

“Viviendo en(tre) la Fantasía y la Realidad”¹
**A Portrait of a Trans Activist Transcending Bordered Traditions through
Art & Pedagogy**

by Michael Vázquez

I believe that telling our stories, first to ourselves and then to one another and the world, is a revolutionary act. It is an act that can be met with hostility, exclusion, and violence. It can also lead to love, understanding, transcendence, and community. I hope that my being real with you will help empower you to step into who you are and encourage you to share yourself with those around you.

-Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness*

“Lo siento, querida.”²

Two checkmarks transition from gray to blue on WhatsApp, meaning she’s seen my text.

“Está bien, cariño. No te preocupes,”³ she replies.

Disappointed, yet intent on consoling me, Lía wonders how she’ll break the news. Now that her performance at our university is indefinitely postponed, her mother must wait even longer before finally seeing her in action. Can we reschedule it for the fall? The crisis should be over by then, and the flights, lodging, and venue would still be available. I check my planner, and I come across October 9, 2020, a Friday. Would that work with her schedule? That date coincides with Latinx⁴ Heritage Month and the inaugural Latinx Alumni Homecoming. It’s also the weekend of National Coming Out Day. It would be perfect. Almost *too* perfect. But, if there’s anyone who deserves serendipitous perfection, it’s Lía Virginia García Barreto, *La Novia Sirena*.⁵

The summer before my 15th birthday, I waited in bed every single night for my parents and siblings to fall asleep. At around midnight, I’d sneak away to the living room, turn on the desktop, and start the dial-up internet. Triple checking the living room to ensure I was alone, I would log on to my sanctuary: The Gay Youth Corner, also known as the GYC. A site for LGBTQ+⁶ youth between the ages of 13 and 19, the GYC was a community for thousands of closeted kids. We would have similar conversations to the ones we’d have offline with our classmates, but here it was (mostly) without judgment. Who is your *real* celebrity crush? Who do you like at school? It was also a space for vulnerability. What happens if my parents find out? Why can’t I change who I am? For young LGBTQ+ folks, online forums have long served as safe spaces to explore their identities and build affinity with others with similar experiences (Craig and McInroy 97). However, at around 6 AM, it was time to cross a few borders. Night became day. Out became in. Online became offline. Your authentic self had to sit back while your public self went back on high alert. These border crossings also had their own set of customs.

Among LGBTQ+ youth, simultaneously hiding and finding yourself can result in significant mental health issues. For QTBIPOC⁷, and TBIPOC⁸ in particular, those effects are compounded by racial discrimination, cultural hegemony, and a stressful journey to understand how their ethnic-racial identity fits within a larger society (Kuper et al. 715). That was certainly

the case for me. In middle school, I was labeled a beaner or a fag. Sometimes I was a *joto*,⁹ an intersectional approach, I presume. For my dear friend Lía, during her adolescence she was deemed a *puta*,¹⁰ a freak, a spic, and a boy in girl's clothing. Sometimes she was beaten up.

I first met Lía two years ago through a mutual friend. We have a lot in common. We're both pedagogues. We're the same age. We both came out in our late teens. And, most importantly, we both agree that cismen¹¹ are *basura*¹². But we're also very different, too. We're both Mexican, but we grew up on opposite sides of the international border, and one of our passports has more power than the other. We're both bilingual, but our mother tongues are different, and one of those languages holds more capital. She's a transwoman and I'm cisman; we're on opposite sides of the gender binary, and one of those sides is afforded many more privileges. She's an artist. I've spent most of my life in STEM. One field is never cut from the school budget. She's a flashy butterfly. I'm a timid—yet obnoxious—cricket. Neither are the main attraction at the zoo, but both are in cages. Yet, through our unique experiences, we've learned how to safely cross a common border: when and to whom should we come out?

As Vice President of the Latinx Student Association, I was thrilled to invite Lía to speak, perform, and recite poetry. Her visit was originally meant to be part of a series of Queer and Trans Latin American voices, following a trans Black *Dominicana*¹³ filmmaker and an undocumented, queer, and cis *salvadoreño*¹⁴ journalist. But, alas, COVID-19 had other plans. However, I am still excited for her to come. I have much love and respect for Lía, who is a scholar activist and a kind soul, and I cannot wait for others to meet and learn from her. Like her sisters Jennicet Gutiérrez¹⁵ and Sydney Freeland¹⁶, she understands how gender is a heavily bordered construct. She, among others, has shown me how we can affirm and redefine our identities while simultaneously embracing traditions and other aspects of who we are that are seemingly at odds. With her guidance, I hope to examine how people navigate intersecting binaries, such as how individuals express notions of gender as more than just female and male while also confronting rigid societal constructions of race and ethnicity. How can we cherish all aspects of who we are? How can we dismantle the borders that seek to compartmentalize our identities in destructive ways? How can we best serve our communities, regardless of what side of and proximity to a border, in both a literal and figurative sense? How do we exist, resist, and inform ourselves and others? This paper presents a portrait of Lía as someone who has approached each of these questions through her life's work and can shed light upon these topics and more. As members of her public audience, we—scholars of intersectionality, many of us QBIPOC¹⁷—need to put in more work to support our TBIPOC siblings, and the first step is to hear and feel the narratives they choose to share.

I. Methods: Portraiture as a Labor of Love

“*Lo que me gusta de tu arte es que tu método es simplemente ser tú misma.*”¹⁸ 

Two more blue checkmarks. *Lía García is typing...*

“*¡Yo diría lo mismo sobre tu arte!*”¹⁹ 

Taken aback, I smile. 

In the summer of 2018, Janet Mock, an activist, author, and public speaker, made history as the first transwoman of color to direct an episode on national television (Kai). *Pose*, a series oriented around New York City's 1980s ballroom culture, addresses sex work, HIV/AIDS, sexual

and physical violence, coming out, and many other difficult topics. However, *Pose* upends traditional narratives about QTBIPOC. Mock, the main writer and producer for the show, believes that while it is crucial to raise awareness about the harsh realities that many transwomen of color face, it is equally necessary to celebrate their lives (Kai). Essentially, Mock is committed to accentuating notions of goodness and beauty—amidst pain and discomfort—to provide an authentic storyline for an oft-misrepresented community.

Mock's sentiments around *Pose* largely mimic portraiture, a narrative form of qualitative inquiry. Emphasizing empiricism and aesthetics, portraiture reframes conventional methods of "damage-centered research" that pathologize communities by instead implementing a "desire-based research framework" (Tuck 416). By "resist[ing] this tradition-laden effort to document failure," portraiture is called to co-construct a research question with communities in a manner that values "goodness;" in doing so, the focus is shifted from "weakness to [a] pursuit of strength" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis 9). To convey such goodness, portraiture recognizes that "every research encounter is a complex set of relationships between people with different needs, desires, and motivations for engaging in the research" (Bruhn and Jimenez 50). Given Lía's artistic approach, which affirms marginalized voices by centering them in the general public, I firmly believe portraiture is the most effective method to share these experiences as the social science method reaches beyond the academy and mirrors her artwork.

Though my initial interactions with Lía were to organize her visit to the university, our discussions eventually revealed a unique story: how a transwoman of color uses her art as a medium to reveal new narratives and deconstruct the confining nature of artificial borders of identity. As such, to compose this portrait, I draw on a year's worth of communication with Lía over the phone and WhatsApp messages. I also reviewed her publicly available multimedia texts, which include photos, diary entries, poems, and speeches, all of which allowed us to develop a research question that is largely answered through her upbringing, activism, art, and pedagogy.

II. *La Sirenita*²⁰ Reimagined

"*¿Me podrías platicar un poco sobre tus performances?*"²¹ I ask.

Two blue checkmarks begin to bloom.

"*¿A qué te refieres, hermoso? La vida es un performance. El género, la cultura...*"²²

In Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, Ariel abhors living within the border between animal and human and longs to be a part of the latter's world. She makes a deal with Ursula,²³ the sea witch, trading her voice and fin for a pair of legs. In the human world, a woman's voice—and especially a woman with a nontraditional construction of gender—is not valued. Her physique is enough to attract the man, defeat the villain, and live happily ever after. Lía, however, is a different kind of mermaid. A foil to Ariel, Lía embraces the ambiguity between animal and human every time she puts on her fin for a performance. Whereas Ariel fantasizes a world she can enter, Lía recreates a new world: one where she, a trans mermaid, is front and center; one where such a unique display amplifies her voice; one where fantasy is reality.

Growing up in the 1990s in a middle-class neighborhood in Mexico City, Lía quickly learned that fantasy and reality were at odds. As a little girl, when her parents and brother weren't around, she'd sneak into her mother's closet and admire her clothing. She'd imagine herself in

those dresses, wearing her jewelry, putting on makeup. She'd pretend to be Ariel. Alone, she'd trade her voice for moments of authenticity, femininity, and happiness. In reality, though, she would try to hide her mannerisms. Her mother, while very much loving, began questioning her behaviors. She noticed subtle changes in her closet. Her father, who is now mostly absent, acted from a place of fear; he'd discourage her from her femininity. Why couldn't she be masculine? Why couldn't she adhere to his gendered expectations?

In middle school, Lía encountered violence. As was the case with her peers, Lía's body was changing, and these changes did not match Ariel's. Her femininity, and its purported contrast to her physique, along with her puke green school uniform required for boys, was a topic of discussion among teachers and students alike. She was bullied. Staff told her to play with the boys and assigned her to more masculine activities, like soccer. Boys made fun of her because she wasn't like them. Girls judged her because they believed she wasn't one of them either. One day, some boys beat her brutally, so she had to change schools. Then it happened again. And then again. It was always unsafe for a girl like her.

In high school, however, things were completely different. She'd leave home in an unassuming pair of pants and a t-shirt. Upon arriving to campus, she'd be in a crop top and short shorts. She was part of an all-girl squad that embraced her. She didn't know the term trans just yet, but she did find support at the gay bench, a site where all the LGBTQ+ students could congregate without judgment. According to her, every high school has a gay bench. I never got that memo. It was here, at her high school, where Lía could freely explore herself. The campus library proved to be the most enlightening space. With a vast collection of books, she had access to texts about queer and trans identities. She read about Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. She learned about the *muxes*, a third gender still recognized and affirmed among the Zapotecs (Suárez 2386). She studied the Zapatistas and how they embraced LGBTQ+ people and demanded their rights be honored. She realized that these two indigenous communities in southern Mexico were living her fantasy. Or, rather, different gender expressions and sexualities were always reality until the conquest; discrimination was the cruel fantasy placed upon our people. Still, each day after classes were over, Lía walked through the gates back into a world that wasn't as welcoming, where she would still have to mind her mannerisms.

Lía reflects on her growth as she discusses her signature performance project. During and after college, on various occasions, Lía went out into the city dressed as a mermaid. Her legs were hidden under a fin made of bright purple fabric. In her sequin tassel bra, also purple, she would simply sit. And wait. And smile. And wait. Sometimes she was in a public park. Sometimes she was on a college campus. One time she was in Barcelona, where she was invited to share. In all cases, passersby noticed a mermaid sitting in an unlikely location. It was clearly a strange sight, but she embraced that strangeness. Fin and bra aside, she also looked different, too. She could see spectators question not only what she was doing, but who she was. What she was. Eventually, folks would gather around her and began to talk to her. They'd hear her voice and confirm that she, like Ariel, wasn't a conventional type of woman. Through this, Lía found her authentic voice. She expressed to others the different types of womanhood that existed. Her dive into the fantasy world of mermaids changed other peoples' realities; they realized that the gender binary is a construct. There are now other genders and expressions in their realities, too.

III. (Un)veil

“¿Qué haces para el Pride? Nosotros iremos a un bar de ambiente.”²⁴

“Ando afuera con algunxs amigxs. Nosotrxs iremos a una fiesta después del desfile.”²⁵

“Nosotrxs también vamos al desfile,”²⁶ I reply. “Ellos quieren celebrar.”²⁷

“*Ellxs,”²⁸ I correct myself.

After graduating from high school, Lía was fortunate to attend the National Autonomous University of Mexico, or UNAM, one of the most prestigious institutions in Latin America. There, she studied pedagogy, following in her mother’s and grandmother’s footsteps, in hopes of becoming an educator. It was there, too, where she did more learning about herself. By then, she began embracing the word trans, and she wanted to engage in projects that allowed her and others to explore her womanhood. But it was also in higher education where she made an alarming discovery: academia has historically been harmful to transwomen. Colleges are not for transwomen to exist and study; on the contrary, they are there to exist and be studied. Anthropologists, biologists, sociologists, psychologists, etc. have all done immense harm to the trans community by dissecting, literally and figuratively, the bodies of her ancestors.

It was at UNAM where Lía began taking gender studies courses. Early into her academic career, she started to understand how borders are “vague and undetermined place[s] created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 25). Borders were spaces of transition, mixing, and disarray. According to Anzaldúa, “in the borderlands, you are the battleground,” and in order to “survive [...], you must live *sin fronteras*,²⁹ be a crossroads” (194-195). Lía learned that all borders—physical, spiritual, sexual—are colonial constructs that have caused extreme damage, meaning that for Lía, being trans also means facing and fighting against violence. Mexico, for example, is the second most dangerous country for transwomen and cis gay men (Rojas; García). She has had to bury her own sisters who were taken from the world. Mexico, like much of the world, has been wounded by colonization’s harsh grasp via artificial borders of gender.

For Kenya Cuevas, another transactivist in Lía’s circles, the greater community must understand the plight that transwomen face in Mexico in order to foster systemic change. As the director of *La Casa de las Muñecas Tiresias*³⁰, a Mexico City-based nonprofit devoted to serving sex workers, people with drug addictions, unhoused communities, persons living with HIV, and LGBTQ+ individuals, Kenya has encountered transmisogyny firsthand. Having endured assault on various occasions, including from police officers, Kenya’s work reimagines a world where trans people can live freely (“Transfemicidios vivir, contar, y ayudar”). However, much is needed for her goal to become reality. In 2016, *el Centro de Apoyo a las Identidades Trans*³¹ released a report stating that between 2007 and 2015, 283 transwomen were murdered in Mexico alone, although that number is likely much higher. In just the month of October in that same year, 12 transfemicides were recorded in the Latin American country. Of all those documented homicides, over 99% resulted in impunity for the assailant. (“Transfemicidios CDMX”). Kenya has seen her own sisters’ aggressors with her own eyes, even long after these incidents; evidently, the Mexican (in)justice system has failed her and other transwomen.

Mexico’s murder rate is a harsh reality that she and Lía have to contend with. But, it is also important to dispel the myth that developing countries are inherently more bigoted. As we watch the news each day, we are constantly reminded of the atrocities committed against LGBTQ+

communities, especially TBIPOC. Mexico is certainly not immune to patriarchy, but neither is the United States, my homeland. In the United States, a beacon of white liberalism, “[o]ne in five transgender people in the United States have been discriminated against when seeking a home, and more than one in ten have been evicted from their homes because of their gender identity” (“Housing & Homelessness”). Transfemicide, especially for Black transwomen, is rampant, and most of their murderers are not held accountable (Talusán). Layleen Cubilette-Polanco, a trans AfroLatina, died after enduring physical and psychological violence at Riker’s Island (Willis), while Roxsana Hernández, a transhondureña migrant, died in an ICE detention center less than a month after seeking asylum (“Roxsana Hernández”). Sza Sza Codner, a Jamaican transwoman, still sits in that same carceral space that Roxsana was in today, placed in a cage with cis men (Vasquez). For a country that lauds itself on how far we’ve come, we are among the most stringent with respect to border enforcement—for borders of any kind—yet we also allow transantagonism and queerantagonism to freely permeate those borders.

It is this harsh reality that provokes Lía to act. While at UNAM, her professor challenged the cohort to engage in an informal pedagogy project. For Lía, this was an opportunity to learn about herself and with others. Planned alongside her classmate Liz Misterio, a cis lesbian artist, this piece featured Lía walking around UNAM’s department of engineering in a wedding dress. A sharp contrast to the school of education, which was dominated by women, the engineering quad was almost exclusively male. There, she engaged with the students. Clearly standing out, many approached her, asked her who she was going to marry, and participated in brief discussions.

Lía’s motivation for this project stems from her childhood. When she was a little girl, she loved attending weddings. She admired the bride, pictured herself in her dress, loved by the groom, and embraced by her family. She regularly tried on her mother’s wedding dress, which was tucked away in a box in her closet. Now, Lía’s fantasy was a reality. She had on a dress, but she was subverting the tradition. Unlike in most weddings, Lía was not betrothed to a man, and she did not rely on her father to give her away. The dress affirmed her femininity, but it was not a traditional marriage. Rather, it was a commitment to her womanhood, to her activism, and to her trans sisters. She was committing to educating others and making the world safer for LGBTQ+ youth. So, as she walked around UNAM’s engineering quad, she invited the students to speak to her. She shared her background, and they shared theirs. She asked them if engineering was what they *truly* wanted to study. Some of them were candid about their fears regarding masculinity, mentioning the pain that such a construction has inflicted upon them. In the end, many of them embraced Lía, adding to the final portion of her project: embodied knowledge. That physical sensation—that touch—is what solidified a connection. They were learning through feeling her, and she was learning by feeling them. She felt their pain, and they felt her understanding of the world. Together, they felt the urgency to reconstruct it.

IV. On (Not) Performing in Public

*“Entonces, ¿cómo fue tu transición?”*³²

Three dots appear. Then disappear. Then reappear.

*“Claro que te contaré sobre esa etapa. Pero antes, ¿me cuentas un poco sobre la tuya?”*³³

*“¿La mía?”*³⁴ I ask, fairly confused.

*“¡Claro! Te mudaste a otro país. Te convertiste en maestro después de ser estudiante. Saliste del closet. Ya eres tío. Todos esos son momentos de transición.”*³⁵

Her eyes are covered by the hands of two cis gay men. She's wearing a pink metallic dress. They're wearing black dress shirts and slacks. Her hair is in a bun, and she has dark pink lipstick. Their pink boutonnieres match her outfit. The three of them are barefoot, standing in the center of a shallow reflecting pool beside UNAM's Museum of Contemporary Art. A violin begins to play peacefully in the background, contrasting with the harsh splashes from their feet as they wade through the water. Her escorts guide her onto the concrete, where a group of spectators wait in silence. She opens her eyes, examines her audience, and screams: "¡Tenía mucho miedo de despertar!"³⁶ She then screams it again before inviting others to approach her. She touches their faces. They touch her arms. She kisses some on their cheek, others do the same. She then whispers into some of their ears, encouraging them to scream out the name of a loved one who has passed on. After a few turns, she instructs everyone to summon their loved ones into this space and scream their name in unison. This performance piece, entitled *Sutiles Extrañezas*,³⁷ acts as a bridge between life and death. Together, they transcend time, memory, gender, voice, sound, and space. Her art piece weaves embodied knowledge, ancestral energy, love, and healing. This communal work of art concludes with a collective embrace ("Lía García: Subtle Strangeness").

I am quick to call *Sutiles Extrañezas*, much like her other works, a performance. Lía doesn't fully disagree, but she doesn't consider them to be performances. Gender is a performance. Ethnicity. Language. Laws. Those are performances. Her pieces are public expressions of authenticity. They're co-constructed gatherings meant for learning and unlearning. And, for Lía, it is crucial for these moments to take place in the public. Whereas she performed her gender in private—within a closet, behind the gates of her high school—she lives her life in public and encourages others to follow suit.

As intersectional feminist movements such as *#NiUnaMenos*³⁸ and "*Un violador en tu camino*"³⁹ shake up Latin America and the rest of the world, Lía's activism becomes even more salient. Amidst Mexico's *paro nacional*,⁴⁰ a mass mobilization organized and by a diverse group of women, activism elucidates the roots of the nation's rampant gender-based violence: femicide, domestic violence, *machismo*,⁴¹ capitalism, transantagonism, queerantagonism, displacement, forced migration, inequitable labor, neoliberalism, hyper-criminalization, and political corruption (Castañeda Pérez). This pivotal moment empowers Lía to continue acting; the assault on marginalized peoples, the battlegrounds, necessitates the power of the collective, the crossroads.

Lía's first public expressions began at the end of high school. In her own words, she has never known masculinity. She has, however, lived at the border between masculinity and femininity, and for a while, that nexus inspired her initial pieces. She purposefully dressed in androgynous clothing. She walked around town and absorbed the stares and confusion of others. Is she a boy? Is she a girl? That ambiguity fueled her. She never encountered violence, only questions, which she welcomed. She was promoting the visibility of diverse gender performances. She then photographed these interactions, making collages out of them. The album holding these collages and accompanied diary entries is the start of her activism.

Dismantling transmisogyny has largely motivated Lía's pedagogy and art, but it doesn't end there. What I admire most about Lía is that she embodies solidarity, regularly attending marches in support of Black Mexican women, sex workers, Central American and Caribbean migrants, and other oppressed communities. She has led interactive workshops with children to talk about gender, and she regularly visits a local prison to lead artistic activities with incarcerated people. In doing so, she confronts the binaries that divide us, chipping away at the artificial borders

that lead to ignorance and violence. And, her transborder activism informs how she understands her own self, too. As she expressed in *Sutiles Extrañezas*, the border between life and death is not as strict as we imagine. Her previous self, one of fear, shame, and bullying, once died, allowing her to be reborn as an activist, an artist, and a pedagogue. Her former self may have died, but she never stopped breathing; the same heart continues to beat.

V. Pino Suárez

“Por supuesto, mi amor.”⁴² She texts me. “Me encantaría.”⁴³

“¡Qué emoción! ¡Ahorita le digo!”⁴⁴ I write with glee. I can’t wait to share the news with Adán,⁴⁵ a trans musician from a local high school. He’ll be so thrilled to perform with her.

Across Latin America, *quinceañeras* are a quintessential rite of passage. My little sister had one, as did my cousins and friends. While there are many variations depending on one’s culture, religion, and social class, in the United States they’re mostly known for big, poofy, brightly colored dresses (usually pink) and carefully choreographed routines to “*Tiempo de Vals*” and “*Suavemente*.” Most involve some sort of ceremony at a local Catholic church, followed by the main party at a private venue. In high school, I was a *chambelán*⁴⁶ on numerous occasions. First, I danced in my cousin’s court with one of her friends. My cousin, in her cotton candy dress and silver tiara, recited prayers with her parents at church before we took a hummer limo to a cheap nightclub to dance to “*Tiempo de Vals*” and “*Suavemente*.” A few months later, I danced at another friend’s *quinceañera*; this time my assigned *dama*⁴⁷ was one of her sisters. My friend, dressed in a hot pink dress and a tiara, had us congregate for mass as she and her parents prayed with the priest. Once that formality was over, we gathered in a hummer limo to head to a party room attached to a bowling alley. There, we danced to “*Tiempo de Vals*” and “*Suavemente*.” Except for the choreography, the colors, songs, and modes of transportation were the same for the other *quinces*. Essentially, the celebration commemorates a girl’s transition into womanhood. She has reached sexual maturity. Her father is obligated to dance with her; it’s his time to praise her accomplishments, shed a single tear, and prepare himself for her next major milestone: marriage.

When Lía was 15 years old, a *quinceañera* was simply out of the question. Some of her friends engaged in the tradition, but she was never the centerpiece. Though she might have wanted one, there were too many barriers. These celebrations, often extravagant, are costly. That’s why one of my friends skipped the church portion and only had the party. That’s why my parents only let my sister have the church portion and opted out of the party entirely (that and Daddy Yankee’s “*Gasolina*”). Modern conceptions of this important ritual didn’t accommodate Lía’s womanhood, so she had to watch from afar as her friends were crowned.

By 2012, Lía had fully embraced her womanhood. Her transition, though long, painful, and rejuvenating, did not feature some sort of celebration. But, for Lía, such a major life event needed to be marked with a celebration. At 23, she had already been a bride. She was already a mermaid. Her authentic self was out in the public. “*Quería hacer una fiesta para todxs*,”⁴⁸ she said. Reflecting on her upbringing, activism, art, and education, that next step was clear; she was going to hold a *quinceañera*. She wasn’t 15. She didn’t have a relationship with her father. She wasn’t religious. Her own sexual development wasn’t of the accepted archetype. But, none of that

mattered. Life is a performance, and borders are constructs. This was Lía's chance to celebrate her new performance, her new construction.

For the next four years, Lía held various *quinceañeras* all over Mexico City. In plazas, in public parks, in the street, and even in a metro station. When Lía was younger, she lived just off the blue line of the city's vast subway system. When she was older, she moved out of the house to an apartment off the pink line. These two routes meet at the Pino Suárez station. This is where she had to hold one of her performances. Here, people literally transition from blue to pink and pink to blue all the time. So, one day, dressed in a big, beautiful blue dress, a silver tiara, and a hairpin shaped like a sea star, Lía declared her womanhood to the world. With her dress and hairpin, she was the *novia*, *sirena*, and *quinceañera* all at once. Accompanied by seven *chambelanes*, all transmen, Lía danced, sang, and celebrated her life with others, most of whom were complete strangers. When she was 30, Lía repeated this ceremony, this time at her own house with many of her loved ones. Everything was the same, except for one important detail. Rather than dance with her father, a portion of her public expression that she never partook in, she danced with a picture of her former self prior to the transition. This was her official goodbye. That former self represented a lot of pain, but it was a heart-felt and tearful goodbye (Lapuerta and Bailey).

Lía's work is not without critique. Some feminists have criticized her artwork, claiming her public pieces merely reinforce patriarchal values. Others believe she is sexualizing the female body. Lía doesn't disagree either. There is validity in their criticisms. But, she also stands firm in her artistic approach. To Lía, the *quinceañera* is a celebratory and inclusive way to tell her story. It's a relatable tradition that others in the community understand. It's one that she, too, is critical of, which is why she is so intent on upending it as well. Through this traditional ritual, Lía signals to the world that we as a society need to reevaluate our traditions, including how we conceptualize gender and other binaries. This isn't the first time *quinceañeras* have been reappropriated as signs of resistance. In 2017, 15 young Latinas, dressed as *quinceañeras*, gathered at the Texas State Capitol to protest State Bill 4, which banned sanctuary cities and authorized local and state police to question and detain anyone they perceived to be undocumented. These young activists described the *quinceañera* as a pivotal moment when a young girl steps up to womanhood by caring for her friends, family, and community ("The Quinceañera Protest"). Activism was at the core of their celebration. For Lía and these young women, the *quinceañera* amplified their voices and placed them at the forefront of the struggle. Their public actions transcended the border between celebration and resistance; their intention wasn't to recognize their sexual growth, but instead to honor the empathetic growth of their audiences.

VI. *Soñando e Imaginando*⁴⁹

Buzz. Buzz. I feel the notification vibrate in my pocket. Lía must have texted me back. I pull out my phone to check the app. She sent me a voice message:

“¡Buenas tardes, cariño!”⁵⁰ To my surprise, it's an unfamiliar and soft, sweet voice.

“*Quiero agradecerte todas las atenciones que has tenido para Lía. Es mi hija, entonces este favor es muy importante para mi también. Ojalá podamos concretar los detalles, ya cuando se calme todo. Estoy muy emocionada, y espero verte muy pronto, querido. ¡Gracias!*”⁵¹

I type www.thegyc.com into my browser's address bar, and, for the first time in my life, I didn't do it in incognito mode. To my dismay, nothing appears. The domain must have been sold years ago. I check their facebook and twitter pages, but neither account has been active since 2012 and 2015, respectively. My endless nights of chat board messages under an alias must be in a cloud somewhere. I'm heartbroken. But, in hindsight, maybe that's a good thing. Maybe the need to hide on the GYC is no more. Maybe the culture has finally embraced us. But then I remember that there are an estimated 480,000 LGBTQ+ homeless youth in this country alone (National Center for Transgender Equality). I think about all those kids who are still sent to conversion camps. I think about all those Black transwomen we've lost this year alone.

When Lía thinks about her educational background, she immediately thinks about the gay bench at her high school. She hopes it's still there and plans to check it out one day. Maybe, like the GYC, it's no longer there. Perhaps the school underwent construction. Perhaps the need for that safe space is no more, since the campus is now more open than ever before. But, what about a place to foster affinity? What about a place to congregate? Where's that, if not the gay bench? Fortunately for many in the region, Lía co-founded *Red de Juventudes Trans México*,⁵² an organization devoted to supporting trans youth via workshops about identity, health, and policy. This network is not just a bench for trans youth to gather; it's also a site for friends and family members to learn how to be there for a loved one, often a child or sibling, during their transition. When not out in the world educating others through her artwork, she is at her organization's headquarters engaging in heartwork, ensuring that the next generation of trans youth can enjoy a more affirming world.

I often find myself dreaming of a world where coming out isn't violent and scary. Where coming out isn't necessary. I dream a lot about a world with open borders, where people can move freely between different places and identities without restriction. However, much work is needed to make that happen. Lía opened my eyes to beauty and art that also revealed a dark reality that transwomen of color face. And, she isn't the first to be open about these truths. When Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans activist, threw the first brick at Stonewall alongside Sylvia Rivera, a Puerto Rican trans activist, and Stormé DeLarverie, a Black cis-butched lesbian, she was speaking an intersectional truth about violence against LGBTQ+ people, much of which is perpetuated by the state. Unfortunately, history temporarily wrote out these three women of color from that heroic narrative, which has had lasting effects on how we still treat transwomen of color. Recognizing this early on, Sylvia delivered the iconic "Y'all Better Quiet Down" speech at a Pride parade. In front of a "a crowd of predominantly cis gay and lesbian people," she revealed how patriarchy, heterosexism, transantagonism, and racism are very much prevalent at Pride:

"I have been to jail. I have been raped. And beaten. Many times! By men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But, do you do anything for me? No. You tell me to go and hide my tail between my legs. I will not put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the fuck's wrong with you all? Think about that! (Benavente and Gill-Peterson 26).

Back then, many didn't take her words seriously. Today, that's still an unfair reality.

After Lía shared her life with me through hours of texting, it is my turn to put in the effort. Despite some similarities in our experiences, much of what she shared was new to me. Queer

cismen, including queer cismen of color like myself, must engage in such radical imagination; that includes reading the stories that are already out there, and committing to doing the work, which could mean educating ourselves and our loved ones about pronouns or volunteering at or donating to organizations like *la Red de Juventudes Trans México* and *La Casa de las Muñecas Tiresias*. Like Marsha, Sylvia, Janet, Jennicet, Sydney, and Kenya, Lía has demonstrated that transwomen of color have always been there to support the greater LGBTQ+ community, even before Stonewall, but many of us have not returned the favor. That needs to change; most of us need to put in the effort since we've inevitably benefited from theirs.

Right now, I'm imagining Adán playing the guitar on stage at the campus center. Adán, with his big fro and thick glasses, wows the crowd with his musical prowess. He's the opening act for a night of celebration. After his performance is over, the crowd erupts. He smiles and looks down at the audience. One person catches his eye. It's his mom, shedding tears of joy while reflecting upon her and her son's journey. I then imagine Lía dancing on stage in a pink *quinceañera* dress and a silver tiara. I see her mother, embracing her during a waltz. She's finally able to partake in her daughter's activism. She, too, sheds a tear as she reflects on Lía's accomplishments. Later, as Lía recites poetry, she repeats a message from her previous public art projects. In English, her remarks roughly translate to:

My transition is a communal experience. It involves my mother, my sisters, and it involves you, the audience. The fact that you're here listening to me makes you a part of my transition. You could have chosen to leave, but you decided to stay. You decided to watch me, to listen to me, to dance with me. With that decision, you, too, are transitioning along with me, one way or another (García).

You, dear reader, have chosen to read this story. You made the decision to laugh with me, to (un)learn with me, and to reflect on Lía's artwork with me. That makes you part of her transition, too. And, that makes you a part of mine. *Gracias*.

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Endnotes

¹ Living within (and between) fantasy and reality

² I'm sorry, dear.

³ It's okay, darling. Don't worry.

⁴ A jab at patriarchy, this is a gender neutral form of "Latino" or "Latina." In English, many of us pronounce the "x" as "ex," so "Latin-ex." Many Spanish speakers spell terms with the "x," but we pronounce them with the "e" sound.

⁵ Lía's performance name, which translates to "The Mermaid Bride."

⁶ A popular initialism that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and More

⁷ Queer & Trans Black, Indigenous, People of Color

⁸ Trans Black, Indigenous, People of Color

⁹ Spanish equivalent for "faggot"

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- ¹⁰ Spanish equivalent for “whore” or “slut”
- ¹¹ The prefix “cis” is used to indicate that an individual’s gender coincides with the sex they were assigned at birth.
- ¹² Spanish equivalent for “trash”
- ¹³ Dominican (female)
- ¹⁴ Salvadoran (male)
- ¹⁵ Undocumented trans Latina activist and founder of La Familia: Trans Queer Liberation Movement, whose mission is to educate, organize, and advocate for LGBTQ+ communities, particularly TBIPOC migrants.
- ¹⁶ Trans Navajo filmmaker whose work examines gender, indigenous sovereignty, and queer and trans liberation.
- ¹⁷ Queer Black, Indigenous, People of Color
- ¹⁸ What I like about your art is that your method is to simply be yourself.
- ¹⁹ I would say the same about your art!
- ²⁰ *The Little Mermaid*
- ²¹ Could you talk a little bit about your performances?
- ²² What do you mean, lovely? Life is a performance. Gender, culture...
- ²³ Fun fact: Ursula’s character and image were inspired by Divine, a popular drag queen from the 1980s.
- ²⁴ What are you doing for Pride? We (masculine) will check out a queer bar.
- ²⁵ I’m out with some (neutral) friends (neutral). We (neutral) will head to a party after the parade.
- ²⁶ We (neutral) are also going to the parade.
- ²⁷ They (masculine) want to celebrate.
- ²⁸ *They (neutral).
- ²⁹ Spanish for “without borders”
- ³⁰ The Tiresias Dollhouse; Tiresias refers to transwoman from Greek mythology
- ³¹ The Center of Support for Trans Identities
- ³² So, how was your transition?
- ³³ Of course I will share that journey with you. But first, tell me a bit about yours.
- ³⁴ Mine?
- ³⁵ Yeah! You moved to another country. You went from student to teacher. You came out of the closet. You’re an uncle now. Each of those moments was a transition.
- ³⁶ I was very afraid of waking up!
- ³⁷ Spanish equivalent for “Subtle Strangeness”
- ³⁸ #NotOne(Woman)Less
- ³⁹ A rapist in your path
- ⁴⁰ National strike
- ⁴¹ Male chauvinism, sexism
- ⁴² Of course, my love!
- ⁴³ I would love it!
- ⁴⁴ How exciting! I’ll let him know right now!
- ⁴⁵ Pseudonym
- ⁴⁶ Male member of a quinceañera’s court, an escort
- ⁴⁷ Female member of a quinceañera’s court, an escort
- ⁴⁸ I wanted to hold a party for everyone (neutral); “*todxs*” pronounced as “todes”
- ⁴⁹ Spanish equivalent for “dreaming and imagining”
- ⁵⁰ Good afternoon, darling!
- ⁵¹ I wanted to express my appreciation for everything you’ve done for Lía. She’s my daughter, so this favor is very important to me too. Hopefully we can solidify all these details, once things settle down. I’m very excited, and I hope to see you very soon, dear. Thank you!
- ⁵² Mexico Network for Trans Youth