host elaborate drag balls consisting of dance, song, and what was termed the “cakewalk,” a type of dance specifically performed on slave plantations both before and after emancipation. It was named for the prize that the winner received—traditionally, a hoecake or other baked good. In his 2020 article in *The Nation*, “The First Queen Was A Former Slave,” Channing Gerard Joseph writes:

In 1896, after being convicted and sentenced to 10 months in jail on the false charge of ‘keeping a disorderly house’—a euphemism for running a brothel—Swann demanded (and was denied) a pardon from President Grover Cleveland for holding a drag ball. This, too, was a historic act: it made Swann the earliest recorded American to take specific legal and political steps to defend the queer community’s right to gather without the threat of criminalization, suppression, or police violence.

Although these gatherings were not safe for the participants due to the restrictive societal norms of the Victorian period, which rejected the idea of “men” dressing in “women’s” clothing, these dangers did not stop them. They were a support group. They were a family. They were a community. This courage to create community laid the foundations for modern-day drag culture. While the Stonewall riots of 1969, seven decades later, are a huge cornerstone for modern drag and queer communities, we must educate and remind ourselves about the pioneering man who first paved the way for American drag: William Dorsey Swann, a queer black man who dared to express his authenticity.

While the drag and trans communities have become more openly accepted since the days of the Ancient Greeks, the new Anglican Church, and post-Civil War America, the gender binary still plays a huge role in modern theater and performance. Although trans people are represented on screen, they are often played by cisgender actors. Despite some progress in

expanding definitions of gender in theater, much work remains to be done. For anyone wondering where to start their own quest for education on the topic, I highly recommend the documentary film, *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen*.

I was eighteen years old when I had my first drag experience in the iconic Rose Room Lounge on the second floor of the S4 Nightclub in Dallas, Texas. The second I walked through the double doors, I was hooked. The glitz, the glam, the lights, the production, the people, the music—everything captivated my senses. The whole experience was so chaotic and overwhelming, from the crass emcee, to the entertainer in pasties, to the sticky floor. I didn't know how to take everything in. I'd grown up acting and singing in the theater, but never had I experienced anything like this.

A year later, I put on my first dress. A female friend applied my makeup. It was awful, but she tried. I didn't know what the hell I was doing; between the wig, the lashes, the hairspray, the heels, the dress—it was utter chaos trying to do this for my very first time. We were undergraduate students in an extremely conservative city in east Texas with one gay bar that was only open one night a week. And on that night, we went to the drag show.

I looked like shit, but I felt amazing. No one could stop me from being myself.

Our mutual friends, who had no idea I would be dressing in drag, loved it. I still look back and think about how intoxicated they must have been. I mean, it was BAD as far as quality drag shows go, but they still LOVED ME. I never could have anticipated that thirteen years later, I would still be a drag entertainer. And here I am, in the arms of this community, whose history and struggles and triumphs stretch back hundreds of years, and whose members have continually transformed the confusion of the world around them into something bright, and bold, and beautifully chaotic.

The queer community is the reason I still do drag today. I came out as non-binary in November 2018. I call it my “second” coming out because before then I only “knew” how to be a gay man, which was not the most pleasant experience, growing up in east Texas. My first coming out was rather

heartbreaking due to the lack of understanding I received not only from my family but from people who knew nothing about me. Their reactions caused a strong emotional trauma. I felt alone, as if no one was there to even listen to me. I know many queers go through similar experiences, and it sucks. It fucking sucks. The feeling of not being wanted or being unloved is an experience that no one deserves, but through drag I have found a love, not only for myself, but for the queer community, and this community has begun to help me heal.

Drag has been, and still is to some, an underground community. The popular reality television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* has definitely aided in the unwrapping of drag to non-queer people, but it certainly doesn't speak to modern drag entertainment and culture. Although eye-opening in some regards, the show is very stuck in the gender binary while much of today's drag entertainment isn't. Drag and queer society have changed since the conception of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which only began airing eleven years ago, in 2009. The evolution of gender and sexuality norms has opened numerous doors for people of all walks of life to experience drag culture. It's not just for males who want to create female illusions anymore. Drag is for everyone. Drag is an expression in which ALL people can exist. Drag is tranquil chaos.

I have been in Denver, Colorado for a little over seven years, and this city is where I felt unconditional love for perhaps the first time in my life. Sure, I know my blood family loves me, but their love is different than that of the queer community. My drag performances have helped me meet people, create relationships, and most importantly, find my authentic self as a human being. This community has picked me up when I have fallen flat on my face. They have held me accountable, have forgiven me when I have royally messed up, and have accepted me for the loving, broken human that I am.

The year 2020 has brought us a global pandemic and reminders of the systemic racism that the Black community has faced for over 400 years. Doctors, drag entertainers, artists, bus drivers, grocery clerks, and many more people are facing hardships, some of which are new, and some of which are centuries old. While the #BlackLivesMatter movement and queer

rights movement may seem like two very different causes, one cannot deny that they share similarities in their rejection of the oppressive nature of American culture. We see the injustices faced by Black people and queer people as ever-present in the countless murders of Black trans women and trans folks in general, and in the lack of response by our judicial system.

We must raise our voices. In truth, society doesn't want to hear them because, by demanding to be heard, we demand our power back and take their cis-heterosexual white privilege away. **STOP KILLING BLACK TRANS WOMEN!** Civil rights are human rights, and human rights are equal rights. Our communities must stick together and fight for a better future for generations to come. I truly believe and hope that through love, kindness, and education we can unify our chaos and brokenness to achieve a better tomorrow. Let all of us rise and create a stronger community. We will be present and we will be heard. Together.



Khrys'ta Aal (L), Veronica Taylor Mykels (C), and Kai Lee Mykels (R) at the Second Annual Colorado DIVAs at Tracks Denver, January 2020. Photo Credit: Stu Osborne



Kai Lee Mykels (L) and Trey Suits (R) at 'The Kai Lee Mykels Show' at X Bar in Denver, Colorado, February 2020. Photo Credit: Brian Degenfelder

REFERENCES

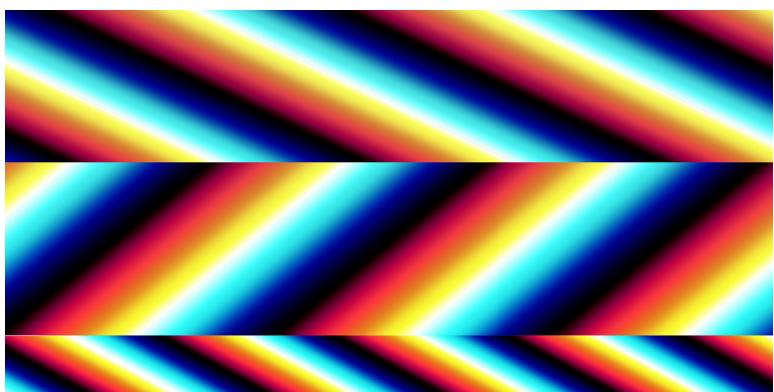
- Baker, Roger, Peter Burton, and Richard Smith. 1994. *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts*. New York: NYU Press.
- Joseph, Channing Gerard. 2020. “The First Queen Was A Former Slave” *The Nation* (January 31). <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/drag-queen-slave-ball/>.



Test

Anthony Garcia, Sr.

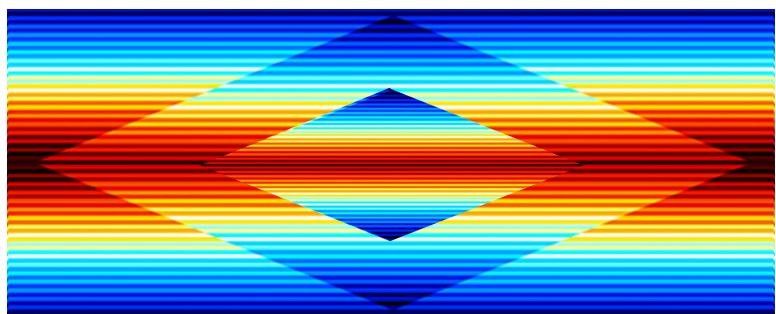
ARTIST	Anthony Garcia, Sr.
YEAR	2019
DIMENSIONS	Variable
MEDIUM	Digital animation
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist



Crush

Anthony Garcia, Sr.

ARTIST	Anthony Garcia, Sr.
YEAR	2019
DIMENSIONS	Variable
MEDIUM	Digital image
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist



Portal

Anthony Garcia, Sr.

ARTIST	Anthony Garcia, Sr.
YEAR	2019
DIMENSIONS	Variable
MEDIUM	Digital image
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist

Thoughts on Social Equity in Mass Media

Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales

I recently spoke with a reporter about the history of white supremacy in my hometown. For the purpose of this narrative, we'll call him Steven. Steven's assignment was to investigate the history of the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado, and he asked me how the decline of their activities had led to a more socially equitable community in Denver. My short answer was that it hadn't. The lack of burning crosses in the front yards of Black families hadn't shifted the considerable imbalance of wealth and social power caused by centuries of white supremacy. Black people in Colorado today face many of the same prejudices, systematic abuses of power, and experiences of othering that they did in the early 1920s.

The more we talked, the more questions Steven had. Although a seasoned journalist, he could not fathom the idea that marginalized racial groups still suffer the same social disparities that they did one hundred years ago. This ignorance is indicative of a much larger problem in our media today and is a direct result of the lack of diverse representation in mass media leadership and coverage.

Mass media have traditionally omitted or neglected marginalized voices, and that omission has influenced American perceptions in ways that hinder our country's social and political progress. Due to intense gatekeeping by those in charge, our national narrative emphasizes one particular point of view—that of white, cisgender males—at the expense of all the rest. However, those who wish to foster change, and artists in particular, have the tools to drastically disrupt this narrative. Arts and culture, when deployed in mass media, have the capacity to inspire democratic engagement and encourage society to find unorthodox ways to approach and solve contemporary problems.

Film, television, radio, social media apps, podcasts, YouTube, and e-games—these platforms define popular culture and articulate our social experience, yet the current media narrative of our reality is severely limited and thus lacks credibility. When experiences other than those of white, cisgender males are acknowledged, they are often shown by way of offensive stereotypes. This portrayal impedes the audience's ability to make sense of challenging, complex ideas related to social issues. The work of media leaders who support these stereotypes becomes canon; this canonized ignorance permeates our culture; and we are then conditioned to accept that narrow, oppressive narrative as truth.

Even media leaders who value the decolonization of the media often tell incomplete stories of marginalization. They ignore the necessary context of systems of oppression because they frankly do not understand the language of oppressed groups. They cannot identify the diminutive effects of systematic oppression and cannot draw correlations between the large splashes of macro-oppressive concepts and the droplets of anti-Blackness and misogyny that affect the everyday lives of marginalized people. The erasure of these stories, either by malicious intent or ignorance, leaves a gap in consumers' understanding of our culture, or what poststructuralists (or postmodernists) call the *grand narrative*.

Marginalized social groups and their experiences are not deviations from the model and should not be relegated to mere special interest stories. Just as white, cisgender maleness is not the defining criterion of humanity, any

deviation from this archetype is not an aberrant, inconsequential other. Humanity's current genetic diversity derives from thousands of years of recombining dominant and recessive gene alleles through reproduction. Thus, it is mathematically impossible for the earliest humans to have expressed phenotypically recessive alleles—those that are contemporarily valued as whiteness.

The exclusive focus on whiteness in the media affects how we perceive not only our culture, but our political landscape as well. Any truly democratic republic depends on public accessibility to information. Despite the seemingly innate accessibility of the internet, mainstream media companies increasingly exert control over that access. Today's citizens receive a schema of society from media leaders who establish the relative importance of any piece of information through its breadth, or lack, of representation. When these leaders fail to cover crucial information regarding social issues, these issues are then othered in public consciousness and become inconsequential in democratic decision-making processes.

The celebrated art critic Clement Greenberg theorized the phenomenon of confronting the other in his analysis of the valuation of abstract art versus representational art: “We cannot yet see far enough around the art of our own day; that the real and fundamental source of the dissatisfaction we may feel with abstract painting lies in the not uncommon problems offered by a new ‘language’” (Greenberg 1961, 136). In other words, the discomfort we may feel when we’re exposed to new ideas and perspectives is the discomfort of frustrated ignorance. Relief from this discomfort will not be obtained by ignoring the truths communicated by the new language, but instead by acknowledging them. The public cannot democratically seek solutions for problems from which they are shielded. By “public,” I specifically mean the cisgender, white audience that wrongly purports to be the base of American society. By “shielded,” I mean privileged in a way that prevents this public from confronting these problems.

The pervasive influence of mass media gives artists a powerful means for inspiring systemic change by providing opportunities for people from isolated backgrounds to experience varying perspectives and thereby deepen

their individual understandings of reality. Art is a societal enzyme that can synthesize diverse narratives of reality into truth. It inspires imagination and creates fresh meaning for old philosophies. The way to inspire change and drive progress is to accurately reflect complex social perspectives through our creative work. The persistent bias in our media must be ground zero in the fight for social equity. Only then will we be able to advance an anti-racist, anti-sexist social structure.

For historical context on how this might be accomplished, let's take a look at the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and '70s, inspired by global reverberations of revolution in Africa, Asia, and South America and the deaths of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Patrice Lumumba. The 1970s saw the pinnacle of the mobilization of art in Black politics, and that decade produced some of the most progressive music, art, drama, and poetry of the time, laying a foundation for modern spoken-word poetry, rap, and hip-hop. This movement placed Black voices center stage, propelled by the momentum of the Civil Rights Movement.

Many of the visual artists associated with the Black Arts Movement were Abstract Expressionists, but their work was generally ignored by white proponents of AbEx painting. Even Clement Greenberg asserted that their work was too autobiographical in nature to be considered (Tate, n.d.). For Greenberg, any interest in representation or identifiable content invalidated the pursuit of true art. By this logic, the self-expressions of identity and liberation often found in Black art would invalidate the creator's right to call the work "art" at all. As Greenberg's narrow definition demonstrates, white, cisgender media leaders and artists have historically failed to address concepts found outside of their own community because they view their own experiences—and their own artwork—as the norm. Concepts that are antithetical to this white supremacist perspective fall to the wayside or—worse—become targets for ignorant condemnation as "too political."

In a 2008 interview with *Poets & Writers Magazine*, Toni Morrison derided this criticism of political art:

All of that art-for-art's-sake stuff is BS. . . . Are you really telling me that Shakespeare and Aeschylus weren't writing about kings? All good art is

political! There is none that isn't. And the ones that try hard not to be political [make their art] political by saying, 'We love the status quo. . . . We've just dirtied the word 'politics,' made it sound like it's unpatriotic or something. . . . That all started in the period of state art, when you had the communists and fascists running around doing this poster stuff, and the reaction was 'No, no, no; there's only aesthetics.' My point is that it has to be both: beautiful and political at the same time. I'm not interested in art that is not in the world. And it's not just the narrative, it's not just the story; it's the language and the structure and what's going on behind it. Anybody can make up a story.

Artists have the power and the responsibility to use media platforms to politically engage the public. Engagement with the arts invites people from different communities to share a single experience, even if they have drastically different worldviews and backgrounds. The empathy and understanding that can be generated from this shared experience can, in turn, motivate civic involvement. In the United Kingdom, the Arts and Humanities Research Council launched the Cultural Value Project to study the level and meaning of participation in community arts work. In their 2016 report, the Council found:

Participation in arts and culture may produce engaged citizens, promoting not only civic behaviours such as voting and volunteering, but also helping articulate alternatives to current assumptions and fuel a broader political imagination. All are fundamental to the effectiveness of democratic political and social systems. Arts and cultural engagement help minority groups to find a voice and express their identity. They can engage people in thinking about climate change when used not didactically but as a basis for reflection and debate (Crossick & Kaszynska 2016, 7).

The artists surveyed in these studies were active in health, education, criminal justice, youth, and community work, and they viewed their artistry as having equal value to their civic practices (60-63). Indeed, in many cases, their civic practices directly informed their artistic practices, creating an inseparable cycle of service, creation, and influence.

In a very real sense, the arts provide us with the vehicle we need for social change. We have the means at our disposal, but we must confront our history as well as our present, recognizing that the stories we have constructed have omitted the voices of many. We must take it upon ourselves to reach out and create spaces in our practices for all voices to be heard, to put an end to gatekeeping and expand the one-sided narrative. As my interview with Steven demonstrates, we must continue to speak harsh truths. Only when America confronts the inequities inherent in our stories and our systems, will we finally be ready to become a truly equitable society.

REFERENCES

- Crossick, Geoffrey, and Patrycja Kaszynska. 2016. *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project*. Swindon: Arts & Humanities Research Council. <https://ahrc.ukri.org/documents/publications/cultural-value-project-final-report/>.
- Greenberg, Clement. 1961. *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Nance, Kevin. 2008. "The Spirit and the Strength: A Profile of Toni Morrison." *Poets & Writers Magazine* (November/December): 1-2. https://www.pw.org/content/the_spirit_and_the_strength_a_profile_of_toni_morrison.
- Tate. n.d. "Spiral." Tate.org (website). Accessed August 8, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/spiral>.



Bridge

Cory Feder

ARTIST	Cory Feder
YEAR	2020
DIMENSIONS	7 x 5 inches (17.8 cm x 12.7 cm)
MEDIUM	Colored pencil on paper
CREDIT	Courtesy of the artist



I'm
burning
down
My
own
house.

집
에
서
너
무
더
워
요
!!!!

I'm Burning Down My Own House

Cory Feder

ARTIST

Cory Feder

YEAR

2019

DIMENSIONS

7 x 5 inches (17.8 cm x 12.7 cm)

MEDIUM

Colored pencil on paper

CREDIT

Courtesy of the artist

I Have Gone Feral, and I'm Not Going Back

Shelsea Ochoa

In light of the dumpster fire known as 2020, I hereby declare myself feral. I have no interest in going back to the way things were when this is all over. Onward, I say! Onward, beyond these old structures! Onward, into the wild! I hereby liberate myself from the constraints of domestication. I strip my bondage and run naked into the forest.

In doing so, I begin a long journey back to myself.

I have lived a life of in-betweens. I grew up in a border town, crossing between two cultures. I am a mixed-race mutt. I have been confronted with prejudice and have chipped away at my own. I have had heteronormative relationships and queer ones. I have had good health insurance at times and have been on food stamps at others. To those of us who have been on both sides of the oppressed and oppressor game, it's pretty damn clear that we should abandon this system.

Almost any young or marginalized person will tell you that things today are a mess. None of us can say that everything will be okay. In fact, I believe that some things will get worse. National elections feel hopeless; our planet is falling apart; and any moment you pause to catch your breath in the fight

for social justice, hatred comes along to kick you back to square one. Plus, there's a pandemic.

At the same time, opportunities for transformation are emerging all around us, and sometimes that gives me hope. I feel encouraged by the people creating change in my community. Our culture is buzzing with conversations about how to dismantle white supremacy and colonialism, and people are questioning all aspects of society, including themselves.

COVID-19 brought about a dramatic personal shift for me. I went from being a full-time performer and educator, surrounded by humans, to being home. Alone. All. Day. At first, the isolation was startling. For the first ten days of quarantine, I stared out the window, stunned. Then, I tried my hardest to be as busy as possible and to not let myself stop moving. I cleaned and organized everything. I took on unnecessary tasks. But eventually, I had to give in to the emptiness. I finally sank deep into my subconscious and pulled out some stale, expired feelings from within. Waves of emotion began pouring out of me, and with nothing to direct them at and no one to project them on, I felt them raw. The tensions of a life in the rat race were shedding away. I had been given the gift of taking a long, deep look within myself and clearing things out.

And then, I felt awake.

I began to notice extremely subtle sounds and patterns all around me. This was a first step into my feral nature: tuning back in with myself and with the present moment. I had been so preoccupied that I hadn't even noticed how I was feeling in my day-to-day existence or the real details of what was happening around me.

During this time of self-reflection, someone on social media posted, "Why do I feel like I'm getting gayer during quarantine?" They hypothesized that being gay is their natural state, but when they have to operate within societal confines every day, there is a subconscious pressure to be more heteronormative. I think that speaks to many of our experiences. Everyone conforms to society in some way. Quarantine allows us to step outside of that pressure and really evaluate who we are. I began to ask myself little

questions, such as: Why are shaved legs better than unshaved legs? For whom do I wear a bra? How much of my productivity comes from an insecure need to seem valuable? These little inquiries were an indication that I was loosening my grip on social norms, if even in the smallest of ways.

As I was “Marie Kondo-ing” various aspects of society, my own behaviors, and my beliefs, I found more and more things that did not, in the words of Marie Kondo, “spark joy.” Energetically, I had a lot to shed. But how would I release it? Enter: howling.

On March 27th, my partner Brice Maiurro and I started using social media to encourage people to go outside and howl at 8 p.m. This idea came without purpose, out of instinct. It wasn’t a statement; we just thought it would be cool if we could get some friends to howl. People latched onto the idea, and eventually we had over half a million people howling worldwide, from all different demographics. As the idea grew, we became witnesses to the purpose of howling.

Howling has a certain magic, in that it doesn’t inherently relate to a single group of people, and it doesn’t inherently express a single emotion. Therefore, at 8 p.m. every night, we created a collective cacophony of howling, a smorgasbord of feelings and intentions. People reported that they howled because they were fighting drug addiction, or because they were in love, or for the loss of a loved one, or in frustration or exuberance or joy or freedom. I think many people howled to feel less alone and to express a feeling that they couldn’t name. Many people grappled with a fear of howling and had to work up courage to disrupt the silence of their neighborhood, to allow their voices to take up space. Whatever people had inside, it was coming out! Howling was a release. Despite our containment, we as a society found a way to shed our energy and tap into our feral natures.

And at the apex of this moment, when we were all in a space of reflection and reclaiming, the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd jolted the nation, and we rushed to the streets as if racist murders by the police were anything new. Howling was replaced by the sounds of sirens, shouting, and pepper bullets. For me, jumping into the protests was a knee-jerk reaction.

Along with many others, I found myself with guns pointed at me, officers yelling, tear gas in my lungs and eyes. I found myself narrowly dodging an explosive can that a police officer had thrown in my direction, which might have given me permanent brain damage if it had landed a few feet closer. I found myself caring for people who were badly injured by the police. I found myself in a crowd that was chanting in fury, then running in fear. This, of course, was nothing compared to the police brutality that has been experienced over time by so many Black people in this country.

Then, suddenly, as quickly as the violence had started, it stopped. The police stopped showing up at protests altogether. Once they were no longer teargassing crowds and shooting pepper bullets at us, the protests became suddenly peaceful, and the contrast of it all felt absurd. It was like the moment when Toto pulled back the curtain to reveal the real Wizard of Oz. Our own curtain revealed that the police violence inflicted to contain the protests had never been necessary in the first place. They were not protecting anyone. The irony of that, paired with our purpose for protesting, was not lost on anyone. I went home feeling disturbed and disillusioned: the institutions that I had been raised to think I needed had been used against the people whom they claimed to serve.

2020 has been ablaze with protests across the country and around the world. In the face of such blatant acts of hatred as the murder of Elijah McClain, many white people who were once afraid to ruffle the feathers of the racist people around them have finally shown up in solidarity against racism for the first time. Given the options of quietly participating in a broken system or making other people uncomfortable, even those who benefit from our broken system are finally choosing the latter. And they have begun to acknowledge the effects of structural racism in themselves. It's messy and imperfect, but these are good first steps.

In early June 2020, I posted a simple question on the “Go Outside and Howl at 8 p.m.” social media page: “How are you feeling?” People from all over the country responded. Here are some of the hundreds of comments the post received:

- *Mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausted.*

- *Defeated.*
- *Depressed and tired.*
- *Mad as hell.*
- *Overwhelmed. Seeing the true colors of people I'm supposed to like and respect and I feel foolish and sad and a little pissed, too.*
- *So stressed I can't sleep, because I just have nightmares when I do.*
- *SAD. Exhausted. Unmotivated. Stressed. I'm supposed to graduate with my AA on the 20th but I can't get work done.*
- *Empty.*

I had to take a moment to grieve over the depth and range of these responses. As we all confront racism within ourselves, our families, and our communities, it hurts, and it is hard. But we are finally letting it out and dealing with it. And out of all of this darkness, there are some real changes happening in policy. As I write this, new protocols are being created to combat police brutality in the United States.

2020 has shown me, more than ever, that the system is not working for us; rather, we are working for the system. And it is so often the people who work the hardest (essential workers such as construction workers, bus drivers, medical staff, etc.), who benefit the least. So now is a time for envisioning a new way of life, and we have a great example set for us by the Black Lives Matter movement.

As for me, I have already wasted enough of my time trying to fit into this tired-ass, dehumanizing, colonizer-centric system. I am now going through a process of molting, of shedding my miseducation. I don't want 2020 to have been for nothing. I want to remember it all.

I want to continue interrogating myself to find ways that I can dismantle the broken systems within me and my communities. I want to continue “Marie Kondo-ing” all my little socially-constructed behaviors. I want to decolonize my mind. For the foreseeable future, I will be searching for some version of

myself that precedes the systems of oppression to which I have been shaped, so that I can be that true self and don't have to live off of the pain of others.

So, I will run naked into the forest. I will declare myself feral, and if that makes me ugly, uncomfortable, unprofessional, or disturbing to society at large, so be it. We have so much to throw into the wreckage of 2020, and so much to gain by letting it burn. This is our chance to undergo a metamorphosis into ferality, in hopes of finding our way back to ourselves. There is simply no humanizing way to go back to the way things were.

I'll see you on the other side: naked, howling, and free.



<https://youtu.be/uYe921l2eqc>

On August 30, 2020, Shelsea Ochoa and her partner Brice Maiurro walked from opposite ends of Colfax, the longest road in the U.S., to meet in the middle. Shelsea created a video of her walk, and paired it with audio of herself reading an expanded version of this essay. Music credit: Tanis Bentley-Brown.

Contributors

Wisdom Amouzou

Wisdom Amouzou (he/him) graduated from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a BA in communications and a certificate in leadership studies. After college, Wisdom joined Teach for America and was awarded the 2015 Sue Lehmann Teaching & Learning Award. In 2016, Wisdom cofounded the HadaNōu Collective while working as a diversity & equity fellow with RISE Colorado to design equity workshops for students, families, and educators. He was a 2017 Camelback Ventures fellow and winner of the 2017 TFA Social Innovation Award. Wisdom currently serves as executive director of Empower Community High School, an innovative student-led high school grounded in Transformative Resistance, in Aurora, Colorado. His life goal is to infuse an African spirit and love ethic into all he does.

Gio Barabadze

Gio Barabadze (he/him) is multi-instrumental, playing piano, guitar, accordion, oboe, harmonica, bass guitar, ukulele, hand drums, and various folk instruments, including wooden flutes and the panduri. He started playing music at the age of six. Born and raised in Tbilisi, Georgia (the country, not the state), Gio attended a children's program at a local conservatory, where he studied classical piano and oboe. At the age of thirteen, he moved to the United States, where he picked up the guitar and a few other instruments and began singing, later continuing his musical education with jazz studies. As an adult, Gio has performed with various

bands and as a solo musician. Currently, he writes and performs folk songs, plays instrumental sets consisting of classical and jazz music, and is a member of the band So It Goes.

Stephen Brackett

Stephen Brackett (he/him) was born and raised in Denver, Colorado, where he regularly interfaces between music and the arts, the education sector, and grassroots movements. He currently serves as the music ambassador of Colorado. A member of the experimental rap-rock band Flobots, Stephen also cofounded the NOENEMIES project and Youth On Record. NOENEMIES works within communities to explore the power of protest music, and Youth On Record hosts a state-of-the-art youth media studio that provides teens in some of Denver's most vulnerable communities with music programs, for-credit classes, and more. Stephen finds bliss in tricksterism, giant toppling, spitting hot fire, and clawhammer banjo. He is constantly provoked by Ephesians 6:12.

Gregg Deal

Gregg Deal (he/him) is a member of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe and a provocative contemporary artist. Much of his work—paintings, mural work, performance art, filmmaking, and spoken word—deals with Indigenous identity and pop culture. Gregg critically examines issues such as race, stereotypes, decolonization, appropriation, and the representation of Indigenous people in the context of Western culture. He has been heavily involved with the media activist movement #changethename in response to the sports mascot debate. Gregg was the Native Arts artist-in-residence at the Denver Art Museum from 2015 to 2016 and an artist-in-residence at the University of California, Berkeley from 2017 to 2018. He has lectured at prominent institutions, including Dartmouth College, Columbia University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, the Denver Art Museum, and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. His television appearances include *Arts District* (PBS), *The Daily Show*, and *Totally Biased with W. Kamau Bell*. Find out more at greggdeal.com.

Asia Dorsey

Asia Dorsey (she/her; they/them) embraces the earth. Ear to the soil, she heeds the instruction of mineral, microbial, and botanical beings. She uses

her gift of pattern recognition as a bioregional herbalist with the Ancestral Herbalism Healing Collective and as a permaculture instructor with the Denver Permaculture Guild. She is also a developer of vibrant organizations that perpetuate cultures of reciprocity, including Regenerate Change and the Center for Community Wealth Building. Ever the Afrofuturist, Asia creates literary beauty and centers Black joy, embodied empowerment, and imagination as cofounder of the Palm Wine Collective and the Satya Yoga Cooperative for POC, and through her work with Seeds of Power Unity Farm. You can find her swimming bone-deep in soil, bending botanical chaos long enough for her people to rise together in power and step into the wholeness that is their birthright. Join in and support her creations on Patreon and Instagram and at www.bonesbugsandbotany.com.

Cory Feder

Cory Feder (she/her) is an animator, comics illustrator, sculptor, tattoo artist, and musician. She grew up in Denver on occupied land of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute nations and now resides in Taos on land of the Apache, Pueblo, and Ute nations. She earned a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2014. Raised by a mother from South Korea and a father from the Bronx, Cory explores “the magic hidden in the mundane” to create a borderless dialogue about her experience existing between two worlds. Cory’s artwork draws on personal storytelling and makes connections between the past, present, and future. She has exhibited and screened her work at galleries and animation festivals in Denver, Chicago, New York, Mexico City, Athens, and Shanghai. Find out more at coreyfeder.com.

Anthony Garcia, Sr.

Anthony Garcia, Sr. (he/him) is a multimedia artist, born and raised in the Globeville neighborhood of Denver. His work runs the gamut from modern-contemporary, to mixed media, to urban art murals, to arts education. In 2001, Anthony was accepted to the Arts Street program. He received his artistic training through the Metro State University Center for Visual Arts. In 2003, he began teaching fine art to Denver youth. Over the years, Anthony has mentored many young graffiti artists, giving them outlets to produce art in a positive way. In 2008, he founded Birdseed Collective, providing a platform for artists to showcase their works and

bringing art to underserved communities through programs that emphasize creativity and healthy living. As executive director of Birdseed, Anthony manages the Globeville Center, Alto Gallery, and Zarape Studios. He is committed to creating economic opportunities for Denver artists and residents. Find more of Anthony's work on [Instagram](#).

Cory Minkah Montalvo

Cory Minkah Montalvo (he/him) arrived on Earth from Neptune in the terrestrial year of 1984. Since then, he has reimagined and designed learning spaces of the future with local communities. He is the founder and chief plug of the Youth Empowerment Broadcasting Organization (YEBO). His career in education includes time teaching in Colombia, as well as in South Africa, where he traveled in 2014 on a Fulbright Scholarship. Cory is a self-described sci-fi nerd who loves to write. He plans to depart from this world upon the completion of his space elevator. He believes the children of Earth hold magic; they remind him of comets.

Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales

Bryánne E. Mitchell-Gonzales (she/her) is a writer and speaker whose work explores social issues of injustice in relation to American pop culture and music. In 2019, she and her husband formed Color Coded Media Group, a multimedia publishing house that focuses on amplifying the stories of diverse cultural identities. She is a passionate social commentator and makes it her mission to engage with detractors. Bryánne is a student of music, coming from a family where music is the language of their dynamic culture. A mother and a wife, Bryánne developed a homelife-based, take-action approach to her career trajectory years before social distancing and quarantine became the norm. If you like bold takes and know what it's like to go through caffeine withdrawal, follow her on Twitter.

Kai Lee Mykels

Kai Lee Mykels (she/her), a.k.a. the #goodchristianwoman, is a drag entertainer in and around Denver. She is a stand-up comedian, emcee, lip-sync assassin, ordained minister, live singer, and music conductor. Kai Lee was the first drag entertainer to perform on the Red Rocks Amphitheatre stage (2017) and on the front steps of the Texas State Capitol (2012). She has preached in drag at Columbine Universal

Universalist Church and House for All Sinners and Saints; she serves as the artistic director of Out Loud Colorado Springs Men's Chorus; and she is on the board of directors for We Are Family, a Denver-based nonprofit that assists queers in financial need. Before quarantine, Kai Lee hosted *Queer Church*, Sunday night shows at X Bar. You can always find her on Instagram and Facebook.

Shelsea Ochoa

Shelsea Ochoa (she/her) has brought her performance and facilitation skills to twenty-eight different countries on four continents, with workshops, travel experiences, seminars, and performance art as her modes of expression. She has performed with the international service organization Up With People, and she has mentored students through organizations such as US-Brazil Connect and NY Help for Honduras. Shelsea brings a unique background in intercultural communications to the environmentalist world; she has worked on the education team with the San Diego River Park Foundation; and she currently works as an educator-performer at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. She is also the creative director of Soul Stories, producing dialogue and storytelling events centered on the human experience, and she performs in Denver with Playback Theatre West.

Kim Shively

Kim Shively (she/her) is a filmmaker whose projects are largely interested in exploring representations of landscape, nature, and mortality. Much of her work originates with the idea of the *palimpsest*—a surface or place on which texts, ideas, and histories are continually being created and erased. The traces left behind are where Kim's work begins. She is also a compulsive documenter; her own archive often functions as inspiration and as material for future projects. Kim has been a frequent collaborator with M12, a Colorado-based art collective, and her work has been screened at many festivals, including the Chicago International Film Festival, L'Etrange Festival (Paris), and SXSW. Find more of Kim's work at her website.

Dujie Tahat

Dujie Tahat (he/him; they/them) is a Filipino-Jordanian immigrant living in Washington State. He is the author of *Here I Am O My God*, selected by

Fady Joudah for a Poetry Society of America Chapbook Fellowship, and *Salat*, selected by Cornelius Eady as the winner of the Tupelo Press Sunken Garden Chapbook Award. Their poems have been published or are forthcoming in *POETRY*, *Poetry NW*, *ZYZZVA*, *TriQuarterly*, and elsewhere. Dujie has earned fellowships from Hugo House, the Jack Straw Writing Program, and the Poetry Foundation, and a work-study scholarship from Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Along with Gabrielle Bates and Luther Hughes, he cohosts *The Poet Salon* podcast, and you can also find him on Twitter. Find more of Dujie's work at his website.

Motus Theater

Tania Chairez (she/her) is an undocumented immigrant born in Chihuahua, Mexico and raised in Phoenix, Arizona. She received a BS from the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania and an EdM from Grand Canyon University. For the past decade, Tania has prioritized her passion for the intersection of immigration and education. Watch her TEDx talk on being *Undocumented and Unafraid*; share her journey in the local documentary *Five Dreamers*; and uplift her nonprofit for immigrant youth, Convivir Colorado. She is the national outreach & education director for Motus Theater and a monologist in their *Shoebox Stories UndocuAmerica Series*. You can listen to Tania's monologue read by Maria Hinojosa (lead anchor and executive producer of *Latino USA* and founder of the Futuro Media Group) on Motus' *Shoebox Stories Podcast*.

Alejandro Fuentes-Mena (he/him) is a Motus Theater UndocuAmerica monologist. He was born in Valparaiso, Chile, immigrated to the United States at the age of four, and grew up in San Diego, California. He received a BA in psychology from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington. Through Teach for America, Alejandro became one of the first two DACAmented teachers in the entire nation. He recently completed his seventh year of teaching in northeast Denver and will be moving on to get his master's degree in educational leadership in hopes of creating an arts integrated school, to be named the Radical Arts Academy of Denver (RAAD).

Kirsten Wilson (she/her) is the founder and artistic director of Motus Theater. She is a narrative artist, editor, and master teacher in the field of

autobiographical monologue work. She has won multiple regional awards for leadership, as well as for her artistic works. She has received funds and commissions from the National Endowment for the Arts for numerous projects, and her work has been featured in media as diverse as *Theater Magazine*, NPR, *Fast Company Magazine*, *Ms. Magazine*, and *USA Today*.

About

Tilt West is a Denver-based nonprofit dedicated to stimulating inclusive community exchange about art, ideas, and culture. We believe critical discourse is vital to the health of an arts ecosystem. We are committed to supporting artists, writers, thinkers, and all cultural workers who make Colorado an interesting and inspiring place.

For every issue of the *Tilt West Journal*, we commission a range of cultural practitioners to respond to a central topic. In addition to our publishing activities, Tilt West regularly hosts roundtable discussions across the Denver metro area and beyond. Tilt West maintains an open invitation list for all our roundtables; sign up at tiltwest.org/join-us. Roundtable prompt materials can be found at tiltwest.org. We post the audio recordings of our roundtables on Soundcloud, and we commission written responses to these conversations for our Medium channel.

Tilt West's activities are supported by a talented group of volunteers culled from the region's growing arts and culture sector. We thank board members past and present for their contributions: Olivia Abtahi, Tya Anthony, Ruth Bruno, Maria Buszek, Jaime Carrejo, Whitney Carter, Sarah McKenzie, Bianca Mikahn, Kate Nicholson, Gretchen Schaefer, Geoffrey Shamos, Marty Spellerberg, Brandi Stanley, Derrick Velasquez, Sarah Wambold, and Brenton Weyi.

This issue was built on Quire, a multiformat digital publishing framework developed by the Getty. In this volume of Tilt West Journal, the main text of the book is set in Tinos; the titles are set in Open Sans Condensed; and the headings, author names, and navigation are set in Open Sans. All three typefaces are designed by Steve Matteson, a typeface designer based in Louisville, Colorado.

Cover art: Anthony Garcia Sr., Test, 2019. Digital animation. Courtesy of the artist.

Acknowledgments

Tilt West's roundtable programming and the *Tilt West Journal* are funded entirely through the financial contributions of our donor members. We are immensely grateful to everyone who has supported our work over the past four years.

We would particularly like to thank and acknowledge the members of our Tilt West Patron Circle for their generous gifts in 2020:

Marci Auston and Frank Martinez
Donna Bryson and Fred Glick
Sue and Tim Damour
Beirne Donaldson and Wood Huntley
Erik and Kelly Duffield
Baryn Futa
Rebecca and Ken Gart
Rick Griffith and Debra Johnson
Sarah McKenzie and Nico Toutenhoofd
Sharifa Moore
Geoffrey Shamos and Genery Booster