

ANGEL LARTIGUE

# Science at the Club: putrefaction as an artistic medium

## ABSTRACT

Science at the Club explores the architecture of the nightclub space as a nucleus for queer testimony, relating it to a judiciary courtroom well. This performance challenges legal doctrines of forensic identification and the binary of life and death, by transforming biological and forensic material into ephemeral essences within the performance of the dance floor. Divided into case studies surrounding my performances at nightclubs, research courses taken in human remains recovery, and visits to various burial sites of South Texas. I pull from a variety of interdisciplinary studies relating to queer death theory, building on José Esteban Muñoz's notion of "disidentification" in relation to the human corpse, racial politics in science, and the biological arts in a nightclub context. Science at the Club creates a catalyst platform challenging racial and scientific histories of the body and land within the current U.S. political climate, while exploring questions of resurrection and disintegration with a focus on the language of forensics and identity.

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## KEYWORDS

Queer death studies, racial politics, biological arts, performance, forensic

## INTRODUCTION

This essay investigates my three nightclub performances from 2017 to 2019 based in Houston as case studies. The performances use the methods of DNA extraction, cultivation of microorganisms and archeological material, in a queer dance floor setting as a site of resistance and transformation that reimagines scientific and forensic data. I define my work as artistic-research, as this essay is not an academic analysis, but a reflection centered on art installations, performances, and their documentation that are linked to my personal experiences, memories, and institution-based studies. I begin by visiting various burial sites of south Texas, particularly forensic sites where migrant exhumations take place along the US/Mexico borderland. My investigations have led me to take training courses in human remains recovery as part of forensic anthropology, and these studies are implemented into my work. The text here pulls from various academic writings, such as forensic anthropologist Kate Spradley and Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate professor Kim Tallbear, in an attempt to weave an interdisciplinary approach to the US history of Eugenics and the ways racialized modes of identification are still being used in modern genetics and forensics. My performances use the dance floor as the core for experimentation to contest these disparate but interconnected ideas. The body and land are inextricably linked through the processes of human decomposition and ask the question: what does it mean to go back to the land? And how do our bodies return into other, non-human forms? I use José Esteban Muñoz's queer theoretical framework of disidentification to investigate alternate modes of identifying brown, black indigenous death and the land. I also explore language as an organic and decomposing material that resists and challenges notions of sterilization, conservation and identification towards marginalized bodies and objects. Through my nightclub performances I question the role of biological material as "forensic evidence" and how it is used to formulate and impose essentialist identity, even after death. I conclude by asking what it means to mourn our ancestors if the dead are not really *dead*? My work argues the continuation (or return) to living non-human or ahuman forms. This essay is an opportunity for me to flesh out and give a theoretical framework to my practice, with the aim of transforming our perception of the living and dead through performances of decay and resurrection.

## SOUTH TEXAS AND THE REANIMATION OF LAND

In 2018, following the loss of my grandfather, a working-class migrant from Mexico whose brother disappeared in an attempt to cross the US-Mexico border. I began exploring various burial sites of South Texas where forensic recovery operations were being conducted by anthropologists who exhumed the unidentified mass graves containing countless migrant bodies; those who have lost their lives in attempting to evade US border patrol checkpoints. Migrant bodies die on these private ranches in the harsh desert terrain of south Texas after hiking for days, sometimes without food or water. My interest in this wasn't necessarily an anguished decision to "find" my grandfather's brother, or to claim his "unidentified" body, but to find testimony within the landscape. There's a large corpus of literature and documentation already dedicated to the mortal reality migrants face on their journey traversing to the US – Mexico border. This text does not retell those narratives, but instead details what is most available to me: my body and the environmental terrain of South Texas. I visit the sites associated with the dead such as historic cemeteries and a shrine dedicated to the late 1800s curandero, Don Pedro Jaramillo. Known to locals, as "The Healer of Los Olmos" his burial place is located in the town of Falfurrias, Texas where inside candles are lit, but usually no one is in sight. Numerous notes and photographs that people leave behind are dedicated to their loved ones—some departed, some missing—compose this shrine. Also, part cemetery, marked graves date back to as early as 1800. And notably a short distance down the street is where the Brooks County immigration detention center is located, where migrants of all ages who are separated from their families are jailed, kept away from public view.



**Figure 1:** Angel Lartigue, *Reanimated Sarcophagus*, 2018, 6-foot clay sarcophagus mixed with sheep blood agar, dirt, mud, vulture feathers, roots, leaves, and other materials from various burial sites of South Texas.

In Falfurrias is also where Sacred Heart Cemetery is located. This is a forensic site of exhumation for migrant mass graves since 2013 where swarms of turkey vultures flock out of the trees as I walk nearby the burial sites and collect feathers, roots, mud and clay from the ground. I used these materials to construct the body of work *Reanimated Sarcophagus* (see fig.1), where a 6-foot sarcophagus made out of clay mixed with organic materials from these sites was shown in an open ventilated warehouse exhibition in Houston. The clay grew odor of fastidious bacteria over the course of this exhibition and blowflies invaded inside its four walls to lay eggs. *Reanimated Sarcophagus* transported the fabric of the South Texas terrain into the exhibition space, by which the souls of black and brown bodies have touched, absorbed, cycled through the fauna and flora, becoming borne witnesses.

Sarcophagi, derived from the Greek words, *lithos sarkophagos*, meaning "flesh-eating stone", were tombs often constructed by a particular limestone believed to have mineral properties that were associated with accelerating the processes of human decomposition by "consuming" the corpse. These were often adorned with eloquent carvings and ornaments made for an individual of high social status. In this piece,

the sarcophagus wasn't built to hold any particular body, but instead a "landscape entity" composed of twigs, earth, and animal parts that operate as incantatory murmurs of this silent genocide. This isn't necessarily an homage to the dead, as something distant and sensational, nor a static memorial or monument dedicated to the loss of migrant bodies, as instead I emphasize destigmatization through the active process and ephemeral nature of decay. At closing of this exhibition, the sarcophagus is dismembered entirely, reducing it back to fragments and dust.

### SUB SCIENTIST AND THE MORBID TREE

The first of my three nightclub performances, *Sub Scientist*, was performed in 2017. This performance was the first instance of my experimentation with a 5-minute DIY form of DNA extraction. I engaged with household items such as salt and water to mouth swish for cheek cells as saliva was taken from nightclub participants. Soap and alcohol were used to extract the DNA substance from participant's cells. The end result of this performance was a 1.5 mL centrifuge the participant was able to take home, which also contained my own extracted DNA substance; I kept theirs as a form of equal communal exchange.



**Figure 2** (left): Angel Lartigue, *The morbid tree (Eugenics)*, 2017, Clay and acrylic paint on canvas, Gspot Gallery Houston TX, Photo by Tere Garcia

**Figure 3** (right): Angel Lartigue, *Sub Scientist*, 2017, DNA extraction performed at Trust Me Daddy Vol. 3, The Space Houston TX, Photo by Tere Garcia

It is important to note that the conference which this essay is written for, *Taboo Transgression Transcendence in Art and Science 2020*, is a site of resistance. Conferences are influential events that shift human thought to create social change which in turn form into cultural programs, civic policies, political campaigns, and in this case scientific congresses. In my *Sub Scientist* performance I have incorporated an inverted image of the Eugenics tree logo (see fig. 2) used for the *Second International Eugenics Conference of 1921*, held at the Museum of Natural History in New York, this conference propelled the movement of U.S. Eugenics history and would inevitably inspire Germany's interest in the "science." 100 years later, TTT2020 is held as an online event hosted by the University of Applied Arts in Vienna Austria, a country historically known for its relationship to the world's most powerful proponent of genocidal racial cleansing. I have painted on canvas my own version of a morbid tree, with the banner of Eugenics lying on the ground, and text written backwards on a pile of fallen leaves. This prop was hung

against a wall during the performance and attached to clay rosary-like beads. These beads extended beyond the tree limbs of the canvas and locked onto my arms, legs, and neck as a choker. I also wear a facemask with the text *Sub Scientist* printed on it (see fig. 3), a sports bra, a jockstrap, and a frayed sleeveless lab coat refashioning an embodiment of a “sub-missive scientist” chained up a la BDSM, possessing my body as an agent to a scientific system.

DNA is used in contemporary culture as a forensic identity source within a variety of anthropological fields including the analysis of genetic “male or female” sex through the XX XY chromosome, alongside the biological profile<sup>i</sup> used to assess ancestry, stature, sex, and age in a set of human remains. In attempt to break-free from these categorizations I reuse the DNA extraction method to dissolve as much of the identity imposed on me by natural essentialism’s biological binary, so as to splinter myself from the bonds of institutional Science. José Esteban Muñoz conceives of a survivalist nature that is inhabited by queer trans people of color by way of their maneuvering and re-transcribing dominant cultural codes by *disidentifying* them (1999). As this pertains to my work, the processes of DNA extraction is engaged with not for medico-industry, or ancestral information, but *disidentified* through the context of a nightclub bodily exchange. I will be referencing Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*<sup>ii</sup> throughout this text, as the series of nightclub interventions utilized this framework as a main conceptual basis.

Sub Scientist is not in “awe” with the beauty of the DNA helix, or the editing of “genetic” material it contains, but instead is interested in disabling its hegemonic machinations through the use of performing the extraction method within queer trans spaces, particularly spaces created by minorities of color. Sub Scientist is an intervention at the nightclub, a space not exclusively black and brown, but a distortion of this space and a moment of resistance and transformation. DNA here departs from being DNA and is altered into an object of decay, as it is not cryogenically conserved for the purpose to extend its lifespan, therefore its genetic information becomes “lost” and disappears within the confines of DNA industrial consumption. Kim Tallbear writes extensively on the complications of the DNA dot com industry and its strategic racial modes of stabilizing and acquiring indigenous identity and property. “Native American DNA” as Tallbear describes, is a racial category developed through European colonial and US-based Eugenic practices:

In theory, key differences between indigenous and mainstream values about property, privacy, and identity should enjoy protection, given tribal rights to self-determination. But when challenged, enforcement of tribal sovereignty falls to mediation in state and federal courts, where it is adjudicated according to nontribal cultural conceptions, values, and law. (Tallbear 2013: 182)

Law, specifically the space known as the courtroom, becomes an operating room for the denotation of minorities of color and defining the subjugation of property and land. Genetic science and the biological profile become forensic devices that extract bodily materials for binary identification and land ownership. Traditional modes of tribal belonging such as blood become obsolete and determined as “mystical” or “folk” materiality in relation to modern genetic bodily material. This replacement of bodily identity source allows anthropologists and federal courts to strategically play out a game of power in regard to who can claim indigenous identity as it pertains to land possession.

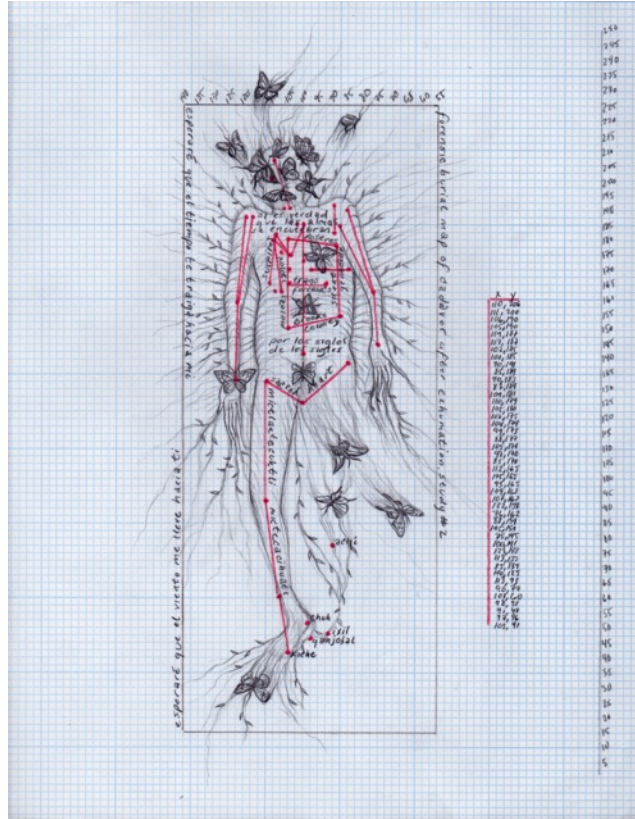
As a result of this jurisprudence imposed on bodily definition, violent rhetoric against trans individuals within the platforms of media outlets and internet spaces (due to its accessibility) is also where present-day debates of trans identity take place. DNA and the conception of the genetic XY XX chromosome as sex determination are a staple for biological essentialists, and an oppositional stance often taken by trans exclusionary radical feminists<sup>iii</sup> to invalidate trans (specifically trans women) and gender non-conforming existence. Biology becomes an online weapon for the purpose of reestablishing binary notions of the body to perpetuate transphobic politics. The performance of Sub Scientist allowed the possibility to change my body and the bodies of participants by splicing and exchanging the genetic material associated with biological essentialism. It redirects DNA extraction from the courtroom and medical office into brown and black turbulent space, where the sounds of experimental electronic, perreo, dance and shape-shifting hip hop reclaim its trajectory for queer body liberation.

## **OPERATION PSYCHOPOMP AND THE ROLE OF FORENSIC IDENTIFICATION**

During my trips to South Texas, I was particularly interested in the work of migrant exhumations by forensic anthropologists, specifically their methods and process. I decided to join their investigations as a student at the *body farm*<sup>iv</sup>, or formally known as FACTS, the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University. FACTS is a 26-acre research facility dedicated to forensic anthropology and is primarily used to study the processes of human decomposition on donated cadavers—notably mostly from white cis-men. These donated cadavers are conducted through a variety of forensic experiments, often laid out on their outdoor terrain and left to decompose and documented for the study of Science.

One of FACTS major operations, Operation Identification, or OpID, is the work of recovering unidentified migrant bodies on the U.S. side of U.S./Mexico border of South Texas. FACTS forensic anthropologist, Kate Spradley, founded OpID in 2013 after large exhumations of migrant bodies were recovered in Sacred Heart Cemetery in Falfurrias Brooks County, Texas. The bodies recovered are brought to the facility approximately 320 km from South Texas, here they are placed in 26-acre outdoor to further skeletonize, then the bones are catalogued and cleaned for further DNA analysis (2020). While undergoing skeletonization the bodies are placed in a specific area within the outdoor facility, away from the general studied cadavers. The environmental terrain is necessary for the skeletonization of human remains, one of the final stages of biological decomposition<sup>v</sup>, when the majority of all soft tissue has decayed and what remains are only bones.





**Figure 4** (left): Angel Lartigue, *Training in human remains recovery*, 2018, photo documentation. Courtesy of the Forensic Anthropology Center at Texas State University San Marcos.

**Figure 5** (right): Angel Lartigue, *Forensic burial map of cadaver after exhumation #2*, 2020, pencil on 8.5 x 11 graph paper.

My training courses included the study of these processes and the archeological method of exhuming human remains from the ground, identifying a burial site, excavating and burial mapping the human corpse (see fig. 4 & 5). It's a powerful event to witness a human body going through the processes of putrefaction, the thousands of larvae that colonize the flesh, the smells they omit and how you inhale them, and they linger inside your body; you can taste the odors through your nostrils as you eat during lunchtime. But what's most striking is how the bodies all share the land and depend on it as a prime tech medium. The land becomes an "underworld" stratum beneath the flesh where the body lays and disintegrates, absorbed by the land in a way akin to carrion.

As I walk on the terrain, through the 100 or so donated bodies decomposing, out of sight from anyone around, there lays the recovered migrant bodies from South Texas. They are kept inside a cage-like structure to prevent the scavenging of animals. Migrant cadavers are not freely studied and used for student experimentation like the donated cadavers, but instead solely for DNA analysis to identify them. There is a fetishization of the migrant body within the US political climate that is often overtaken by narratives of tragedy and grief. In dealing with the dead, or the *materiality* of the dead—which consists of the grotesque visibility of migrant corpses and their corporeal elements that transfer into the language of forensic identification—the work of forensic anthropologists is often considered humanitarian, due to the fact that they give identity to the nameless migrant cadavers as they process remains to be returned to their loved ones. But I am often skeptical of what is considered humanitarian aid within the U.S. narratives of race relations that conflates this aid with a savior complex narrative that is notably white. Science here becomes a tool of liberal progressives and necessary to extract bodily information on the basis of institutional forensic advancement. This perpetuates binary and racial modes of identification further, and inevitably reinforces the interests of US law enforcement and legal systems.

I must mention that this is not an anti-science essay dismissing the work of forensic anthropologists. My interest is in studying the *methods* used for body identification that are intrinsically tied to the U.S. history of racialized Science. One of the lectures presented to me at FACTS, as part of their curriculum, was going over forensic identification models of a human pelvis and how to determine a male or female biological sex. The human cadaver pelvis becomes a site of biological sex assignment, even after death. Bodies are still designated within a male or female binary spectrum in institutional forensic science (there was even an awkward silence when the anthropology professor, who's white, attempted to describe outdated racial models of human skulls in a room mostly of anthropology and law enforcement white students). The truth is these systems are not only used in forensic science, but in a variety of biological disciplines, as there doesn't exist a non-binary or non-biological essentialist model to identify gender at birth (or if we even need one to exist), much less forensic models to identify transgender and intersex human remains. The transformation of these models will not only change the racialized biological profile, ancestry, and sex in particular, but also how these elements are used in jurisprudence with black and brown bodies.

I want to expand on the definition of forensic I use throughout this text and my artistic research as an activity that can be used in context of the court of law. Anything can become a forensic material, such as objects, bodies, land, medicine, and language. Typically, this is what people define as "crime evidence," but I avoid this definition in relation to the crisis of migrant deaths in South Texas because it doesn't decenter the juridical systems in which and why it becomes evidence. *Forensis*, as rooted in Latin for, "before the forum", best describes the public presentation of the court space that evidently gives forensic material jurisprudence power. Kate Spradley mentions the lack of "humanitarian forensic action" to identify migrant remains due to poor county resources and scarce medical examiners in South Texas (2020). This has led to a massive number of improper burials without any effort in identifying migrant remains that are found on private ranches. She proposes a collaborative approach for the purpose of recovering and identifying migrant remains in South Texas. This approach involves actively working alongside complex systems of state and local humanitarian non-profits, county morgues, governmental agencies, authorities, both federal and foreign DNA databases, and various national and international forensic lead organizations and community volunteers. This also includes universities with forensic programs that allow students the opportunity to train in hands-on fieldwork—which in the case of South Texas allows the practice of forensic tools on the exhumation of brown and black migrant bodies in a "real life" situation—where students become an important gear to the advancement and future of jurisprudence power (2020). This web of collaboration, in all these social entities, accumulates to activate a juridical weight to the power of *forensis* as forensic information that is hard factual documentation used in the courtroom. The architecture of a courtroom can also take on many forms, as in the club space in my performances.

The nightclub transforms into a type of queer courtroom in my second club performance, *Operation Psychopomp*, a play on FACTS OpID (Operation Identification) where the word identification is replaced by psychopomp. *Psychopompós*, translated from Greek, meaning "guide of souls", are creatures typically in the form of an animal, sometimes with anthropomorphic characteristics, who escort deceased souls to an afterlife. I assembled a group of close family and friends, dressed them in hazmat suits, and transported burial site material into the nightclub. The burial site material consisted of the remnants of my previous piece, Reanimated Sarcophagus. These materials were stored in plastic buckets after being disassembled. Over time, the burial dirt and clay slabs stored in buckets grew more fungi and created a biome for cultivating blowfly larvae (*Sarcophaga bullata*). These buckets were carried into the venue and poured onto the dancefloor recreating a "forensic scene" at the club. The bacteria, fungi, vulture feathers, and maggots transition into psychopomps for the dead, as their material is usually *forensis*, or documented evidence, but is now inverted through this transportation into a ritualistic space where "facts" become obsolete. Identification of the dead becomes as in Munoz's term, *disidentified* and liberated within the space of this nightclub.



**Figure 6 & 7** (left to right): Angel Lartigue, *Operation Psychopomp*, 2018. Necro-garment, Xoloitzcuintli 'Matador', burial site material, maggots and pupae. Performed at Exhibition VII, The Dive Houston, Texas.

The team also handles a *Xōlōitzcuintli* (see fig. 6) Mexican hairless dog, replacing the typical forensic dog of the German shepherd. The Xoloitl dog is a Nahuatl psychopomp that guides the dead into the various strata of the underworld, or *Xinoapan*, the place of those without flesh. Within these levels the body gradually decomposes and loses all its material properties into the pure state of *tonalli*, or the soul (Fernández 1987). The dead, along with the land, become *disidentified corpses* through the guidance of the Xoloitl dog as opposed to institutional forensic data. Maggots and pupae are also thrown onto the dance floor in a climax of industrial pulsating beats (see fig. 7). Groups of spectators surround the psychopomp team as the discarded burial material is recovered back into buckets, leaving odors of moist earth in the space. This inversion of bringing forensics to the club that is often considered a “social” space (I’m pretty anti-social when it comes to club nightlife) is also a space for disguise and experimentation. The club creates a public sphere and experience that a formal institution or gallery cannot fashion—white girls screamed as they saw larvae tossed into the air, and white boys complained to the club door person of the stench inside—as brown and black folks gathered around the scene, they touch the clay and mud with their bare hands. Our proximity and familiarity with death is so prevalent in public spaces outside of the club, that for queer trans people of color a survivalist nature takes this form as a greater threshold of being with the processes of the dead.

The event of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando Florida 2016 has created an ambient of uncertainty for trans queer people of color in public spaces. We’ve developed ways of navigating danger as its confronted in our daily lives, and in the context of the club as a space meant to be safe, it has been transformed into a scene of queer death visibility. Upon seeing a team of people enter the dark atmosphere of the club in hazmat suits and headlight gear, one can’t avoid the instinctual questions, what is going on here? Where is the danger? Should I run out of the venue? *Operation Psychopomp* is a ritual for queer and trans survival by taking the powers associated with crime and transforming them on the



dance floor. Of course, many of the nightclub goers do not know the dirt and mud come from South Texas because there are no formal label descriptions on the materials used at the club. The dance floor is a political ground, a type of court well<sup>vi</sup> designed to hold queer testimony through this performance. The evidence are the burial sites, resurrecting not only the souls of South Texas, but also conjuring other brown and black forces into play.

## NECRO GARMENT AND THE CASE OF LINGUISTIC PUTREFACTION

Necrophilia, cannibalism, memorializing fetishism, surgical intrigue, the potentials of the dead body for desire and as a resource are without end and far exceed the pathologizing names psychology and anthropology have given them and the law allows.  
(MacCormack 2020: 164)

Operation Psychopomp included a sculptural garment made out of 104 Petri dishes, which are the nutrient medium used to cultivate bacteria and fungi by surface transfer, traditionally used by biologists, but also a staple image for BioArt<sup>vii</sup> since the 1990s. This particular piece is titled *Necro-garment* (see fig. 6) and consists of petri dishes cultivating microorganisms, bacteria, and fungi from the burial sites of my studies at FACTS. During the performance the garment is worn by friend and trans artist, Farrah Fang. She wears the garment as a strait dress instead of the Hazmat suit and is unable to escape the smell of the combined petri dishes. She also wears garden gloves used during my exhumation training at FACTS, a necklace made out of large clay beads mixed with burial dirt, black heels and a pink gas mask. It is important to note the gasses emitted by the Petri dishes are not toxic, though potentially repugnant to a nightclub goer. This became the reason for censorship in an upcoming group exhibition of mine.

This Necro-garment was later exhibited as documentation of the nightclub performance detailing the process of its composition, alongside large-scale burial map drawings I also made. These drawings are transposed from coordinate points taken during burial exhumation and redrawn on paper precisely, according to the actual centimeter measured (see fig. 5). The drawings emphasize a geographical map, blurring the land and body, marking corporeal limbs, animal scavengers, insects; even sky and roots through visual text imitate a constellation guide between these various worlds. The petri dishes also contain dead maggots and their exoskeletons, which were collected from fresh human cadavers as part of my entomology course at FACTS. The garden gloves I used during training, while excavating and touching a variety of human remains that were both skeletonized and in early stages of decomposition, were the main objects used to transfer the microorganisms into this petri dish nutrient.

I did not actively go into the body farm seeking a project, or to formally document it. As stated earlier, I was interested in learning their forensic methods as a student and in turn created these works with the remnants, or *remains of the remains*. The works do not use any human cadaver bones or flesh, but instead utilize the processes that break up that matter—bacteria and fungi. Forensic anthropologists describe this as the necrobiome<sup>viii</sup>. This makes the body farm a unique site—unlike the morgue where chemicals such as formaldehyde are used to preserve flesh and organs; it is avoided in my training because it kills the medium. The necro-garment is not an object of taxonomy but a living entity itself—I saved and took home the garden gloves, unwashed, and used the microorganisms living on their surface naked to the eye to cultivate them. The Necro-garment takes the components of the human cadaver and the land as prime mediums. The surface of the first underworld strata merges into the biome of necro-politics of the South Texas terrain.

What I've experienced as most challenging for the public is distinguishing the necro-garment from an actual human cadaver. As I mentioned earlier, the piece doesn't contain any human remains, but only the microorganisms that are involved in the processes of human decomposition. This creates an insecure relationship towards the piece, because in theory, the process can use the microorganisms of a living human and be constructed the same way. These microorganisms also exist inside living people—maybe not in the same volume as a human body going through putrefaction, but nonetheless it's the same material that inevitably consumes the body after death. My work argues that there is no distinction

between the corpse and a living person, or the human and non-human. The Necro-garment blurs the lines between the binary of life and death. This necro-garment was deemed hazardous and abruptly taken down, wrapped up and hidden away from the public during an exhibition. The language the gallery used for this censorship was later extended into the legalities of exhibiting remains of human cadavers. This generated a series of pushbacks for my work with local gallery spaces, art professionals, and scientists alike. It was not the actual materials of bacteria and fungi they were afraid of, but the way I describe the pieces. Biologically and politically, the fear is in the language.

My Necro-garment was censored not because of its stench but by linguistic fear, specifically its descriptive process of putrefaction and the transportation of human cadaver microorganisms. The gallery description reads: *Plated garment impregnated with human cadaver fungi, maggot exoskeletons and pupae*. If we look at language as an organic material that is also in a constant state of decomposition, death in this situation collapses language and creates reactions that only amplify the questions the work is designed to ask. I challenge the white gallery's intent to sterilize through the historical treatment of "contaminated" biological objects and "hazardous" bodies, specifically the bodies of brown, black, and indigenous peoples.

My work is brown in the sense that my trajectory to create is linked to the burial sites of South Texas, my experimentation with DNA extraction, studying the methods of migrant exhumation, their bacterial odors, carrion, maggots, clay and mud. These events create a web of living entities that I link through my work and what make its *forensis*—my proof of brown facts—and presented in the nightclub, my forum.

Their brownness can be known by tracking the way through which global and local forces constantly attempt to degrade their value and diminish their verve. But they are also brown insofar as they smolder with a life and persistence. (Muñoz 2020: 2)

## **SCIENCE AT THE CLUB, VENUE OF QUANTUM ARCHAEOLOGY**



**Figure 8** (left): Angel Lartigue, *6 Daggers* (featuring performer Farrah Fang), 2019, Ixtli pyramid made out of chicken wire, photo panel, a queen bee & six 3-d fabricated daggers. Performed at Be Careful, The Dive, Houston TX

**Figure 9** (right): Angel Lartigue, 3-d model from jade dagger (Monte Albán, Oaxaca), 2019, digital archive. Courtesy of private collection.

I conclude with my 2019 performance and the last of the nightclub interventions, *6 Daggers*. This is an architectural piece that involves the construction of a 4-sided pyramid-like structure with the ability to move within the nightclub space. The base of which was built using a plywood pallet with wheels attached for mobility, along with chicken wire to create the 4 façades of a cage cocoon structure. Inside the cage, *la devoradora*, the devourer, Farrah Fang performed and danced inside the pyramid as it was pulled into the venue (see fig. 8).

In this performance I was interested in looking at what is classified as “historical” or “archaeological” objects within the perspective of the nightclub. I borrowed a jade dagger that was part of a private collection from a family in Mexico and used this in the performance. Archaeological material like this dagger (originating from the region of Monte Albán, Oaxaca) is often seen as remnant of the past, without judiciary weight in the present. In contrast, modern institutional forensic materials have the potential to sway power within the court of law. What defines these categories is of special interest to me. I argue in this performance that the dagger is evidence that counters the agenda of white institutional power. Yet, one can’t simply recover and collect archaeological objects as evidence of black indigenous erasure and make a modern judiciary case with them. Many of these archaeological objects become inaccessible “artifacts” through ownership by history museums and institutional laws created by the state. In the performance the dagger has left the plexiglass cube of the museum and is placed into the hands of nightclub goers, touched and passed down from person to person as an object of ceremony and resuscitation. Prior to the performance, I laser scanned the dagger and 3-D replicated it into 6 identical copies (see fig. 9), these copies were handed to friends and nightclub spectators and were used to stab,

puncture and destroy the 4 panels of the pyramid during the performance. This is significant because the pyramid is named *Ixtli*, meaning eye, visage, or face in Nahuatl, and composed of images and faces of murdered trans women taken from online sources and applied upon the panels. This work shows how the souls of trans bodies are trapped within the gore images produced by the media, depicted solely as victims of violence. The dagger is used to pierce through the images, releasing their souls into the nightclub well.

As I've mentioned earlier, the nightclub spaces where I do these performances are not exclusively brown and black, or trans and queer. It is a mixed audience also comprised of curious hetero cis-men and women, along with white suburban kids wanting to experience something "different" in the city. This creates an aggressive environment for trans and gender non-conforming identifying artists who use the performance of drag while already deemed as "caricatures" to cis-gender people. How does a trans artist enact fiction and performance? How can a trans person hold space when their existence is excluded and invalidated from the very same people that share this space? 6 Daggers seeks to reclaim the performance of drag from its origin roots as a trans and gender non-conforming practice that was integral in cultivating and shaping it. Farrah Fang becomes her own performer, erotic dancer, actress and tribute. She knows why these people are here—they are not here for her. She is here for her own trial of survival—she wears a shredded, hand-ripped black dress and elbow satin gloves, a cow eye used for dissection as a third eye on her forehead, fishnet tights and leather boots. She navigates through the smoke of the fog machine, her entrance mesmerizing the straight people, gay queer boys, and girls that whistle and cheer. The *Ixtli* pyramid demands the space and energy to whomever her sight bestows itself upon. Crowds part an opening for the queen being pulled inside the floating carriage. Caged in, she is kept momentarily safe. This scenario mimics when a new queen bee is introduced to a hive colony. Worker bees smell her, touch her, inspect her and if not accepted, her own community kills her.

The mainstream LGBT community has historically erased trans people, particularly brown and black trans women of their foundational contributions to the movement, both in political rights and artistic spaces. Hostility continues to exist against trans women and gender non-conforming self-expression within the LGBT community, perpetuating the same transphobic violence that kills them. The performance ends when Farrah freely escapes the cage structure after spectators destroy it. She then devours a dying queen bee brought into the club that was kept inside a necklace capsule she wears. This action consumes her as if it took her remaining life energy. She slowly crawls onto the wood pallet, collapses and is dragged out of the venue by participants. In her words,

The ouroboros ritual commences,  
The queen bee is devoured & a new one is born. (Fang 2019)

After the performance, Fang publicly announces on social media her MtF transition and begins HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy). Though always identifying as a trans woman regardless of HRT, she states the performance changed her by relinquishing herself into a public manifestation. The performance of 6 Daggers warps the ambience of the dance floor into an architectural obelisk, a ceremonial rite that summons our *transcestors* of past and future into current corporeal possessions. Physical resurrection of the dead, as Russian cosmist and philosopher Nikolai Fedorov<sup>ix</sup> suggests, will inevitably be accomplished through the progression of technological Science.

In the context of achieving a repression-free utopian society, resurrecting our ancestors who experienced death through oppression, or everyone else who did *not choose* to die, needs to be brought back to life and given the opportunity to *choose* to die. It is our duty and relief of guilt to have the dead come back and enjoy our greatest futurity; accordingly, it is due to our past we accomplish or advance to a more justice society (Sofronov 2020). We cannot leave our dead behind! We cannot allow their deaths to be dehumanized and solely necro-memorialized. This introduces the question of grief and what it means to mourn the loss of migrant bodies and trans victims. Are we supposed to find ways to resurrect them instead of being in a constant state of mourning? Is it resurrection by cultivating bacteria and fungi from burial sites and human cadavers?



There is an interesting term that relates to Fedorov's scientific resurrection: *quantum archaeology*. If the purpose of archaeology were to excavate objects and information from the past, then the science of quantum mechanics and the control of atoms and subatomic particles through quantum archaeology would be the ultimate form of all archaeology. Through this quantum formula it is impossible to achieve resurrection without disappearance, and vice-versa. Disappearance surpasses death in the sense death has an appearance. You know when the body dies, but with the disappearance of a body, death is no longer included or dependent on it. Modern forensics relies not on the dead but ultimately on the disappeared or *absence of bodies* and resurrection is the reemergence of bodies. Thus, quantum archaeology also blurs the binary of life and death—is my dead grandfather *really dead*? His brother eternally vanished? Or just out of temporary existence, a type of forced exile—as a product of racial violence and oppression. Will this liberate us from all forms of grief? The processes of decomposition demonstrate how the body isn't necessarily lost, but comes back from the land into non-human, living sculptures of putrefaction.

The performance nightclub becomes a site of reanimated archaeology and at the same time the disintegration/disidentification of the anthropology/centric identity. A stratum built where our ancestors are able to astro-traverse all layers and forms of science, as celestial and microbial, and able to justify for their own (re) existence. Science at the club is an excavation of ancient and present crime scenes, where the judicial reimaginings of queer hearings takes place. Bystanders and eyewitnesses dance around in bodily exchange, ominous odors and voices become rhythms and sounds, and our declarations become the eyes of truth within the parameters of the dance floor.

## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> The biological profile is used in anthropology to determine and identify a variety of physical assets including but not limited to the human cadaver & DNA relating to ancestry, sex, stature and age. My work specifically responds on the identification of sex and ancestry through the anthropological analysis of the human pelvis (binary spectrum of male or female identification) and human skull (through the four racial categories of Native American, Asian, African, and Caucasian).

<sup>ii</sup> I use José Esteban Muñoz's theoretical approach to disidentification taken from his *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, and expand on the notion of forensic identification of the black and brown body and corpse, as *disidentified corpses*, within the context of my nightclub performances.

<sup>iii</sup> Trans exclusionary radical feminism, or abbreviated as TERF, originated through online platforms to refer to feminists who exclude the voices of transgender women within feminism.

<sup>iv</sup> Body farm is a colloquial term used for an outdoor research facility where human decomposition is studied through donated cadavers, mostly for the purpose of forensic anthropology. The world's largest body farm is FACTS, one of the two body farms located in Texas.

<sup>v</sup> Decomposition and putrefaction are two of the biological stages after death, including pallor mortis, algor mortis, rigor mortis, livor mortis, skeletonization and fossilization. Decomposition includes sub microbial stages like butyric fermentation and natural mummification. I use the terms decomposition and putrefaction interchangeably throughout the text to refer as the process medium used in my works.

<sup>vi</sup> The well is part of the architecture of the courtroom and is located in the center between the bench and counsel tables. This space is usually a "forbidden" space to traverse without permission, especially during a trial. This is of importance throughout the text and I use its peripheries to refer to the dance floor, as another spacial form of hearings in the context of the nightclub.

<sup>vii</sup> BioArt is an artistic practice that involves working with biological systems and life processes. The term was coined by artist Eduardo Kac in 1997 and since then has been used to refer to projects involving "living matter" as an artistic medium, usually through the use of biotechnology and laboratories. Some notable artists and art collectives indirectly associated with the movement are the *Tissue Culture and Art Project* founded by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr.

<sup>viii</sup> The necrobiome refers to the species, like microbial (bacteria and fungi) and entomological (insects), that are involved in the decay processes of cadavers. The study of the necrobiome is used to determine the post-mortem interval (PMI), or time since death within a forensic anthropology application. I use this term to refer to a more detail process on decomposition and putrefaction, to reveal more of the ecological facets, the land, scavengers and atmosphere, from which the body is absorbed into.

<sup>ix</sup> Nikolai Fedorov is often referred to as a precursor to posthumanism particularly transhumanism, in the ways he advocated through his "anti-death" philosophy of resurrection. My work is sculpted with the processes of putrefaction and extends beyond resurrection as a method for blurring the binary of life and death entirely, by embracing death, or the *materiality of death*.

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