



José
Esteban
Muñoz

DISIDENTIFICATIONS

Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics

Latina Performance and Queer Worldmaking; or, *Chusmería* at the End of the Twentieth Century

for Tony

Our *Chusmas*, Our Selves

Readers outside the realm of the Caribbean Latina/o experience might require an introduction to *chusmería* if they are to follow this book's final chapter. Those who grew up in and around Spanish-speaking Caribbean communities probably have encountered the term as an admonishment: "¡No sea tan chusma!" (Don't be such a *chusma!*). This reprimand plays into a stigmatized understanding of Latina identity held both inside and outside those communities. By turning to the theatrical text under consideration, Carmelita Tropicana's play *Chicas 2000*, one can locate an efficient explication of the term.¹

Chicas 2000 features four actors playing various roles. The play narrates the future adventures of Carmelita Tropicana, the performance artist persona of Alina Troyana, whose solo performance work was discussed in chapter 5.² The play's two opening scenes are fictive TV programs: *Opinions of the Hoi Polloi* and *Homo Decorum*. Both are deliberately tacky and ribald. Both are interrupted when they are abruptly pulled off the air in mid-"broadcast." An offstage voice indicates that "due to the offensive nature" of both shows they have been "taken off the air." The play's next scene features another televisual voice-over monologue that this time explains the state's decision to clamp down on *chusmería*. Two *chusma* fashion police perform a *chusma*-esque pantomime during this scene.

The next few scenes tell the tale of the *chusma* protagonist's abduction by a mad scientist, his cloning of two mini-Carmelitas, and Carmelita's ray gun-wielding retaliation against the demented geneticist. Our heroine is then arrested by the *chusma*-deraining arm of the state power apparatus. She serves time in the big house with her televisual sidekick from *Homo Decorum*, the lovely Desiree. Carmelita keeps herself busy behind bars by engaging in a jailhouse romance with the mysterious and feral

Rodesia. The play then shifts from the star's plight to the now-adult clones' flight from captivity. The sisters are accidentally reunited and, after identifying each other as two of a matched pair, decide to go on a quest for their their *chusma* parent/source, the performance artist Carmelita Tropicana. The girls eventually run into their "source" through a series of mishaps, but they do not recognize her until the play's conclusion when the mad doctor, their evil "father," pits the younger woman against Carmelita in a field of combat. The play ends with a comedic family reunion. The entire drama is a tacky affair, a spectacle of Latina excess and gaudiness.

From this thumbnail sketch of the play's action, the codes of conduct that make up *chusmería* come squarely into view: *chusmería* is a form of behavior that refuses standards of bourgeois comportment. *Chusmería* is, to a large degree, linked to stigmatized class identity. Within Cuban culture, for instance, being called *chusma* might be a technique for the middle class to distance itself from the working class; it may be a barely veiled racial slur suggesting that one is too black; it sometimes connotes gender nonconformity. In the United States, the epithet *chusma* also connotes recent immigration and a general lack of "Americanness," as well as an excessive nationalism—that one is somewhat over the top about her Cubanness. The sexuality of individuals described as *chusmas* is also implicated. The prototypical *chusma's* sexuality is deemed excessive and flagrant—again, subverting conventions. There is something monstrous about the *chusma*. In this chapter, I will read Tropicana's play and its thick description of the *chusma* and her "ways" to further outline my theory of disidentification. This case study will allow me to pay special attention to the unique features of disidentificatory live performance. I will also mark the way in which subaltern subjects negotiate what I call the "burden of liveness," which I describe as a particular hegemonic mandate that calls the minoritarian subject to "be live" for the purpose of entertaining elites. This "burden of liveness" is a cultural imperative within the majoritarian public sphere that denies subalterns access to larger channels of representation, while calling the minoritarian subject to the stage, performing her or his alterity as a consumable local spectacle. Thus, the story this chapter tells is the tale of *chusma's* disidentifications with the "burden of liveness."

A consideration of the play's logic of censorship allows us to understand the threat that *chusmería* presents to the dominant public sphere. The censorship mechanism is seen in the play's third scene, which features three of the play's four cast members: Carmelita Tropicana plays a newscaster, while Ana Margaret Sanchez and Rebecca Sumner-Burgos begin the scene as stiff FBI agents who flank the equally upright-looking newscaster. (Although the latter two performers' outfits, snug-fitting silk miniskirts and tops, do not connote their positions as FBI agents, the costumes do signal a fantastic transformation that both characters will soon experience.) The newscaster's monologue introduces the play's setting and the general style of the play:

On December 31, 1999, TV shows like these were taken off the air. They were symbolic of the social ills gripping the nation. It was in response to these shows

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WRITTEN BY **CARMELITA TROPICANA**

DIRECTED BY **UZI PARNES**

STARRING **CARMELITA TROPICANA, REBECCA SUMNER BURGOS,
ANA MARGARET SANCHEZ & UZI PARNES**

JUNE 6-21, 1997

THU, FRI & SAT AT 8:00PM

RESERVATIONS: 219-3088 

Poster for *Chicas 2000*, written by Carmelita Tropicana, directed by Uzi Parnes. (left to right) Rebecca Sumner-Burgos, Carmelita Tropicana as Pingalito, and Ana Margaret Sanchez. Photo by Paula Court. Courtesy of Carmelita Tropicana.

that the FBI DNA RA BMU was created, the DNA Remodeling Agency and Behavior Modification Unit. Its mission: better the human race through designer genes. Genes responsible for antisocial behavior were coded and classified. Among the deviant genes heading the list: the *chusma* gene, that which gives rise to a disease known as *chusmeria*—shameless, loud, gross, tacky behavior, in short, tasteless attitude.

At this point in the performance, the two agents' body movements and general countenance abruptly change. The two are no longer rigid with their hands crossed behind their lower backs; instead, their arms swing loosely at their sides and their erect posture fades as they rest one hand on a hip. While the announcer explains that "Individuals with the *chusma* gene are known to favor Egyptian head movement from side to side," Sanchez illustrates this characteristic as her own head swivels back and forth in a symmetrical fashion. The announcer then makes a fashion commentary: "They wear clothes that are too tight for their weight category, with emphasis on the chest and posterior." Sumner-Burgos walks to center stage and lasciviously clutches her breasts; she then turns her back to the audience and pats her buttocks. The announcer concludes this definition of the corporeality of the *chusma* by explaining that "when excited [*chusmas* are] known for wild gesticulations of their extremities." At this point the two performers cut loose. They mutter in Spanish as they swing their hips and pick their teeth. The announcer drones the final lines of her monologue in an arid make-believe "white woman" voice as the newly born *chusmas* carry on:

The *chusma* gene is found in Latin America with high concentration in the Caribbean, although the gene has crossed over to North America. U.S. citizens classified with the gene are: Shelly Winters, Dennis Rodman, Roseanne, Tonya Harding, and Martha Stewart. The latter is a perfect example of the gene in remission. Although the *chusma* gene cannot be eradicated or its disease cured, it can be controlled. The government has stepped up its efforts to combat the *chusma* gene and a disease called *chusmeria*.

As the newscaster mouths the last word of the monologue, *chusmeria*, the *chusmas* yell it out in unison. The word sounds like a battle cry and the women fly toward the audience. Their body movements are bawdy as they tour the assembled spectators. They pick out an audience member (during one of the performances I attended, I was one of the unfortunate targets) and harass her or him, commenting on his or her fashions, claiming to be the "*chusma* fashion police," and threatening to arrest the perpetrator as they shake their fingers, sashay their hips, and practice their "Egyptian" head movements.

The examples of *chusma* cultural crossovers are interesting as they target queerly valenced icons in the popular culture. The non-Latina/o pantheon of *chusmas* includes figures of exaggeration who practice "inappropriate" and antinormative behavior. Although some of these figures embody a corporate ethos that is camouflaged a-

subversive (Rodman, Stewart, Roseanne), their reception through *chusma* eyes enables models of identity that contest hegemonic models of citizenship.

The *chusma's* identity is thus a Goffmanian spoiled identity.³ The work that Carmelita Tropicana's play carries out, then, follows a disidentificatory path that I have traced in the work of other cultural workers in this book. Disidentification is a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label. Disidentification is therefore about the management of an identity that has been "spoiled" in the majoritarian public sphere. This management is a critical negotiation in which a subject who has been hailed by injurious speech, a name, or a label, reterritorializes that speech act and the marking that such speech produces to a self. Judith Butler has argued that although injurious speech "may appear to fix or paralyze the one it hails," it often, paradoxically, inaugurates in speech a subject who comes to use language to counter an offensive call.⁴ Indeed, this story is at least as old as one of English literature's most enduring fables of disidentification, William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In that play, Caliban, who learned how to fully inhabit his monstrousness, used that stigmatized designation—"monster"—as a site from which to curse Prospero, the oppressive force who brought him into language in the first place. Rather than counteridentify with Prospero (refusing to speak his language) or identify with his master (to speak like Prospero), he chooses to disidentify by recomposing Prospero's idiom and making it his own.

There is in fact something quite Calibanistic and, as I have suggested, monstrous, about the *chusma*. *Chicas 2000* offers several representations of monstrous women, starting with the diva herself. In this play, Carmelita is a blue-haired freak who has been detained for a number of years at the FBI DNA RA BMU—the DNA Remodeling Agency and Behavior Modification Unit. While in that facility, a love affair ignites between Rodesia (also played by Sumner-Burgos), another monstrous creature, and the captive *chusma*. Rodesia, a butch woman whose behavior is greatly influenced by the fact that her heart is the transplanted heart of a brown bear. Rodesia's condition is a comical send-up of the postcolonial hybrid. Her position in the play is a commentary on the general condition of "exilic hybridity" that characterizes the majority of Latina/o America.⁵ Rodesia is a monstrous creation whose heart does not correspond to her exterior self. We are reminded of a tradition of exile sentimentality where crooners and poets wax on about having left their hearts in their native land. Her queerness can be located not only in her butch demeanor, but also in the very fact that her heart and body do not line up.

The play's engagement with monstrousness also signifies upon recent updates in reproductive technologies that are deemed "evil" by proponents of heteronormative reproduction. Hysteria about the monstrous practice of cloning, a potential mode of queer reproduction, is manifest in the characters of Clana and Cluna. Clana and Cluna (played by Sanchez and Sumner-Burgos) are the blue-haired *chusma* clones of

Carmelita. Carmelita was captured and detained in the FBI DNA RA BMU after an altercation with the play's sinister villain. In the fourth scene, Carmelita is kidnapped by the evil Dr. Igor (performed by the play's director, Uzi Parnes), a mad *chusma* wannabe who wished to possess the play's heroine. Tropicana refused to submit to the deranged scientist, who retaliates with the nonconsensual cloning of cells forcefully extracted from her buttocks. (The buttock, as the earlier monologue indicates, is a privileged site on the *chusma's* body.) Carmelita's monstrous progeny grow up separately in BMUs located in two hubs of *chusma* culture: Miami and the Bronx. They do not meet each other until they simultaneously escape from their prisons and become illegal immigrants on the run.

The plight and flight of Clana and Cluna, while hilariously funny, manage to articulate a poignant social critique. The two clones literally bump into each other as they flee the law. They almost instantly recognize each other as twin sisters. (Much of the humor in this scene is derived from a sight gag: the two women who play Clana and Cluna, Sanchez and Sumner-Burgos, are dressed in almost identical outfits, wear similar wigs, but physically look completely different.) Once the cloned sisters meet, they begin to contemplate their "bio-original." Clana asks Cluna if she ever wonders about their bio-original, to which Cluna responds: "Every day. I think, why did she make us knowing we would always be illegal? Once illegal, always illegal." In this speech, a pivotal fact about the status of U.S. Latina/o existence becomes painstakingly apparent: "once illegal, always illegal." The U.S. Latina/o holds the place of the perpetually "illegal" immigrant in the national imagination. This fact is apparent both in the channels of majoritarian representation and in federal legislation as the civil rights of U.S. Latinas/os, both "illegal" and "legal," continually erode. In post-Proposition 187 North America, the U.S. Latina/o is constantly scapegoated as the invader and outsider who is ruining the prosperity of "real" citizens. Legislation has reached the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives that calls for a curtailing of benefits and social services to immigrants who are deemed "illegal" by the state apparatus. Hence, one of the *Chicas 2000's* most salient points: *Once illegal, always illegal.*

Similar social commentary undergirds the entire play. The postmillennial setting of the play speaks of the massive (and continually accelerating) class stratification of New York City. The play's science-fiction chronology is set in a not-too-distant future in which most of the island of Manhattan has become a posh elite residential district. The only exception to this ultragentrification is a small section of the Lower East Side, an area that has come to be known as "*Chusmatown*." *Chusmatown* is an apartheid-like settlement inhabited exclusively by *chusmas*. Clana and Cluna's quest for their bio-original takes them to the fabled *Chusmatown*. The ghetto-like neighborhood is a site of government relocation, and in this way the play calls attention to the U.S. government's history of internal colonization—specifically, the forced "removals" of indigenous peoples to reservations and the practice of detaining Japanese-Americans in internment camps during World War II.

"The Burden of Liveness": Toward a Minoritarian Performance Theory

This future Chusmatown is besieged by massive inflation. The clone "sisters" and the bio-original both opt to work in a Chusmatic Casino, a coliseum/entertainment complex where *chusma* gladiators fight as entertainment for the non-*chusma* elite. Fighting in the Chusmatic Casino is an *illegal* profession. By performing in this space, the *chicas* participate in an alternative "outlaw economy." Again, the far-flung future scenario remarks upon the contemporary social plight of Latinas and other disenfranchised people of color. Late capitalism represents the dwindling of possibilities for the racialized working class. Under such hegemony, women of color compete over low-wage positions within the shrinking service economy. Individuals who reject this constrained field of possibility often choose to survive by entering alternative economies involving sex work or the drug trade. The *chusmas'* move into the illicit coliseum represents a dystopic vision of what the continuation of late capitalism will mean for Latinas and other people of color. The illegality of the space also represents the overdetermination of such positions for the always "illegal" subject. Clana is taken aback by Cluna's suggestion that they work in the Chusmatic Casino. She protests by pointing out that the casinos are illegal. Within Cluna's justification of working in the "illegal" performance space one can trace the same social forces that lock "immigrants" into criminal or exploitative labor situations today:

So are we [illegal]. They have *chusma* wrestling. It's packed on Fridays with *chusmas* and well-dressed respectable non-*chusmas*. Their lives are so dull they gotta come for cheap *chusma* thrills. I read about it in the *Daily Chusma* while you were doing number 3. Clana, with your physical ability and my mental strategy, we could do it. Without money we can't live and finish our mission. What do you say?

An illegal establishment such as the Chusmatic Casino is the space allotted for the *chusma* (non)citizen within the national economy. The only activity that the *chusmas* are permitted to perform is that of "live performance" for the *chusma* and non-*chusma* elite. Once again the dystopic picture rendered by the play has direct parallels that bear considering.

Live performance for an audience of elites is the only imaginable mode of survival for minoritarian subjects within the hegemonic order that the *chusmas* live within and in opposition to. This fact correlates with what I call the "burden of liveness" that infects the experience of postcolonial, queer, and other minoritarian subjects.⁶ The story of "otherness" is one tainted by a mandate to "perform" for the amusement of a dominant power bloc. If there is any acceptable place for "queers" in the homophobic national imaginary, it certainly is onstage—being "funny" for a straight audience. The minoritarian subject is always encouraged to perform, *especially* when human and civil rights disintegrate. This point is evidenced in chapter 4 of this study, which surveys the paradox of contemporary drag and queer performance's current

boom in an age of escalating state-sponsored homophobia. The same is true in the United States for people of color who are lauded as performers and entertainers but are still met with recalcitrant racism in everyday life. If we consider the colonial condition, we might again turn to *The Tempest* and recall that, upon meeting Caliban, a drunken Stephano immediately thinks of bringing the indigenous monster home to Naples as a prize and amusement for his emperor.

The female subject who is both racialized and queer is triply susceptible to the "burden of liveness." Elin Diamond has suggested that "women, especially lesbians and women of color, have struggled to appear, to speak, to be heard, to be seen. In the history of Western metaphysics the female body is represented as both crude materiality and irreparable lack."⁸ Although the minoritarian subject experiences pressures to perform a live and "crude materiality," this fact nonetheless does not register within the larger context of the dominant culture. Diamond points to a fact that is important to index here: "Socially and culturally, however, all performances are not equal."⁹ Some performances are structured through historically embedded cultural mandates that the body of color, the queer body, the poor body, the woman's body perform his or her existence for elite eyes. This performance is positioned within the dominant culture as a substitute for historical and political representation. Thus, performing beyond the channels of liveness and entering larger historical narratives seems especially important.

Perhaps the best way to understand the "burden of liveness" that shadows the minoritarian subject is to consider the far-reaching implications of what Coco Fusco has called "the other history of intercultural performance."¹⁰ Fusco discloses that Dadaist events were not the first instances of performance art in the West. Fusco has suggested instead that the history of performance art is as old as the European "conquest" when indigenous people were transported to the metropole as scientific curiosities and popular amusements. She and Guillermo Gómez-Peña offered a meta-commentary on this history with their controversial 1992 "Couple in a Cage" performance. The artists toured museums around the world posing as Amerindians from the fictitious land of "Guatinau," an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had miraculously escaped the notice of imperial eyes for five centuries. While audiences looked on, the "Guatinauis" ate, slept, and marveled at the wonders of modern technology. They also danced, told stories, or exposed their genitals for nominal fees. The performance served as a "reverse ethnography" that made the audience the object of critical scrutiny. Fusco's essay and the performance both debunk any notions of the history of intercultural performance as one of fair and mutually beneficial exchange. Furthermore, they also expose the ways in which the other is constructed as a live performing other whose place is that of entertaining the dominant order. The Chusmatic Casino is a fictional performance space that, like the couple's golden cage, comments on the burden of live performance that is sutured to minoritarian subjects. Both cage and casino call attention to the audience, interrogating the spectator's racial, class, and gender privilege. The casino mirrors the actual reception of the play. The audi-

ence at Dixon Place is implicated by this scenario and implicitly asked to question how it might be or not be one of those *chusmas* or non-*chusma* elites who consume *chusería* as spectacle or amusement.

My interest in schematizing a trope like the "burden of liveness" is nothing short of the disarming of a celebratory precritical aura that shrouds some performative research. It is important to keep in mind that not all performances are liberatory or transformative. Performance, from the positionality of the minoritarian subject, is sometimes nothing short of forced labor. The most obvious and relevant example of performance as forced labor from a U.S. perspective is certainly chattel slave performance. But this history does not stop there. It in fact reaches into our present context. Minoritarian subjects do not always dance because they are happy; sometimes they dance because their feet are being shot at.

It is equally important to understand the ways in which the "burden of liveness" structures temporality. The "burden of liveness" affords the minoritarian subject an extremely circumscribed temporality. To be only in "the live" means that one is denied history and futurity. If the minoritarian subject can only exist in *the moment*, she or he does not have the privilege or the pleasure of being a historical subject. If that subject needs to focus solely on the present, it can never afford the luxury of thinking about the future.

It is important to offset the "burden of liveness" by employing a performance theory that disentangles a reified linkage between performance and liveness. In this book, I have attempted to assemble a performance-studies lens that reads the performance of minoritarian subjectivity in live manifestations and in other aspects of visual culture such as film, photography, video, and painting. I have thus mapped disidentificatory performances across fields of cultural production. I have chosen to interrogate disidentification's always already performative properties in both live and mediated manifestations because it is not the liveness of disidentificatory performance in and of itself that bestows it with its worldmaking properties. I am interested in disidentificatory performance's power of critique and its vision of transformative politics. This is what constitutes the power and relevance of disidentification. Furthermore, we run the risk of making liveness something of an obstructive fetish when we position it as the central trope of performance or performance studies. The burden of liveness makes us cognizant of the burden to always already be live that the minoritarian subject must continually negotiate.

Philip Auslander has worried about the binary between "liveness" and media culture. He warns against discourses that privilege a "liveness" that is imagined as a "pristine state uncontaminated by mediatization." Instead, Auslander points to the unavoidable and often *productive* imbrication between technological media and performance:

- I would argue that the live and the mediatized exist in a relation of mutual dependence and imbrication, not one of opposition. The live is, in a sense, only a secondary effect of mediating technologies. Prior to the advent of those technologies

(e.g., photography, telegraphy, phonography) there was no such thing as the "live," for the category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility.¹⁰

I share with Auslander this belief that technological mediation is not performance's end. Furthermore, the insistence on a binarized opposition between live performance and mediated performance can lead not only to a dangerous reification of performance, which would contribute to the "burden of liveness" that haunts minoritarian subjects in the dominant public sphere, but also to an ossification of performance's potential to enact social critique. Although "liveness" and "performance" are rich theoretical and political concepts, both are lessened by any *intractable* and *essentialized* linkage to each other.

The culture of mass media has made significant inroads into performance and vice versa. This is true of the feminist video surveillance work of Julia Scher and the incorporation of video images in the solo performance work of Idris Mignot, to name just two examples from a wide field of technologically imbricated performances. Television, or, more nearly, the phenomenon of television, plays a role in *Chicas 2000*. By indexing the televisual, the play gestures to the importance of media culture for the performed enactment of minoritarian counterpublics. The play opens with this premise: Pingalito Betancourt, a seventy-year-old Cuban man with a cigar who identifies himself as a "retired transportation official," has been given a cable access show.¹¹ His show is titled *Opinions of the Hoi Polloi*. Pingalito's career in public transportation encompassed his tenure as a bus driver in Havana, where he was affectionately known as the Socrates of the M15. This experience as bus driver/philosopher has prepared Pingalito for his current role as televisual public intellectual. Pingalito's topic for the day is "Puritanism." The play uses this opportunity to launch a social critique of the United States' foundational mythology. Pingalito misreads and misrecognizes the attributes "Self-reliance," "Industry," and "Frugality." He understands his own self-reliance, for instance, as his ability to repair his eyeglasses with the skillful application of duct tape and a safety pin. These "attributes," which have been invoked by the nation as justifications for the gutting of public assistance, are mocked and satirized, revealed as ridiculous concepts that justify greed and foreclose the possibility of an ethical and just state system.

Pingalito eventually parts company with Puritanism—even his misrecognized Puritanism—when the topic of sex is broached. The elder Cuban statesman recommends the example of the Bonobo monkey as a positive rewriting of Puritanical sexuality. The Bonobos, he explains, utilize sex for various purposes: "They have sex for procreation, recreation, to relieve stress, anxiety, boredom." Pingalito then challenges the audience to imagine a human culture that was patterned after Bonobo society:

Can you imagine, ladies and gentlemen, what kind of world this would be if you got up in the morning and your doorbell rang. It's the UPS girl with a package. You are tired and sleepy and to wake you up she starts to rub against

you; and at the bank you find yourself overdrawn and the bank teller starts to fondle your privates to make you feel better. Eh. What a world this could be!

Lolita, a female Bonobo, joins Pingalito on stage for a duet of "To All the Girls I've Loved Before." A woman in an ape suit jumps on stage. She is exceedingly frisky with the senior citizen, and before things become too risqué the stage blacks out. The announcer's voice explains that because of the show's tastelessness, it has been taken off the air. Televisual censorship is thus positioned as the first explicit maneuver in a war against *chusmas*. *Chusmas* are denied access to televisual performance and any media stage and are, instead, rerouted to the Chusmatic Casino, where their performances of self are staged exclusively for elites who can afford to consume spectacles and resist the political pedagogy of *chusma* performance. This opening skit locates the time and place of the production, of the *live* play, as that of media culture. The lesson to be extracted is this: performance exists within media culture and the media culture has a life inside of performance. Behind the absurd humor of this opening scene, we begin to glimpse an important truism: a critical optic that does not calculate the imbrication of both modes of expression will fail to see the future of performance *and* media.

Chusmaesque politics informs my decision to look far and wide for disidentificatory performances. I have paid great attention to performances of disidentification that have been strategically embedded in other media and mediums. The methodology I am performing can be understood as a critical *chusmeria*—a tactical refusal to keep things "pristine" and binarized, a willful mismatching of striped and floral print genres, and a loud defiance of a rather fixed order. In this sense, I am following Pingalito's lead by rejecting a live performance puritanism. This critical *chusmeria* allows me to resist subscribing to a stabilized notion of performance that can be primarily defined by its relationship to presence. My *chusmalike* disruption of performance as unsullied by alternative representational media is meant to counteract the burden of liveness that haunts intercultural and minoritarian performance. The "burden of liveness" informs this maneuver insofar as it understands the need to dislodge the minoritarian subject from a theoretical apparatus that positions her as only legible as a live and immediate presence and not as a historicized and representable entity.

Disidentificatory Iconicity: Loving La Lupe

Although I am arguing against a performance puritanism, I am nonetheless invested in what I call a notion of "pure performance." A *chusma's* life is one in which drama and performance reign supreme. This is certainly true of the *chicas* and their *chusma* foremothers. A climatic scene in the Chusmatic Casino helps us understand a *chusmaesque* understanding of pure performance. The Chusmatic Casino is run by the twisted Dr. Igor, who, realizing the relation of Clana and Cluna to Carmelita, pits the masked clones against their also masked bio-original in the arena. The play's resolution occurs

when the match's participants realize each other's identities and subsequently turn on Dr. Igor. It is thus the moment when the Other looks beyond the audience and sees the "otherness" of those who have been cast as one's enemy within a majoritarian script that liberation is achieved. *Chicas 2000* concludes with a musical number—a stirring lip-synching of Cuban diva La Lupe's rendition of "My Life." The song choice brings a crucial point to light: it is only when a subject is brought to light that the constitution of a self ("a life") is possible.

The closing song pays homage to the troubled iconicity of La Lupe, a figure who reigns supreme in the history of *chusmería*. La Lupe's live performances in pre-revolutionary Cuba and in *el exilio* were legendary for their excess. The singer was known to shudder and convulse as she sang. Her stage movements often included writhing on the floor. A few witnesses have reported that she concluded her performances by banging her head against the wall. If one considers the history of strategic shock effects and theatricalized violence that characterize performance art, La Lupe emerges as an important precursor of that artistic movement. Thus, the play offers an alternative genealogy of performance art, one in which a Caribbean queen reigns supreme.

Carmelita herself names La Lupe "Latin America's first performance artist." She further expounds on La Lupe's critical importance when she declares that she was:

A woman whose singing was a censored sensation;
A woman who gave us not Dada art but mama art;
A woman who showed the way for many a little boy
letting them find meaning in life through eyelashes,
sequins and mascara. The one and only: La Lupe!

This ode to the Cuban songstress identifies her not only as an outlaw artist and an unappreciated avant-gardist, but also as a disidentificatory icon for queer little boys who had little hope of achieving the linear gender identifications that heteronormative culture decrees. La Lupe was a *chusma* diva and the monstrous excess of her femininity proved to be an accommodating and rich site for many a queer boy's psychic attachments and investments.

Citing La Lupe and giving her the position of the play's patron saint or chief divinity establishes a productive link between theater and everyday life. La Lupe's live performance and songs thematized performance in everyday life. One of her most famous songs, "Puro teatro," presents a scorned lover who turns to her partner and shrieks, "Teatro, lo tuyo es puro teatro" (Theater, your life is pure theater). Her accusations continue to fly and she indicates that her loved one's behavior is "estudiado simulacra" (studied simulacra). Of course, it takes one to know one, and La Lupe's deep read of her lover sounds as though she is talking about herself. More broadly, it sounds as though she is describing the *chusma* condition, an aspect of the Cuban condition not covered in Gustavo Pérez Firmat's study by that name.¹² The *chusma's* life is *pure performance*; it is about studied excess and overblown self-fashioning. It re-

jects constraints on the self that are mandated for the "good immigrant" by Anglo culture. *Chusmeria* also responds to reactionary aspects of Latino culture that suggest that a Latino should not be too black, too poor, too sexual, too loud, too emotional, or too theatrical.

Carmelita turns to La Lupe for the purposes of establishing a Latina self who is not lessened by restrictive codes of conduct. Santa La Lupe serves as a beacon; through her model and her shining example, an identity that has been spoiled is newly reinhabited and recomposed as a site of possibility and transformation. *Chusmeria* is "puro teatro" or pure performance. This pure performance salvages something that has been disparaged and rendered abject. This pure performance, this divine *chusmeria*, as realized in *Chicas 2000*, helps build a queer world.

Picuo: A Queer Thing about Chusmeria

This idea of pure performance is familiar to many a queer subject who understands her or his existence, with campy composure, as an ongoing drama. *Chusmas* and queers are not one and the same, but they do share a drama queen's identifications. Yet, *chusmeria's* relation to the discourse of queerness is not that of "stand-in." *Chusmeria's* discourse of loudness and deliberate tackiness does not necessarily connote practices of same-sex desire or queer self-actualization. Conversely, queerness, while sometimes a very camp enterprise, does not usually pride itself on its regard for (mis)matching stripes and floral patterns. I have already pointed to the excess of *chusmeria*, and certainly similar discourses of excess saturate queerness. A gay man's non-monogamy and willful promiscuity and a butch dyke's masculine style both register, under a heteronormative criterion, as excessive. Yet, excess is not the only entrance into a consideration of links between queerness and *chusmeria*; the key word *shame* might also be considered.

Chusmas who fail to be properly reconditioned with the FBI DNA RA BMU are treated to all manner of torture and punishment. Take, for instance, the fate that befell Desiree (played by Sanchez), Carmelita's sensuous assistant on her censored *Homo Decorum*. Carmelita instantly understands what Desiree has gone through when she encounters the trembling young *chusma* in the FBI DNA RA BMU's common space during scene 8. The play's protagonist describes the "tank" and Desiree's three-hour stay in the torture chamber:

The tank is where they stick you when you break the dress code and then they flash slides of *chusmas* in *chusma* outfits. Every time a slide comes on they whisper "Shame," and the voices keep getting louder and the slides go faster and faster. There are slides of *chusma* men with bellies in tank tops with big gold medallions drinking beer from cans, and *chusma* men and women smiling with their gold teeth; and *chusmas* that don't know how to match outfits—floral prints with stripes; and even ancestral *chusma* women in housedresses with big fat foamy curlers going to the corner bodega for a pack of Marlboros and pork *chuletas* [chops] in *chancletas* [flip-flop-like sandals].

Desiree falls apart after the senior *chusma's* description of the "tank." As she drops to the floor, Desiree yells "Shame, Shame, Shame" in a thick accent. Her crime: the wearing of *chancletas*. In this scene, one discerns that *chusmeria* is, in part, stigmatized by its refusal to be shamed and, furthermore, its shamelessness. Shame, on the other hand, is an effect that shares a particularly dense history with "queerness." *Queer* itself is a taking back of the shaming epithet that does not participate in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called "deontological closure" or cleansing, but, instead, recomposes shame as an inhabitable and potentially enabling identity site.¹³ The mind programmers who torture the *chusmas* in the tank strive to reestablish a damaging and inhibiting shame. *Chusmas*, like queers, have managed a spoiled identity by disidentifying with shame, making it a source of energy as opposed to an occasion for devaluation. Thus, both *chusmas* and queers make a world through performances that disidentify with shame.

Chicas 2000 is a theatrical text that includes many shame-laden *chusma* performances. *Chusmeria* also permeates the production on the level of costumes and acting. The costumes are loud, bright, and revealing. These semiobscene outfits complement the simple yet gaudy set design and go with the inexpensive Fourteenth Street wigs that the actors also wear.¹⁴ The acting is deliberately overindulgent; all four actors turn in performances reminiscent of the over-the-top antics of Charles Ludlam's legendary Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

The entire production is deeply *picuo*. *Picuo* is a word that sends me on a more personal journey between queerness and *chusmeria*. I remember walking into my father's house one Saturday afternoon. He had just come home from work. This incident occurred during my late teens, at about the time I manifested my "difference" from my family by beginning to dress "punk." This particular afternoon I had donned a pair of bright red sunglasses that I had shoplifted from the drugstore where I worked after school. As I entered the house, my father took one look at me and asked why I was wearing such glasses. At this stage of my adolescence, my father's displeasure in me often progressed to anger. What I wanted to say was that I had enlisted these red sunglasses in an attempt to see the world differently, to look beyond the universe of my family and ethnicity, perhaps to see things they never wanted me to see. Of course, I said no such thing. Instead, I offered some lame defense—claiming that my ruby lenses were some new style or fashion. My father, with equal measures of disgust and exhaustion in his voice, said that the sunglasses were simply *picuo*. I instantly knew that this was one of those old-fashioned Cuban words that had not completely traveled to Miami. I was not sure what it meant, but I feared the worst. By now it was clear to all parties concerned that I would *not* be following the path of Cuban-American heterosexuality that had been so neatly laid out for me. I would instead be traveling my own route, with my own friends, and, most probably, with these scarlet sunglasses. My father's temper storms and the increasingly frequent tone of disgust in his voice indicated that he suspected what my general destination was.

He was none too happy about this. I instantly felt the shaming properties of *picuo* and imagined that I was being called the faggot I was about to become. Weeks later I summoned the courage to ask my mother what *picuo* meant. She explained that the word meant tacky. The clothing *chusmas* wore was, for example, *picuo*. *Chusmas* I knew from. I remembered stories of our loud and quarrelsome neighbor Hilda La Flaca (skinny Hilda), who lived next door to us in Havana. According to my parents, her *chusmería*, which was most often evidenced by tales of her street brawls with her husband, was legendary. (It certainly was to me.) So *picuo* did not mean what I thought (and secretly hoped) it would mean. But I was nonetheless still stung by my father's shaming. Although he could not call me the *maricón* (faggot) I was, he found another way of inducing the same shame in me without having to own his son's queerness by performing so direct a speech act. His lips were spared the indignity of speaking my name and performatively confirming what for him was the worst. I was left shamefaced and *picuo*.

The fact that *picuo* meant tacky, yet I feared that it might mean queer, reveals what is for me a point of convergence between these two different forms of alterity. Both the queer and the "tacky" poor have failed to properly be hailed by heterosexuality and capitalism. Both share this sense of "failure" when hailed by the call of normativity.

This recollection also concretizes what for me are the powerful and inescapable links between *chusmería* and queerness. The play's politics and performances are located at these links. All the performers and most of the characters are queer; Carmelita and Rodesia, for instance, have a star-crossed bear-girl hybrid/*chusma* affair. Alterity is not performed via the route of queerness but is instead articulated through *chusmería*. The discourse of queerness has mostly been employed by white performers. Performers of color who work through this concept often feel the need to define themselves against the overarching whiteness of "queer." *Chusmería* becomes a mode of articulating a *queer world* (for the world of Chusmatown is most certainly that) through the auspices of Latina performance. *Chusmería* provides Carmelita and her collaborators an occasion to speak queer *and* beyond.

Performance, Politics, and the Making of Queer Worlds

A central contention of this study is that minoritarian performance labors to make worlds—worlds of transformative politics and possibilities. Such performance engenders worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future. Performance is thus imbued with a great deal of power in my study. But what is meant precisely by "worldmaking"? The concept of worldmaking delineates the ways in which performances—both theatrical and everyday rituals—have the ability to establish alternate views of the world. These alternative vistas are more than simply views or perspectives; they are oppositional ideologies that function as critiques of oppressive regimes of "truth" that subjugate minoritarian people. Oppositional

counterpublics are enabled by visions, "worldviews," that reshape as they deconstruct reality. Such counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.

Nelson Goodman, among the first writers to employ the term *worldmaking*, has remarked that "composition and decomposition" are central to that process. Other aspects of worldmaking that he lists include revisionary "weighing" and "ordering" of reality as well as practices of "deletion and supplementation," and, finally, "deformation."¹⁵ In this book, I have outlined the ways in which minoritarian performances have done all of this work. *Chicas 2000* has offered an oppositional public where a stigmatized identity is simultaneously decomposed and recomposed; where values and tastes are reordered and reweighed utilizing alternate criteria; where a degree of editing, deletion, and supplementation is applied to an oppressive social script; and where a fundamental deformation of the dominant public sphere is achieved. All of this is the work of disidentification.

Performance is capable of providing a ground-level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere. Disidentificatory performance willfully disavows that which majoritarian culture has decreed as the "real." The force of performances that I collect in this book is performative as opposed to epistemological energy. Disidentificatory performance's performativity is manifest through strategies of iteration and *reiteration*. Disidentificatory performances are performative acts of conjuring that deform and re-form the world. *This reiteration builds worlds*. It proliferates "reals," or what I call worlds, and establishes the groundwork for *potential* oppositional counterpublics.

Such performances transport both audience and performer, equally integral components of any performance, to another *space*. In his classic treatise on the liminal space of convergence between theater and anthropology, Richard Schechner has pointed out two modalities of performance: performances of transportation and performances of transformation.¹⁶ Transportation is more typically associated with theater, whereas transformation is linked to the realm of ritual. Performances of transportation move the spectator from the space of the ordinary world to a performative realm. After the performance has expired, the spectator is returned to the realm of the ordinary at about the same place he or she entered. Individuals who have experienced transport performance have encountered some minimal change in their lives. Performances of transformation include bar mitzvahs and other initiations into adulthood. Transformation performances do not merely "mark" a change, they effect

a change through the performative act. Schechner is quick to point out that these two modalities of performance are not always discrete categories and the same performance will often include components of both. *Chicas 2000*, a performance that I have been describing as a queer worldmaking performance, initiates both spectator and performer into *chusmahood*—a very queer and racialized ontology. It transports the spectator to Chusmatown, a performative world where *chusmería* is not a toxic identity characteristic, but instead an emergent American identity. This transformation makes inroads on the “real world.”

Schechner’s project maps out a “point of contact” between performances of transformation and performances of transportation. In his paradigm, the transported (the actor, performer, cultural worker) imprints change onto the transformed (who might be a spectator or a performer in a ritual). I am suggesting that the imprint left on both performer and audience is laden with queer worldmaking potentialities. These imprints or marks are “loaded with power” and potentially “bind a person to his community; anchor him to an identity”; and “are at once intimate and public.”¹⁷

Disidentificatory performance’s ability to move a subject through political and symbolic space is only one of its particularities worth noting. The performances I collect in this text also possess extremely special temporalities in that they exist in both *the future and the present*. This phrase, “the future and the present,” echoes the work of the great Marxist theoretician C. L. R. James, whose first volume of collected writing was titled *The Future in the Present*.¹⁸ This title riffs on an aspect of Hegelian dialectics that suggests that the affirmation known as the future is contained within its negation, the present. In another text, his coauthored *Facing Reality*, James argues that a socialist future could be glimpsed by observing worker interaction and sociality within the space of the industrialized factory. Furthermore, he explains, the shop floor was *an actually existing socialist reality in the present*. His most striking proof for this thesis considers the case of an anonymous worker at an unnamed factory:

In one department of a certain plant in the U.S. there is a worker who is physically incapable of carrying out his duties. But he is a man with wife and children and his condition is due to the strain of previous work in the plant. The workers have organized their work so that for ten years he has had practically nothing to do.¹⁹

James looks to this situation and others like it throughout the world as examples of an already existing socialist present outside of the bureaucracy that characterized the Eastern bloc. James argues that “the fundamental task” is “to recognize the socialist society and record the facts of its existence”; thus, the scenes he describes are to be read as “outposts of a new society.” This notion of the future in the present is manifest in James’s post-Trotskyist workerism, which has been critiqued widely. Two of James’s most famous collaborators denounced this notion as delusional and naive.

Cornelius Castoriadis (who contributed to the book under his pen name Pierre Chaulieu) countered James's claims by explaining, "It is not difficult to understand that if socialist society already existed people would have noticed it"; and Raya Dunayevskaya, who, with James, founded the Johnson-Forest Tendency in American Marxism, stated that "the man who can write 'It is agreed that the socialist society exists' need never face reality."²⁰ These are harsh words from allies and friends; yet, despite these damning critiques, I am still drawn to this idea in James and its emphasis on the factory worker, particularly its framing of the social performer as something more than a cog. I contend that James's dialectical utopianism can tell us something about the temporality of disidentificatory performance, which I have described as worldmaking performance. I have suggested that *Chicas 2000* maps a future in which the *chisma* citizen subject (who represents the minoritarian citizen subject) resists escalating state repression by performing the very shame-laden excessive affect that the state indexes as justification for discrimination. But such a future-oriented claim fails to properly consider the time and place of the present in the performance, that actual sensuality of the present moment witnessed during the actual moment of performance.²¹ If disidentificatory performance transports us across symbolic space, it also inserts us in a coterminous time where we witness a new formation within the present and the future. In this fashion, the temporality of disidentificatory performance disrupts the mandates of the "burden of liveness" that shadows the minoritarian subject in that the "burden of liveness" labors to relegate this minoritarian citizen subject to the live and the present and thus evacuates such personages from history. The coterminous temporality of disidentificatory performance exists within the future and the present, surpassing relegation to one temporality (the present) and insisting on the minoritarian subject's status as world-historical entity. *Chicas 2000* is more than a vision of a future moment; it is also about something new emerging in the actuality of the present, during the scene of performance. The stage, like the shop floor, is a venue for performances that allow the spectator access to queer life-worlds that exist, importantly and dialectically, within the future and the present.

James's workerist theory allows me to think of the minoritarian performer as a worker and the performance of queer worldmaking as labor. This notion of performer as avant-garde worker is calibrated to derail limited essentialist or constructionist understandings of the worker. Queer and gender theories that employ performance and performativity are, according to Cindy Patton, primarily responses to critiques of essentialized identity and debates about the end of identity politics. The problem that Patton detects with this direction in those larger bodies of theory is what she perceives as an "overemphasis on the actant-subject and a relative lack of consideration of the stage or content or field of the performance or performative act."²² For Patton, performativity and performance are important critical terms for social theory. Performativity, for instance, can also discern the role of institutions and the state as players in a performative scene; for it is not only counterpublic cultural

workers who utilize different modes of performance, but also the ideological state apparatus and other aspects of the hegemonic order that perform. Disidentificatory performances sometimes mimic and remake those performances with a critical worldmaking difference, but such performances are some among many. The social is both a stage and a battlefield. Different performances attempt to order reality and prescribe "truth" and organize hierarchies. Opposing players also use competing discourses that need to be understood (and countered) as performative. Whiteness, heteronormativity, and misogyny are performative projects and disidentification is a counterperformativity.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has also stressed the state's status as a performing entity within the context of colonial and postcolonial regimes. He has argued that "The struggle between the arts and the state can be seen in performance in general and in the battle over the performance space in particular."²³ In that essay-opening sentence, Ngugi describes, with different terminology, the manner in which disidentificatory performances (by postcolonial artists) serve as counterpublicity that contests the performances of majoritarian regimes (by empire or the neocolonial state).

The stakes in the conflict between performing forces is the world, or, better put, the world to be made. Ngugi further specifies the performance of the state: "The state has its areas of performance; so has the artist. While the state performs power, the power of the artist is solely in the performance. Both the state and the artist have a different conception of time, place, content, goals, either of their own performance or of the other, but they have the audience as their common target."²⁴

The performances and performative energies located in Marga Gomez's imaginary talk show, Jean-Michel Basquiat's pop art paintings, Isaac Julien's revisionary history of the Harlem Renaissance, Richard Fung's reconstructed porn and ethnography, Vaginal Davis's white masculinity stage show, Ela Troyano's Latina camp, Pedro Zamora's version of *The Real World*, Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "disidentity politics," all share a common goal with the repressive regimes of truth they counter: they all aim to make worlds. Ngugi's distinction is key: the state performs power but the artist's power comes through performance. Thus, all the disidentificatory performances I have chronicled have been enactments of power in the face of repressive truth regimes and the state power apparatus.

Chicas 2000 enacts power and attempts to make a world by imagining a dystopic scenario that critiques the present by imaging its teleological future. The play visualizes a "worst-case scenario" that is well within the limits of our contemporary imaginations and then locates a kernel of counterpublic resistance within that nightmare future. The production builds a present in the future and, dialectically, a future in the present. This temporality helps counter the "burden of liveness" mandate that stalks the minoritarian subject insofar as time and space transport is made available and the disidentifying player and spectator are freed from the holding cell that is the strictly live, local, and present world. Politics is enabled and propelled by humor

and extravagance. *Chicas 2000* makes visible the performative ideology of the state by exaggerating it, causing it to balloon to ridiculous proportions. Through its enactment of comedy, Ludlamesque ridiculousness, and satire, Carmelita Tropicana's play extrapolates a queer world within a very antiqueer future.

This book has insisted on the need to read disidentificatory performances in manifestations both live and not so live. The priority has been to describe the performative politics of disidentificatory performances, which is to say that I have opted against an epistemological approach to disidentification and have instead attempted to offer descriptions of what disidentification *does within the social*. Rather than pit performativity against performance or stack them next to each other in a less than interactive fashion, I have chosen to employ a methodology that stresses the performativity of *or* in performance. It is my contention that *the doing* that matters most and the performance that seems most crucial are nothing short of the actual making of worlds.

Disidentification is a point of departure, a process, a building. Although it is a mode of reading and performing, it is ultimately a form of building. This building takes place *in the future and in the present*, which is to say that disidentificatory performance offers a utopian blueprint for a possible future while, at the same time, staging a new political formation in the present. Stakes are high. People of color and queers are scapegoated, targeted, and assaulted in all manner of ways. Through the "burden of liveness," we are called to perform our liveness for elites who would keep us from realizing our place in a larger historical narrative. Queers of color and other minoritarians have been denied a world. Yet, these citizen subjects are not without resources—they never have been. This study has tracked utopian impulses made manifest by the performers, cultural workers, and activists who are *not* content merely to survive, but instead use the stuff of the "real world" to remake collective sense of "worldness" through spectacles, performances, and willful enactments of the self for others. The minoritarian subject employs disidentification as a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking. The promises made by disidentification's performance are deep. Our charge as spectators and actors is to continue disidentifying with this world until we achieve new ones.