Always (K)new: Recombining Identities and Queering Narratives through a Transcultural Theatre Project

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In her article "Constructing a Self: a Brazilian Life Story," about the process of collecting oral narratives and, in particular, attuning one's ears to the intrinsic poetry of everyday speech, Daphne Patai states:

> [...] oral history depends for its existence on the intervention of an interviewer who collects and presents a version of the stories gathered. Nor are the stories themselves pristine and unchanging. Quite the contrary. Although I went to Brazil tape recorder in hand and asked a few questions and mostly listened, the resulting tapes must be seen as a point of intersection between two subjectivities-theirs and mine, their cultural assumptions and mine, their memories and my questions, their sense of self and my own, their hesitations and my encouraging words or gestures (or sometimes vice versa), and much much more. (146)

This exploration of the relationship between storyteller and witness was a driving force behind the development of the theatre project *Always (K)new,* performed at the University of Georgia (UGA) in December 2017 under the direction of Alberto Tibaji during his residency at UGA in Fall 2017. This article will highlight particular approaches the collaborators took in creating this piece, as well as some of the challenges and questions that pervaded this process. While, in retrospect, the project represented a unique pedagogical opportunity for students to engage with memoir and experiential play making, it also raised fundamental questions about authenticity of voice, ownership of narrative, and the performative, often collective, nature of identity. By allowing its development and presentation to mirror the fluidity of gender and sexuality represented in the stories collected, *Always (K)new* echoed the often messy and unpredictable nature of sexual orientation and gender

identity, offering a complex and layered representation of multiple identities through the acts of telling and re-telling personal narratives.

From its earliest stages, the collaboration for the project included this article's authors, as well as Richard Gordon of UGA, animation artist Cecília Traslaviña and her animation students from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Colombia, UGA's LGBT Center, and UGA students.[1] The ensemble of actors was comprised of graduate students in UGA's Theatre and Film Studies program, who were enrolled in Contini's "Genre and Style" class and studying the practice of devised theatre. Prior to Tibaji's residency at UGA, the project's scope was also enhanced by the participation of Moser's split-level (undergraduate/graduate) class in the Department of Romance Languages (ROML), which was focusing on memoir and memory in Luso-Brazilian literature. Students in this class consisted of both Brazilians and advanced North American students of Portuguese and Luso-Brazilian literature and culture. Students and faculty in these classes ranged across the spectrum of gender and sexual identification. From the onset, the ROML students assisted with interviews, transcribed and translated recorded narratives, participated in designated rehearsals, and exposed the actors to key cultural references and terminology related to the LGBTQ experience in Brazil. Each acting student was paired with a ROML student to jointly conduct the interviews and both classes were trained in methodologies of devising theatre and in the principles and best practices of oral history.

The group's goals going into the collaboration were clear: to devise a piece that would explore, through personal narratives and through similar stories collected from LGBTQ individuals in Brazil and Colombia, a broad set of issues facing LGBTQ students and faculty at UGA and in the Athens community. The involvement of these three particular communities stemmed from previous collaborations between Moser, Tibaji, Contini, Gordon, and Traslaviña in the U.S., Brazil, and Colombia, and the shared belief that such a multi-national project had the potential to enhance the students' learning environment at UGA and abroad. Moreover, overlapping course offerings at UGA in acting, animation, and literature, during the Fall 2017 semester, served as a developmental base for the project's interdisciplinary approach.

Through multiple video conferences over a ten-month period, the outline of the project was developed. The interviews in Brazil and Colombia were conducted before the start of UGA classes, thus allowing the animation group in Colombia to begin creating the complex media sequences arising from their collected narratives. These sequences were then shown to the animation

students in Georgia, who used them as reference points when creating their own media in response to the interviews in Athens. Interviews in Portuguese and Spanish provided materials translated early in the semester by ROML students, giving further insights to the acting students on how to gain stronger images and compelling stories when conducting their own interviews in Athens for inclusion in the final piece. The collected narratives were then woven together, creating a dramatic dialogue using movement, text, music, and animation with the performers and, at times, interviewees speaking texts in English, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Since multiple classes and disciplines—Acting, Literature, and Animation—were involved in the creation of the project, *Always (K)new* also provided a unique opportunity for applied creative research. From a pedagogical standpoint, the acting students were taught methods and techniques of devising an original piece. Six of the seven actors involved in the piece had previously taken Contini's "Queer Theatre and Film" course and were aware of the historical and social context of the presentation of queer bodies and stories on the stage. UGA students of Portuguese studying memoir and memory were also exposed to alternative forms of collecting and transcribing oral narratives and understanding the poetic nuances of everyday conversation. At the same time, animation students at Javeriana University in Bogotá and at UGA were asked to translate and abstractly visualize the oral narratives in another medium.

Both Tibaji and Contini had previous experience creating performances based on personal narratives from the LGBTQ community. Each teaches queer studies courses and engages in research in queer theatre and performance. Regarding his work with auto/biographical narratives, Tibaji stresses, in the program notes, his disinclination to present life stories in a linear manner, or at least in a fashion that would result in a traditionally cathartic theatre piece:

> Since I started working with Auto/Biographical techniques in Theater, I am more and more convinced of the importance of the contribution that narrating life stories may have to human rights and theater. The importance of fighting for LGBTQ rights is irrefutable, but it is also important to fight for the formation of a new sensibility that would inspire respect for diversity in a broader sense and would queer traditional ways of telling life stories in theater.

This particular approach towards queering personal narratives frequently involved, or resulted in, the blurring of autobiography and biography. Prior to conducting interviews, the students were introduced to the notion of "bio-

graphical space," as developed by Leonor Arfuch (2016) who, more specifically, questions the limits and parameters often imposed on genres associated with auto/biography. Rather than establishing permanent and immutable characteristics for each auto/biographical genre—memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, letters, journals, for example,— the Argentinian critic proposes that each of these types of text are part of a permeable "biographical space" where each genre can borrow from the other. Furthermore, Arfuch affirms that "the story of a life appears as a multiplicity of divergent stories, to which no one can apply the right of 'representation'" (2016, 272) Consequently, interviews are never one-sided and, as much as the interviewer attempts to not interfere with the interviewee's story, it is impossible to obtain a personal narrative free from other subjectivities.

Similarly, once narratives are presented to an audience, they are subsequently transformed, as stories are told and retold. As witnesses, we form our own version of the narrated stories, which in turn become part of us and, as we retell them, part of the next interlocutor. In this way, our lives and identities are comprised of the cumulative stories we have heard and retold. For artists developing a devised theatre piece, this "multiplicity of divergent stories" within a shared biographical space raises the question of "who owns the narrative" and what role the artist plays in conveying an "authentic voice." Ultimately, the creators *of Always (K)new* came to understand that the project represented their own refashioning of memoir through a theatrical lens. In this way the collected narratives became testimonies that the artists not only responded to but also transformed through a variety of materials and mediums.

In terms of staging these narratives, as Govan, Nicholson, Normington point out in *Making a Performance,* "The process of shaping intimate thoughts, feelings, and experiences for a witnessing audience inevitably fuses truth and fiction by recognizing that the imagination is integral to the narrative of selfhood" (56). Rather than tying together narratives with the purpose of building a homogeneous production, with a clear and overarching meaning, the direction of *Always (K)new* recombined multiple elements (i.e. texts, images, and gestures) to create different possibilities for 'reading' the performance. As such, the creation of the show was guided by an underlying recombinatorial theatrical technique, whereby the retold interviews were recombined into a tapestry of oral history, movement, songs, and short animation pieces, and exemplified by a fluidity of characterizations and dramaturgy.

In the project's initial weeks, following training on how to conduct oral history interviews, the actors and ROML students collected personal narra-

tives from volunteers in the LGBTQ community at UGA and Athens. The interviewers were trained to be sensitive to the interviewee's need to shape the direction of the interview topics. A questionnaire was developed through discussions and practice sessions that narrowed down to four main areas addressing gender and sexual identity: How and When did Identities Emerge; Navigating Interpersonal Relationships with Family and Friends; Cultural and Personal Signifiers; and Advice for Others. These questions were meant to not only obtain narratives but also to gain compelling imagery to be used in staging and animation. Furthermore, personal objects and popular culture played an important role in these interviews and in the subsequent performance.

The UGA LGBT Center was crucial in the project's ability to reach out to members of the community willing to be interviewed. Calls for volunteer subjects were disseminated through university and community listservs and social media. Each volunteer was met in a private and safe space of their choice and audio of the interviews was recorded, but no names or other identifiers were used in the final project, unless direct permission to do so was granted. The volunteer respondents in Georgia represented students, staff, faculty, and other local citizens and ranged in their sexual and gender identification as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and allies. In the several months devoted to interviews, students in all three countries collected stories from five Brazilian, five Colombian, and seventeen North-American volunteers.

Initial Inspiration

To better understand the play's overall development, it is worth noting that initial discussions by the collaborators revolved around how best to translate, and culturally transpose, Silvero Pereira's *BR-Trans* for an English-speaking audience in the Southeastern U.S. To characterize Silvero Pereira's *BR-Trans* as a one-person performance belies the intrinsic multiplicity of voices and intimate testimonies that give shape and color to this groundbreaking Brazilian play. Based on Pereira's 2012-2013 interviews and interactions with transgender individuals and drag queens in Fortaleza and Porto Alegre, this creative theatrical channeling of multiple personal narratives with autobiographical musings and iconic queer references quickly gained recognition as a watershed moment in not only contemporary Brazilian theatre, but also the broader realm of transgender cultural production in Brazil. Pereira's collage of personal/collective transformations and the resulting inherent ambiguity of never fully knowing what scenes stem from his subjects' lives, his own life,

or from the persona of Gisele, appealed to the collaborative group in Georgia and Minas Gerais. Originally inspired by the idea of mounting a production that was a direct response to, and translation of, Pereira's work, the project eventually morphed into a fundamentally transcultural approach in which personal narratives of self-identified LGBTQ individuals were collected simultaneously in Athens, São João del-Rei, and Bogotá. The narratives were then reconfigured through a collective process that involved transcription, translation, retelling, and rescripting, in a fashion not dissimilar to Pereira's collage, but with the added multi-layered dimensions of juxtaposing three distinct languages, cultures, and non-heteronormative communities.

Given that the stories were collected from queer communities, broadly defined, it became evident that the style of the piece should reflect the fluidity and transformations, especially regarding identification, inherent in those stories. How could we embrace the idea of "queering the narrative" through theatre using a collective creative process, collective improvisation, and collective poetry? Partly inspired by the convergence of queer studies and pedagogy within the context of post-identity politics, as discussed for example by Guacira Lopes Louro, the project explored these very questions. As Louro suggests: "Uma pedagogia e um currículo queer estariam voltados

Silvero Pereira in *BR-Trans.* Photo: Caique Cunha, 2015.

para o processo de produção das diferenças e trabalhariam, centralmente, com a instabilidade e a precariedade de todas as identidades" (48). *Always (K)new* emphasized this instability both in the stories told by the interviewees and in the way each actor related to their 'character,' that is, through the narration of a life built from two or more subjectivities rather than a single, homogeneous identity. Ultimately, this process tended to draw attention to difference, to strangeness, and to resist the creation of "mirrors" for people (both onstage and in the audience) to easily recognize themselves. As Janet Miller states: "an educator who conceives of autobiography as a queer curriculum practice doesn't look into the mirror of self-reflection and see a reinscription of her already familiar, identifiable self. She finds herself not mirrored—but in difference" (372). And she concludes: "In the space she explores between self and other, nothing looks familiar, everything looks a little unnatural. To queer the use of autobiography as a curriculum practice is to produce a story of self, and other, with which one cannot identify" (373). The collaborators sought to engage with this liminal space in performance and were motivated by the possibilities and further questions it would raise.

Ambiguous authorship also partly explains the underlying tension residing in the play's recurring motif of "I always knew/No one knows/always new," perhaps giving legitimacy to the contradictions inherent in affirming each of these sentiments, even simultaneously. The juxtaposition of these seemingly incongruous views lies at the heart of the play's recombinatorial approach, emphasizing the many voices that can reside within one subjectivity. A kind of critical distancing between the audience and the characters and their subject matter resulted from the relative depersonalization of each narrative voice.

Guided by these central tenets, the collaborators opted, in terms of theatre presentation, to ultimately let the form of the piece grow without any traditional "straight" or linear narrative structure in mind. One of the project's challenges pivoted around how best to render the oral narratives from the interviews into the spoken (and written) word onstage. To this end, the project drew from the work of Daphne Patai on collecting oral history and, in particular, attuning one's ears to the intrinsic poetry of everyday speech.[2] Rather than speech coming to us in "unadulterated form," 'straight' from the soul, recorded interviews are best viewed, she says, as "a point of intersection between two subjectivities—theirs and mine" (146). She also advises us to listen carefully for the "literariness of the narratives" as we proceed to the next step of transcribing them, in an effort to preserve the "tone, style and flavor" and particularly the poetic rhythm of the source (148). Following this

model, the transcriptions completed by the students and actors also became an exercise in transposing the recorded narratives into a kind of "dramatic poetry," where pauses, silence, inflections, and even body language were captured in free verse form.[3] Patai astutely recognizes that, in contrast to a flat, literally prosaic, depiction of the facts about a person's life, the poetic version, with all its messiness, reveals the speaker's performance, the character they create for themselves.

This performative approach towards transcription, or better yet transposition, served as a kind of guiding principle for *Always (K)new* on multiple levels. It instilled the life stories of the interviewees with a dramatic poetry that might have otherwise been missing in the play's monologues and dialogues. But, just as importantly, the poetic transposition of these stories represented a second (and often third or more) layer of performance by the students and actors who brought their own creative intervention and interpretation to the words uttered. This process of collective narrative ownership was emphasized by the decision to have students record their transcriptions in their own voice, recombining gender, language, and nationality in a way that often dissolved the notion of a single original source. From a theatrical standpoint, the loss of an exclusive source and viewpoint defies the classic Aristotelian narrative device of a single protagonist and shifts to a communal voice.[4]

Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Exchanges

Bringing together students from distinct but often overlapping disciplines and cultural backgrounds contributed to the transcultural experience of the play as well as the deterritorialization of academic boundaries. The participation of Romance Languages students also helped the acting ensemble to better contextualize the personal narratives that stemmed from Brazil. For example, one of the texts discussed in the ROML class and introduced to the actors was João Nery's memoir *Viagem Solitária,* in which Nery describes his personal journey of becoming trans-male in Brazil.[5] Bringing a discussion of this groundbreaking memoir to rehearsal served several purposes: it introduced the actors to non-heteronormative lexicon from Brazil, such as 'bicha,' 'veado,' 'sapatão,' and 'Maria-Homem,' and also placed the interviews conducted in Minas Gerais and these cultural references within a broader spectrum of LGBTQ social history in Brazil.

Similarly, students discussed the significance of 'pajubá,' a highly codified form of slang, often borrowing from Yorubá, used by transvestites and the broader LGBTQ community in Brazil as a means of impeding understanding

by outsiders and reaffirming the bonds of communication within their own marginalized community. The American students found corollaries between this slang and catchphrases (e.g. Yaaas Queen) drawn from American drag queens such as those used on shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race.* The notion of language serving as both a shield and weapon and the collective empowerment that can come from appropriating otherwise derogatory terms (bicha, queer, etc.) found expression at pivotal moments in the play, and through innovative interactions with multi-media, as will be discussed later. Moreover, the exercise of creating a multi-lingual glossary, in Portuguese, English and Spanish, of related LGBTQ terms shed light on the surprising confluences and transnational borrowings that these communities share, as well as the pitfalls of presuming the existence of a homogeneous globalized gay culture stemming predominantly from Western norms.[6] Students and actors reflected together on the realization that vocabularies (including those of homosexual identities) are never neutral sites and that they can reflect both transnational/linguistic interactions as well as local agency.

This duality is perhaps most clearly exemplified in an expression repeated in multiple scenes in *Always (K)new,* thus forming a kind of motif for the transcultural exchange unfolding on stage. In each scene two men are observed by several other actors who point out one man, in particular, and whisper in Portuguese, "Essa Coca é Fanta" and in English "This Coke is Fanta! Who is he trying to kid?" The scene is replayed several times, with no additional context or explanation until finally one of the actors asks, "Why are you laughing? What do you mean by that?" to which the other responds, "In Brazil, when a gay man tries to pass as straight, we say 'essa Coca é Fanta.' This Coke is Fanta."[7] The expression often carries with it a connotation of discrimination and intolerance but, depending upon the speaker, can also serve as an example of a marginalized group developing a highly contextual means of communicating sexual orientation. In performance, there was certainly a sense of irony in appropriating "Coke," perhaps the most internationally recognizable symbol of American globalization and export domination, in a way that left the North American audience in the dark about the joke's actual meaning. *Always (K)new* plays with this insider/outsider dynamic, both through the actors and with the audience, until revealing the "punch line," so to speak, but also and more importantly, a moment of transcultural exchange originating from beyond a position of North American hegemony.[8] Indeed, one of the overall effects of constantly juxtaposing personal narratives and animation from South America with LGBTQ stories from Georgia was to leave the Athens

Actresses Brittney S. Harris and Taylor Wood rehearsing scene with "that Coke is Fanta" insinuation. Photo: Alys Barrow, 2017.

audience in "unfamiliar territory" and thus help dissolve a simplistic "McGay" understanding of global queering through a constant queering of dramaturgical expectations.[9]

In fact, the audience's psychological and physical experience with unfamiliarity was provoked upon its arrival in UGA's Seney-Stovall Chapel theatre in Athens during the pre-show period. Seats were grouped according to celestial constellations that were posted on signs interspersed throughout the seating area.[10] Each spectator received a program with a drawing of one of the constellations, while the actors and ROML students moved throughout the audience explaining that they should search for a seat in the area corresponding to this drawing. Of course, some people wanted to choose their seats, almost all preferred to sit together with their friends, and some people were given drawings that didn't match the constellations in the audience. The ensuing confusion and tension were intended to motivate the audience to feel and think about identities that are assigned to each of us since childhood or even pre-birth. To what extent is each person comfortable with the identity assigned to her/him/them? Must these assignments always be respected?[11] The actors engaged in conversation with the audience members during this time to further draw out and accentuate the themes of identity and community.[12]

Subjectivity and Collectivity

The twenty-seven narratives that were collected were not only each reconfigured but, in many cases, collectively recombined such that dialogues often contained elements of more than one initial story and voice.[13] This is

keeping with what Dwight Conquergood calls "dialogic performance" as it brings together "different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another. The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is the kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing" (75).

The piece was a new experience for the acting students as they navigated the shifting perspectives of the creative process from interviewing a person, to transcribing the interview, to translating those words into movement for the stage. As actors trained in the psychological concepts of "motivation" and "action," in regards to performance, it presented a unique challenge being directed to create abstract "physical scores" based, not on a linear narrative, but on a recombining of words, phrases, and images from multiple interviews. These "scores," much like the score of a piece of music, were then rehearsed with varied tempos, rhythm, dynamics, and volumes. In addition, the scores were then layered upon one another or in tandem with overlapping dialogue or animated sequences. This allowed the various scores to interact in a fugue like manner, weaving in and out, commenting on, reflecting, refracting, and creating something "always new." The actors involved often referred to this purposeful blending and reframing as "queering the narrative."

A good example of this type of contrapuntal interweaving of voices occurs early in the play when each of the actors alternate positions on chairs spread across the stage and interact in a way that is both monologic and dialogic. The show begins in reference to the interview process itself, with one actor offering another a chair and inviting them to "Take a seat." This line and action is quickly mirrored throughout the ensemble. In this scene the alternating repetition of lines such as "I always knew," "No one knows," "I never wanted to be me," "I never felt gay enough," "The chalkboard says do not erase," and "say thank you" preserves the give and take of interlocution without actually engaging in direct dialogue. Drawn from different interviews, each line appears again later in the piece when those particular interviews are featured. At this point in the play, however, they represent abstract images. This indirect, often impersonal quality of the characters' voices is enhanced by both the adopted free-verse form and director's recombination of narrative elements. As a result, in many scenes the more direct "dialogue" seemed to be conveyed through highly charged, choreographed, abstract physical interaction between two or more actors, rather than the exchange of words.

Actors Marlon Burnley and Larry Cox Jr. rehearsing *Always (K)new*. Photo: Alys Barrow, 2017.

This interplay between physical dialogue with parallel and overlaying monologues strongly characterizes a subsequent scene between two male actors in which two separate interview transcriptions are combined. Through staging, each actor follows his own train of thought while together they move, climb on blocks, and influence each other's physical space. Their interwoven narratives both repel and dovetail at times. The action of "building blocks" reminds one of multiple situations; the developmental "building blocks" that a child might use, the creation of a large obstacle ("block") that one must overcome, the "building blocks" of forming an identity, etc. As one man asserts his opinions about Youtube as a popular platform for queers through channels such as Super Fruit and the disappointing gay hook-up scene in college, the other man re-experiences the anguish of telling his parents that he is gay and his insecurities associated with not feeling "thin enough," "pretty enough," "gay enough." At the end of the scene, after sharing an intimate kiss and prolonged eye contact, they utter together "I'm still me."

The loss of self, or perception of this loss, is underscored by the ambiguity of authorship. This ambiguity also complicates any desire, by the characters or audience, for quick labels, tidy life stories, or easily compartmentalized sexual/gender identities. It may be said that when the stories of the characters (interviewees) do intersect, the impact is that much greater. Such scenes demonstrate how the absence of linear, highly confessional individual nar-

ratives can be offset by the gradual formation of a "constellation" of voices and bodies, whose impact and meaning stem from their own collectivity.

This is not to say that the collaborators were unaware of potential problems inherent to this approach towards dialogic performance, or of the limitations that can arise when not allowing a subject's story to be front and center but is, instead, highly fragmented. By re-combining stories of two or more different identities does one run the risk of relativizing and neutralizing their social, racial, or gender status? Do we even further minimalize the stories of an already marginalized community by recycling them?[14]

The following monologue is an example of a recombination of the literal transcription of an interviewee's words blended with the observations of the interviewer and then overlaid with the performance of two actors. As part of the initial interview process, the interviewers were asked to be conscious of not just the subject's words but also of physical idiosyncrasies, gestures, and surroundings. In devising this particular monologue based on the interview of a young bisexual male, the audience is asked to split their focus aurally and visually. On one side of the stage, a male actor enacted the gestures mentioned ("weighing his hands," "pulling one arm into his sleeve") in an abstract manner, while on the other side of the stage a female spoke the words, resulting in a heightened focus on everyday gesture and the possible subtext that lies therein. In this particular case, as the words are spoken neutrally, we are witness to a subtextual gesture palette (in italics below) that suggests "hidden," "imbalanced," "frightened."

Arms crossed, touches neck
Gently grips the table to delicately explain
Five minutes pass and he opens
Then closes again

Thinking he looks up, weighing his hands,
Two years with a female
As he closes his arms
My father
As he closes his arms, pulling one arm into his sleeve
Just like a little boy

Thirty minutes go by
He picks up a stirrer from the table

LGBT
he says with a high pitch
My best friend knew. We danced to Brittany Spears behind closed doors
She would confess her love to me
Awkwardly
Then we'd sing with abandon

I cried at The Notebook
I stood straight in choir. I had great posture
I was and always wanted to be the "best boy" in the class
I had so many survival strategies

Slightly alone
Queer... it's not a big deal
Everyone's a little bisexual
I carried stories that bothered me

There is a small ting in the room. It sounds like a bell.
The chalkboard says Do Not Erase

I always *(air quotes)* "knew"

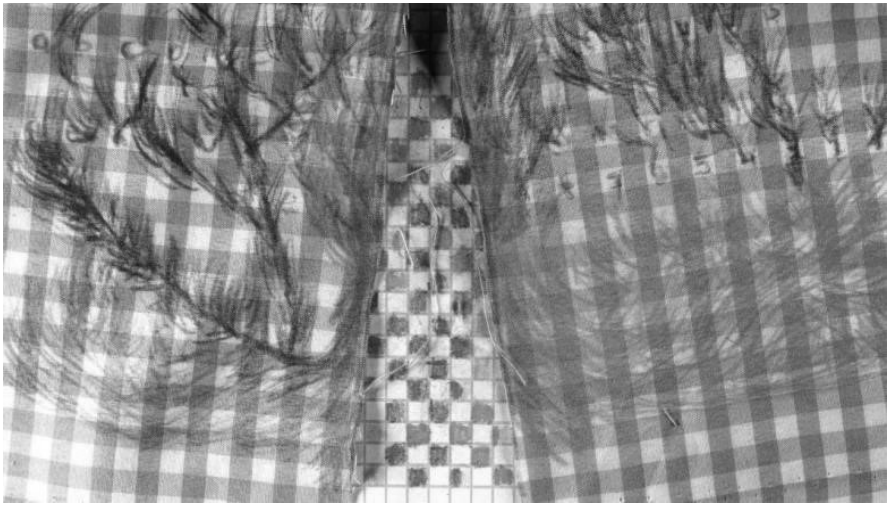
Queering Borders

Deterritorialized tensions, improvisational approaches, and fluid identities emerged through the recombinatorial process behind *Always (K)new.* As a result, the audience in Georgia was confronted not only with the unsettling of heteronormative (and homosexual) expectations, but also the "out of context" deterritorialization that comes with placing alongside, and often interweaving, Colombian and Brazilian narratives, cultural references, and unfamiliar language with a Georgian/American context. Audience reception was complicated further by the fact that some spectators spoke Spanish and/or Portuguese and were Latin Americans themselves, while others only spoke English.

Although a multi-voiced approach was fundamental to the production, there were certain moments when the audience listened to the actual voice of the interviewee, thereby gaining direct insight into the original storyteller's language and perspective. In these cases, the steps of transcribing

and recombining the narrative were still applied. English subtitles were also provided. The longest work of animation in the show, created by the visual arts group in Bogotá and inspired by the accompanying narrative of a lesbian woman from Colombia, is an example of the deterritorialization that resulted from reconstituting and refashioning of narrative into a visual medium. The opening imagery, projected onto a screen upstage, consists of pieces of cloth, thread, and embroideries that immediately evoke a woman's stereotypical environment. Little by little the cloth is painted with pink—a color usually associated with women—until the moment when a piece of cloth with a white and pink plaid pattern appears. Then a black line is drawn that divides the cloth down the middle into two parts and most of the colored threads enter this 'opening,' which resembles the female genitalia. The images formed by these two pieces of cloth continue to change, thus creating a sense of fluid identity. Subsequently, the two pieces of cloth open as a curtain, suggesting two different things: a theatre curtain that opens for a show and a curtain that hides something that cannot be shown or remains in the background.

In another example of multiple perspectives on a narrative playing out in performance through animation and live actors, we see a black and white sketch of an infant suckling from his/her mother's breast while in voice over we hear a monologue. The original narrative stems from an interview,



Selected image from animation piece entitled "La infancia es como una daga clavada en el pecho," created for the project by Bibiana Rojas, a member of Cecília Traslaviña's animation team at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. Image: Bibiana Rojas, 2017.

conducted in São João del-Rei, of a gay Brazilian man who recounts, in Portuguese, feeling different as a child, the aggression both verbal and physical he received from peers, things he wishes his parents could have known, and the endemic intolerance stemming from Brazilian society as a whole.[15] While the actor responding physically to the narrative is male, the storyteller's recorded voice-over is now female and speaking in English, with the exception of certain words such as "bicha, veado, and amigo gayzinho." Though the narrative the audience hears is also the product of multiple interventions, including transcription, translation, and transposition, it, in fact, unfolds in a relatively linear fashion, in contrast to other scenes.

Coinciding with the animation, a single actor is left downstage while five other actors remain seated in the corner, stage left, aggressively repeating the hurtful words. Akin to an audience of peers, this group whispers maliciously to one another as they observe the solo actor contort his body, in part to the rhythm of the child's thumping heartbeat in the animation as well as in response to their bullying comments. The tension of this scene then shifts to a subsequent animation (created by the UGA animation team) comprised of only words, in different fonts, sizes, and colors, drawn from the story that the audience hears in a voice-over recording. Key words (*different, effeminate, gossip, peers, gay*) appear simultaneously on the screen, flickering and moving about, as the voice overhead continues, the solo actor responds to the words attacking him, and his peers continue to heckle him with insults.

Through its many stages of development, the scene represents an example of queering borders and translating identities; a gay Brazilian man interviewed another gay Brazilian, an American female undergraduate student listened to the interview and prepared a free-verse transcription of the parts that moved her most and finally recorded herself re-telling a narrative that is simultaneously hers and his. This recombinatorial approach and queering of the narrative thus tested the limits of representation and authorship (who can represent who? Who can pass as what?). To what extent is it possible, or theatrically viable, for an American female undergraduate to adopt/adapt the words of a Brazilian gay man? Who owned the story? Who had the right to tell the story? Similarly, the interviewer's role is vital in this trans-creative process, in which, at each step a different subjectivity interferes with the 'final' version of the text, without eliminating the previous meanings but always adding something new to the already existing layers of meanings. Akin to the formation of a palimpsest, in which some parts of the 'original' manuscript

Actor John Terry center stage with ”peers” heckling from stage left and animation piece, entitled “Infancia,” created by Tatiana Vaca, projected behind him. Photo: George Contini, 2017.

are erased while others are left legible, the building of the scenes in *Always (K)new* repeated this process throughout its development.

Ela tá constelando...

The play’s shift towards collectivity within subjectivity and the metaphor of sexual/gender identity as a constellation rather than a fixed point are perhaps best exemplified in one of the closing scenes. With the lights down, the audience’s attention is turned to the voice of an individual speaking Portuguese, with English translation scrolling on the screen. Responding to the question of self-identification, the voice responds:

> O que eu gosto mais é transfeminina, né, acho que vem do próprio inglês ‘transfeminine’ porque acho que reflete melhor o que eu sou, porque... tipo... eu nunca fui muito confortável com o termo mulher pra se aplicar a mim, eu me afirmo como mulher muitas vezes e eu entendo que a minha identidade... ela é meio constelar, assim, ela tá constelando mulher, veado, transfeminina, sabe?[16]

Laura’s narrative is an example, on multiple levels, of a form of “thinking with trans.” As Roger Brubaker proposes in *Trans: Gender and Race in an*

Age of Unsettled Identities, "to think with trans" implies viewing not only gender, but also identity classifications (race, ethnicity, nationality, language) in pluralistic and non-binary ways, as "open to the forces of change and choice, and as constituted through ongoing performances rather than simply ascribed at birth once and for all" (132). In a similar sense, Laura is open to the idea of a label and finds one that best suits her. But she also recognizes the many identities at play, each with its own possibilities and limitations—mulher, veado, transfeminina—and prefers, instead, to see her identity as a constellation, that is, an assemblage of celestial *bodies* (and sources of light) in constant motion, but also forming an imaginary, yet recognizable, whole. Laura's identity is best described in the present progressive tense, as a verb in the third person—"ela tá constelando"—and it is this performative side of not only sexual/gender identification, but also national, cultural, and linguistic constructions of the collective self, in the present moment, that Laura's story speaks so poignantly to. We notice, for example, that she seamlessly switches to English, with "transfeminine," to demonstrate her knowledge of and association with a transnational phenomenon. It is worth noting that a significant portion of the interview was also conducted in English, a language that she felt comfortable with and was, in fact, eloquent in.

Laura's narrative and the following closing scene also highlight the play's constant juxtaposition of different cultural references. As her voice fades and the lights reappear, the actors return, now dressed in white, and one by one vogue down a catwalk that has been quickly constructed center stage. Significantly, however, the soundtrack to this vogue is not from the expected playlist of Ru Paul, Cher, or Madonna, but rather, a song sung by the Brazilian transgender artist Linn da Quebrada. Entitled "Serei A," a play on "I will be THE... (using the feminine article) and "sereia," or "mermaid/siren" in Portuguese. Indeed, the song begins with an ethereal, siren-like voice beckoning the listener to "entregar o seu corpo," or "relinquish your body."[17] Yet the way the words are sung can also lead the listener to understand that the singer is, in fact, addressing a siren, who metaphorically evokes a "travesti," "a siren of the asphalt," a hybrid being that walks up and down the street at night to seduce and attract her clients.[18] And the singer admonishes the "sereia": "Entrega o seu corpo/Somente a quem possa carregar," referring to how dangerous it is to be a *travesti*, but also the self-affirmation that stems from possessing a *travesti*'s body.[19] This (en)trancing moment morphs into the distinct Afro-Brazilian percussive rhythms of an atabaque, agogô, and caxixi, instruments commonly used in candomblé ceremonies intended to summon

the orixás and create a trance-like state for selected participants. The image of the sereia is also easily associated to one specific orixá—Iemanjá—"the *queen* of the sea."[20]

As the penultimate moment in the piece, each actor's vogue on the catwalk evokes both the actor's individual expression as well as certain stereotypical gendered movements, while also criss-crossing both modern norms of the Western fashion scene and elements of Afro-Brazilian dance or religiosity. The quality of Linn da Quebrada's hypnotic song, overlaid on the catwalk motif, operates on multiple cultural levels in this scene. The final verse of the song urges the *travesti*— and all listeners—to keep going: "Continue a navegar/Continue a travecar/Continue a atravessar/Continue a travecar." The semantic field of the verb 'navegar' is linked to the image of the sea and thus to the association of siren/*travesti*/Iemanjá, bringing also perhaps the sense of contemporaneity with internet navigation. The word 'travecar' is a neologism from the slang term 'traveca,' a synonym of 'travesti,' but in this case, it is a verb, thereby defying the necessity for a *travesti* to have a solid and immutable identity, but rather permanently performing what she is. Each of these meanings are linked to the verb 'atravessar' (cross, go through), which also connects to a queer experience.

The play's conclusion emphasizes the idea of fluid identities, identities that keep moving, re(k)newing, and recombining different aspects of subjec-

Actress Katherine Butcher, with outstretched arms, voguing on the catwalk in the final sequence of *Always (K)new*. Photo: George Contini, 2017.

tivities. Through its transcultural juxtapositions and recombinatorial process, *Always (K)new* also calls into question fixed notions of localness, globalization, authenticity, artistic domains, as well as gender and sexual identity.

Since the beginning of the project, the creative team was inspired by Silvero Pereira's work and the idea of using the theatre as a space for translating identities and queering borders. In the preface to the published version of *BR-Trans,* Brazilian journalist and gay rights activist Jean Wyllys underscores the play's uniqueness, but also its universality: "todos nós em transe" (7), a sentiment that Pereira echoes in the play's notes, when he recalls how the loneliness and exclusion experienced by transgendered individuals in school resonated profoundly with a physically handicapped audience member.[21] For Pereira, the play "é sobre todos nós!" (52-53). Wyllys also calls our attention to the multiple associations that the play's title evokes (7): the "trans" of national highways crisscrossing the Brazilian hinterland; the itinerant life of transvestite prostitution; the transitions Pereira performs on stage moving from his subjects' stories to his drag persona Gisele Almodóvar, and back to himself; even the "transe," that is, trance state that occurs when the spirit, or orixá, descends upon and incorporates a "filha de santo" in Afro-Brazilian religious ceremonies. More than mere transit, "trans" suggests a state of dislocation, of leaving one's home and identity without necessarily arriving at a known or fixed destination—"de quem partiu mas ainda não chegou" (7).

The polysemic title *Always (K)new,* with its intervening parentheses, implies identity formation, for gender/sexuality and otherwise, that can be both deep seeded and changing. Moreover, the prefix 'trans-' and the notion of "thinking with trans" also embodied the idea of crossing linguistic and national borders and gender norms without negating the validity of these liminal spaces. It is no surprise that words such as transgender, transnational, translation, transcription, transposition, transdisciplinary, transgressive, and transformative were part of the project's daily work. Through queering the narrative and ultimately the audience's expectations, the piece allowed for a greater re-imagining of our ability to address these issues collectively and, hopefully, more compassionately.

University of Georgia and Federal University of São João del-Rei

Notes

[1] The LGBT Center at UGA, directed by Meg Evans, provided space and assistance for the majority of interviews conducted in Athens. In Brazilian theatre, *collaborative* work (processo colaborativo) differs from *collective* work (criação coletiva) in terms of authorship and responsibility. Roughly speaking, in a collective production there is usually no single person responsible for each of the specific theatrical elements, such as set design, text, direction, costumes. Decisions about these elements are made by the collective group. In a collaborative work, though elements may be discussed by the entire group, there is one person responsible for making final decisions. *Always (K)new* is best described then as a collaborative project in which Alberto Tibaji (Federal U. of São João del-Rei) served as Director in Residence, George Contini (UGA) as Producing Artistic Director, Robert Moser (UGA) as Dramaturg, Cecília Traslaviña (Javeriana U.) as Animation Coordinator, and Richard Gordon (UGA) as Collaborator and Translator.

[2] See Patai's article "Constructing a Self: a Brazilian Life Story." In a departure from literary criticism focused on the written text, Patai shifted her focus in this article to the process of collecting and transcribing oral narratives told by ordinary Brazilian women.

[3] Patai is, in turn, working from Dennis Tedlock's observations on the inadequacies of rendering oral narratives into prose because this genre lacks the "dramatic poetry" contained in everyday speech (Patai 149). See the collection of Tedlock's essays in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (1983).

[4] In a similar vein of disrupting fixed characters and dramatic styles, it is worth noting that Moser (as translator) and Contini (as Director/Adaptation) collaborated on a UGA production of *As Aventuras do Tio Patinhas* by Augusto Boal (1986), Brazilian playwright and creator of Theater of the Oppressed. The premier of this play, translated as *The Misadventures of Uncle McBuck,* in the Spring of 2008 constituted the first production in the U.S. of a full-length Boalian play in English.

[5] *Viagem Solitária: Memórias de um Transexual 30 Anos Depois* is the second of Nery's autobiographical works. His first book *Erro de Pessoa: Joana ou João,* published in 1984, was, according to Nery, the first account of a "trans-homem" to receive mainstream attention. It is worth noting the fluidity of Nery's chosen name(s) over the course of his life and career (he also went by Paulo Albernaz de Mello Bastos) in light of the legal hurdles and other challenges transgenders have faced in Brazil. He recently died, in October 2018.

[6] Peter Jackson (2009) uses the historical example of Thailand and the emergence of homosexual identities in this region of Asia to underscore the role of local agency and differentiation in resisting, negotiating with, or ignoring Western sexual and gender norms.

[7] Coca-Cola developed an advertising campaign in 2017 that used this expression to promote greater tolerance of LGBTQ communities in Brazil and beyond. A limited-edition can, launched on International LGBT Pride Day, of the original Coca-Cola was filled with Fanta instead, and the question "E daí?" follows the expression "Essa Coca é Fanta," thereby appropriating, in a positive light, what had been a generally derogatory comment. See link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWkMvgRYAfE

[8] See Silviano Santiago's article "O homosexual astucioso: primeiras, e necessariamente apressadas, anotações" (2008) where the Brazilian literary critic problematizes, for example, the assumption that "outing" is a viable strategy to fight for LGBTQ rights in all socio-cultural contexts.

[9] For a broader discussion about this topic see Jackson (2009) and Boellstorff (2005).

[10] The image of constellations came about from an interview with a Brazilian trans-activist who compared her identity to mapping a constellation, which shall be discussed later.

[11] During this intentional pre-show confusion, some of the actors circulating through the audience would prompt individuals to follow the rules, and if someone couldn't find their place in the theatre, they were told to keep looking for it. Similarly, if someone was sitting in the 'wrong' section, s/he would be prompted to leave the seat and try to find her/his appropriate place. The audience reacted as one might

expect. Some people just refused to change places, others kept looking for the 'right' place, and some just agreed to sit in the assigned section.

[12] It is worth noting that the audience for *Always (K)new* consisted of a heterogenous mix of Portuguese-speaking, Spanish-speaking, and Anglophone students, faculty, and other people from the surrounding Athens area.

[13] Of the twenty-seven total interviews collected, five were conducted in São João del-Rei, Brazil, five in Bogotá, Colombia, and seventeen in Athens, Georgia.

[14] In addition, at times the actors felt distanced and frustrated with the approach to the material. The disjointed nature of the narratives and pervasive abstraction often resulted in a lack of cohesion. As one ensemble member pointed out: "The most fulfilling part of working on *Always (K)new* was the opportunity to tell the stories of so many people within the LGBTQ community, stories that otherwise would not have been told. The combining of stories into a dialogue allowed us to portray the diversity of the community as well as the attributes that unite it. The use of our own diversity as interviewers and artists assured that diversity and unification. Unfortunately, the use of so many artists and the goal of utilizing all of their work sometimes overshadowed the stories being told. The focus of story-telling sometimes became lost in spectacle and artistic perspectives."

[15] The following is the translated/transposed version of selected portions of the interview conducted in São João del-Rei in September 2017:

During my childhood,
I was a different kid,
Different from the others,
Because of my behavior,
Which the others thought was effeminate.
I was the only one who didn't have this awareness.
I didn't want to know what it meant to be gay.
In my mind, I was only a kid.

But I coexisted with the others—
My peers—
Who always called me
Veado
Bicha
But I never understood why.

I always stayed with the girls
With whom I identified the most.
The boys were always aggressive...
Physically—
They beat me up.
But the verbal aggression was much more common...

It happened all the time—
Through gossip,
In conversations...
Because of this I was
Aluno gayzinho,
Amigo gayzinho.

This didn't happen just at school.
It happened in my neighborhood,

With my family,
With my cousins.

If it were possible
To go back and talk to myself
As a child,
I would direct this child—
Me—
And show him that everything is okay,
That he is beautiful,
That he has potential,
That he is not sinful,
That he has nothing to be ashamed of.

Maybe,
If I could go back to that time,
I would go back to my parents
And guide them
During the time when I was a child
So that they could guide me—
As a child.

Society needs to understand
That many times the conflict,
The search for who we are
Or the acceptance of who we are,
In a society that doesn't accept us
Wastes time—
Wastes time in life.

If parents understood
And treated their gay child
In a way without prejudice,
That child would have more goals,
More dreams,
And could contribute to society.

But parents aren't the only ones to blame.
Society itself is at fault.
Because the child encounters this prejudice
At school,
At the park,
At the mall.
In all of these places the child is made aware
That he is different.

[16] Laura goes on, in this interview conducted in October 2017, to reflect more on the relationship between her own identity and the concept of being a woman: "Porque também não tem como eu — ehh—eu sei que hoje eu me coloco como mulher na sociedade, eu sou lida como mulher a maior parte do tempo—ehh—, mas eu não, eu não acho que seja, sei lá, fidedigna exatamente eu me conter nessa palavra, eu me resumir na palavra mulher. Eh porque ela não, porque a gente sabe o que significa mulher

na linguagem corrente e isso não é necessariamente algo que me contempla plenamente não. Mulher, a gente tem que esticar essa palavra, a gente tem que aumentar os limites dela."

[17] The verb 'entregar' has different meanings at play in this verse. It is a synonym of 'deliver,' but can also mean 'to give' and 'to not resist.' As a 'filha de santo' must 'entregar' her body to the entity who is going to incorporate her, the 'travesti' must 'entregar' her body to the male clients who pay for her services. Worthy of note is that the testimonies of many 'travestis' affirm that male clients sometimes pay to be penetrated by them. Currently in Brazil, 'travestis' are fighting to guarantee their rights for education and jobs in a safe environment, and so that prostitution will not be their only means of employment. For a discussion about the physical and symbolic violence that travestis and transgender individuals are subject to in Brazil and beyond, from a geographical standpoint, see *Geografias Malditas: Corpos, Sexualidades e Espaços.* Ed. Silva, Joseli, et alli (2013).

[18] The word 'travesti' in Portuguese means someone that after birth was assigned as a male and identifies herself as a female. *Travestis* do not undergo genital surgeries. It is not a synonym of transvestite, which can also signify a woman dressed as man.

[19] Sirens and mermaids are creatures that—like a 'travesti'—possess a heterogeneous body, the former fish/human and the latter feminine/masculine.

[20] For a discussion of the intersection between transgender identification and Afro-Brazilian religions see Pablo Assumpção B. Costa's article "Divas Play and Queer Belonging in Brazil" (2014).

[21] It is noteworthy, within the context of this article and the current state of identity politics in Latin American and globally, that Jean Wyllys was reelected in the recent 2018 elections in Brazil as a congressman in the state of Rio de Janeiro, but in response to death threats to himself and his family, decided to not assume office and to flee the country.

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