

Mangos with Chili:

Life-Sustaining Performance Art for and by Queer and Transgender People of Color

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Abstract

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By examining the Bay Area-based arts organization Mangos with Chili, this research explores how performance and storytelling can aid the survival of queer and transgender people of color. Interviews with Mangos co-founders, artists, and audience members revealed that the cabarets staged by Mangos with Chili helped queer and transgender people of color build community, gave them an opportunity to see their experiences reflected and validated, and offered them hope and inspiration, all of which helped to reduce the isolation they face in the outside world. Mangos allows queer and transgender people of color an opportunity to see themselves as part of the world, and as having a livable place in it, which in turn helps them to survive.

Keywords: Mangos with Chili, queer, transgender, people of color, performance, art, survival

Introduction:

For a person who has no place, no presence, no legitimate space, whose presence has been denied, erased, and silenced, taking up space, literally on stage or in an imagined space--is important. It is a form of validation.

-Michelle Habell-Pallán, "The Politics of Representation"

We need to see and hear our stories on stage to not feel crazy, disempowered and alone. We need to see reflections of our lives. We need to be witnessed, and witness. We need art that documents and illuminates our realities. So we don't disappear. So there is a record. So we know we exist. We deserve this.

-Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, Mangos with Chili co-founder

For people marginalized within American society, performance art can be a crucial way to claim space and visibility. Mangos with Chili (Mangos) is a queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) cabaret who describe themselves as a "[San Francisco] Bay Area-based arts organization committed to showcasing high quality work of life-saving importance by queer and trans artists of color." Queer and transgender people of color in the Bay have called Mangos "a staple in the community," but does it actually save lives? Using Mangos as a case study, this research explores how performance art can create spaces that bring queer and transgender people of color together and how this aids community survival.

In conversations with Mangos artists and audience members they stated almost unanimously that attending Mangos performances helped them know they "weren't alone" in the challenges they faced as queer and transgender people of color. This feeling of aloneness, or social isolation, has been identified by several mental health studies as a risk factor for queer and transgender suicide. Therefore, I suggest that by reducing social isolation, Mangos contributes to the health and healing of queer and transgender communities of color, and may help reduce the risk of suicide within these communities.

Terminology:

For the purposes of this discussion, the term **queer** is being used to describe people who identify as having a “non-normative” sexuality which often, but not always, includes some form of same-sex or same-gender desire¹. This includes, but is not limited to gays, lesbians and bisexuals. The term **transgender (or trans)** here is used to describe people who were assigned a biological sex at birth which is not consistent with the way they perceive their own gender. This includes, but is not limited to, female-to-male and male-to-female transgender individuals as well as genderqueers and others who do not identify as exclusively male or female². **Cisgender** refers to people whose assigned sex aligns with their gender identity, in other words, people who are not transgender. **People of color** is an umbrella term used to refer to people who do not identify as white, including but not limited to Black/Diasporic African, Asian, Latino, Indigenous, Middle Eastern and mixed-race people who identify with the term.

A Brief History of the Organization

The ultimate expression of independence for a minority audience struggling to free itself from the dominant culture’s hegemony is to become the creators and not merely the consumers of media channels. – Larry Gross, “Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media.”

We don’t get the big spaces unless we’re tokenized, so let’s create our own spaces. Got to dream big, right? –Manish, Mangos artist

In 2006, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Cherry Galette founded Mangos with Chili, a Bay Area-based arts organization which curates queer and transgender people of color cabarets featuring spoken word, burlesque, poetry, drag, and other forms of performance in the San Francisco Bay Area and across the country. Leah, a queer woman of color who had been living in Toronto and writing and performing for several years, was growing more and more

¹ For more on the difference between sex and gender, see, for example, Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl*.

² For more on the gender binary, see, for example, Kate Bornstein’s *Gender Outlaw*.

frustrated with the lack of supportive spaces for queer and transgender artists of color to share their work. She found the available queer performance venues to be almost exclusively white and the performance spaces for people of color to be very heteronormative. Watching white queer performers of her generation go on to gain careers through queer cultural institutions such as Sister Spit and Homo-A-Gogo, while queer and transgender performers of color of the same generation stopped performing because of the limited opportunities available to them exacerbated her frustration. Regarding why Leah was inspired to start a queer and transgender people of color performance group, she said,

I wanted to stop resenting the way things were and create the project of my dreams with my peers. I wanted spaces where queer of color artists were at the center; a big, curated show where we were paid well for our art, and thus had motivation to work hard on the work, where the emphasis was on high quality performance... I wanted to create a place where folks could build with each other and have a place to grow and develop as artists.

In 2004, she started *Browngirlworld*, a performance night in Toronto focusing on queer artists of color. After starting out as a monthly series, it eventually became a twice-a-year curated event bringing together US and Canadian queer and feminist artists of color followed by a dance party (personal communication, 2010).

As Leah published, performed and toured throughout the US and Canada, she built an informal network of queer of color performers, using social networking tools online to maintain these relationships from abroad. During this time she came across the blog of queer performer of color, Cherry Galette, with whom she quickly developed a close friendship online. Cherry was planning to move to the Bay and dreaming of a floating queer of color cabaret. In 2006, the two finally met, and drew on their existing network of queer and transgender artists of color to form *Mangos with Chili*. *Mangos* began as a ten day tour and eventually grew to include several regional tours throughout the United States, as well as annual shows in the Bay area. Through

Leah and Cherry's hard work networking, curation, and touring, over the years they were able to establish Mangos as a queer and transgender people of color cultural institution.

Literature Review:

A (Very) Brief History of Representation of People of Color and Queer People in the US:

My favorite thing about [Mangos] is that it never feels cliché. There are so many queer narratives that I've seen like 800 times in mainstream media. Mangos never feels like it has anything to do with that. –Jack, Mangos audience member

While Mangos may have evolved from a need felt by queer and transgender performers of color for a supportive place to showcase their art, it also filled a need of broader queer and transgender communities of color to see their experiences reflected on stage. To understand why, it is useful to consider Mangos in the context of historical legacies of representation of queer and transgender people of color in the mainstream media.

Beginning in the early 1800s, blackface minstrelsy was both one of the earliest forms of American popular entertainment, and it showcased some of the first representations of people of color in American popular culture. Originally, blackface minstrel shows featured white men performing stereotypes of Black people that portrayed Blacks as content to be slaves and requiring the paternal guidance of benevolent white slave masters (Byrd 2009, 80; Toll 1974, 119). By the 1850s, blackface minstrelsy served as a means through which Black performers entered American “show business” (Toll 1974, 195). At the time, catering to white tastes in entertainment that upheld white supremacist ideas was one of limited options Black performers had to make careers for themselves (Toll 1974, 51, 196).

While racism in entertainment often takes on more subtle forms today, many media channels still cater to the tastes of heterosexual white consumers, which limits the depth and

breadth of representations of marginalized people such as queer people, transgender people, and people of color (Gross 1995, 62; Gray 2001, 440; Becker 2004, 395). While it is outside of the scope of this thesis to detail the many ways different groups of people of color have been marginalized in the mainstream media over time, one of the overarching themes characterizing the history of these representations is the prevalence of racial and ethnic stereotypes which support and sustain dominant ideologies about people of color.³ The marginal status of characters of color in television and on film often leaves them flat and under-developed.

Similarly, gay and lesbian characters are still often relegated to easily recognizable stereotypes and given marginal roles on TV and in film with little room the kind of character development which would make them more realistic and relatable for audiences (Gross 1995, 63; Collins 2004, 171-3). Even in reality TV shows where gays (at least theoretically) are not acting, they are often still depicted in stereotypical fashions. This can be seen in the case of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, one of the first successful gay TV shows, where five gay men, through their shopping, style and "culture" expertise help fashion-impaired heterosexual men in their quests for love (Muñoz 2005, Papacharissi and Fernback 2008, 351).

Lesbian and gay-themed TV shows like *Queer Eye*, *The L Word* and *Queer as Folk* suffer from a lack of racial diversity in their casts⁴, leaving queer audience members of color few representations of their community they can identify with (GLAAD 2010, 4-5; Skeggs et al. 1847, 2004). Even fewer shows include regular transgender characters, especially transgender characters of color⁵.

³ For more on this see, for example, Marlon Riggs' "Black Macho Revisited"

⁴ *Noah's Ark*, a TV show specifically about gay Black men, is one notable exception. *True Blood* and *The Wire* on HBO also feature important queer characters of color in supporting roles.

⁵ Exceptions include *TransFORM Me*, a reality TV show much like *Queer Eye*, but featuring transgender women giving cisgender women makeovers, and *Transgeneration*, a documentary series about the lives of four transgender college students.

In the context of these limited, flat depictions of queer and transgender people of color's lives on TV and in film, it is not surprising that queer and transgender people of color who know about Mangos have sought them out as an alternative. By offering diverse and complex representations of queer and transgender people of color's lives, Mangos allows queer and transgender people of color to see themselves reflected in the world and, as my research shows, enables them to feel a part of it, even if they don't look like the gays on TV.

The Role of Performance:

If queer and transgender people of color's experiences and communities are to survive and thrive, we must continue to tell our stories as often as possible in groups as small as two and as large as a filled auditorium. Live performance is particularly important because it offers a collective experience that reconnects us to the most traditional forms of storytelling. It brings us together in one space to create a historical moment together. -Nico Dacumos, Mangos artist

Live performance art varies from media such as film and television in a number of important ways. Perhaps most important is the way live performance gives performers the opportunity to witness the audiences' response to his/her/hir⁶ performance and to respond to it, creating a dialogue between performer and audience not possible with forms of media such as films and television. Also, unlike films and television, live performance requires you to share a space with all the other people who are witnessing the performance, and thus creates a temporary community. The forming of this temporary community offers the potential for a more permanent one by allowing audience members make connections with each other before, during, and after the performance. These temporary communities can serve a particularly important function for queer people, who often experience social isolation, by bringing them together.

⁶ "Hir" is a gender-neutral pronoun some transgender, genderqueer and gender non-conforming people prefer. "They" is another.

The Importance of Queer and Transgender People of Color-Centered Space

Space is citizenship, the lack of queer space within the “public” sphere signifies an erasure, not only of queer representation and narrative, but queer experiences and memories themselves. – Leia Penina Wilson, “Negotiating the Panopticon”

Building on the work of scholars of queer space, queer of color performance and queer of color performance space, I make a case for the cultural, psychological and social significance of Mangos with Chili. I will begin by reviewing scholarship on queer space in order to explain why Mangos serves an important function by creating spaces where queer and transgender people of color can experience belonging.

Being queer or transgender in public space is characterized by the persistent threat of violence (Steinbugler 2005, Doan 2007) and thus queer and transgender people often self-police in public in order to protect themselves from this threat (Steinbugler 2005). One of the important reasons for the creation of spaces specifically for queer and transgender people is because of the threat of violence they face in the public sphere (and sometimes in the home). Spaces created for queer and transgender people ideally offer them a much-needed respite from both the threat of violence and the need to self-police.

Unfortunately, the queer-centered spaces which do exist, such as gay bars, gay pride parades, and gay neighborhoods like San Francisco’s Castro District are often predominantly populated by upper-class white gay men (Nero 2005).⁷ In addition to the kinds of policing and surveillance people of color often experience in public, many also often face tokenism, racial fetishism and even blackface drag performances in queer spaces (Roy 1998, Strausbaugh 2006).

Geographer Petra Doan found that some queer spaces such as gay neighborhoods often prize gender conformity, citing window displays in the Castro as one example (Doan 2007, 62).

⁷ For more on gay racism and gentrification see Charles Nero’s “Why Are the Gay Ghettoes White?” or Marlon Riggs’ “Tongues Untied.”

Other queer spaces, such as the Michigan Women's Music Festival, have explicitly trans-exclusive policies (Doan 2007, 63). By valorizing gender conformity and creating single-sex environments where biology, rather than gender identity, is used to determine who is male and who is female, queer (or gay/lesbian) spaces can often be unwelcoming to transgender people.

Additionally, gay and queer spaces designed around the wants and needs of the most privileged members of the gay community may also be socially, physically and economically inaccessible for working-class queers and trans people, as well as queer and trans people with disabilities⁸. Keeping this in mind, Mangos co-founders sought out wheelchair accessible venues, asked audience members not to wear scents so that people with chemical sensitivities can enjoy the show, and offer sliding scale admission at all of their shows (no one is turned down for lack of funds).

By inviting queer and transgender people of color the opportunity to access an affordable, accessible space populated mostly by other queer and transgender people of color, Mangos offers people often marginalized within the queer broader community a space to call their own. While the spaces Mangos creates may only last for the duration of the show, they offer queer and transgender people of color a brief respite from the exclusion and hostility they face in the outside world.

Queer of Color Performance

The importance of what Mangos does lies not only the accessible QTPOC spaces they create, but also in the kind of work showcased in those spaces. José Muñoz is one theorist exploring the transformative and political potential of queer of color performance. His 1999 text,

⁸ For more on this see *The Sexual Citizen* by Jon Binnie and David Bell

Disidentifications is one of very few books dedicated entirely to the politics of queer of color performance and provides an important foundation for this study. His description of Marga Gomez's performance, *Marga Gomez is Pretty Witty and Gay* helps establish some of the important functions queer of color performance serves for queer people of color audiences,

“[Marga’s] performance permits the spectator, often a queer who has been locked out of the halls of representation or rendered a static caricature there, to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity. The importance of such public and semipublic enactments of the hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere. Spectacles such as those Gomez presents offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency (Muñoz 1999, 1).

Muñoz argues that in a world where queer people are often misrepresented (“rendered static caricatures”) or not represented at all (“locked out of the halls of representation,”) it is crucial for them to have the opportunity to create and access other representations of themselves, ones which represent the fullness and complexity of queer lives. The stage is one of few places such opportunities exist. He articulates queer performance as creating a counterpublic, a public sphere created by those marginalized within the “public” spheres of the dominant culture. From the relative safety of these counterpublics, marginalized subjects have space to create and validate knowledge which may resist dominant ideologies that construct people of color as inferior and queer and transgender people as deviant (“thus contesting the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere”). This allows queer people of color (“minoritarian subjects”) an opportunity to see themselves not as anomalies, but as people who have a past and a future (“to situate [them]selves in history.”) Being able to put their experiences into a broader historical context enables them to better understand the oppression they face is real and that they are not alone in these experiences. This knowledge gives them a place from which to go about making

change (or “seiz[ing] social agency”), knowing that the need for such change is real and necessary.

Queer of color performance space

Both queer of color performance and the "queer spaces" where we gather to see them are equally important in the creating the kinds of experiences that I theorize serve as life-sustaining sources of support for queer and transgender people of color. One scholar examining both queer space and queer of color performance in the context of each other is Horatio N. Roque Ramírez.

Ramírez's study of Pan Dulce, a queer Latino dance night which used to take place in San Francisco, provides another important foundation for this research. He argues the queer of color dance and performance space Pan Dulce served to help create a sense of belonging to a community (which he calls “cultural citizenship,”) for its queer Latino patrons. He offers cultural citizenship as an alternative to notions of citizenship based on shared belonging to a nation-state. This alternative is useful because as marginalized subjects, queer people and people of color often don't feel the same sense of belonging to the nation that more privileged subjects might enjoy. Additionally, they may not want to “belong” to a nation-state whose government actively perpetuates violence against their communities through its policing of people of color, queer and transgender bodies, which, as a result, are disproportionately incarcerated in the United States⁹. Ramírez argues this queer Latino cultural citizenship contributed to community survival by affirming identities that resist hegemonic whiteness and heterosexuality, saying,

“The queer sonic *latinaje* of Negron's Pan Dulce was precisely one of these forms of resistance to [cultural] domination... Pan Dulce produced cultural affirmations and resistance both to heteronormative and whitening practices in the City by the Bay.” (Ramírez 2007, 304)

⁹ For more on this see Beth Richie's “Queering Anti-Prison Work” or the film “Cruel and Unusual” directed by Janet Baus et al.

He argues here that the sense of belonging based on a shared identity that Pan Dulce offered its queer Latino community, gave them an opportunity to exist and belong without needing the approval or legitimacy granted through recognition by the dominant (white, heterosexual) culture. It did this by offering cultural affirmations in the form of music and dance, which by virtue of the Latino nature of the music and the way patrons subverted the heterosexism of traditional Latino dance, resisted pressures to assimilate that patrons might experience elsewhere in their lives.

Like Pan Dulce, Mangos with Chili also offers a sense of belonging based on shared identity. As conversations with Mangos artists and audience members reflect, Mangos with Chili helps queer and transgender people of color survive the racism, homophobia and transphobia of the outside world by creating a space in which they can experience a sense of belonging.

Methods and Methodology:

The following findings are based on content analysis of several open-ended, semi-structured interviews with queer and transgender people involved with Mangos with Chili as co-founders, performers and audience members. Participants included one of Mangos with Chili's co-founders, four Mangos-featured artists (not including the co-founder, who also performs), and six people who have attended Mangos shows as audience members. Additionally, I interviewed Dr. Trinity Ordonez who teaches a class on queer of color cultural production at City College of San Francisco. Though the sample was diverse in regards to participants' race and ethnicity, one of the limitations of the study is that only one of the artists I interviewed (the co-founder) was female-identified and only one of the audience members I interviewed was exclusively male-

identified, (another described himself as “bi-gender”). Additionally, though my participants were split almost evenly between cisgender and transgender-identified, my participants did not include any transgender women.

Participant Demographics:

Though race and gender are socially constructed categories, they play a large role in how these participants construct their own identities and experience the world. For this reason, and to reflect the diversity of the participant pool, race and gender have been included in the demographic information below. All participants in this study identified as queer, gay or same-gender-loving and were between the ages of 20 and 35 when the interviews took place between September and December in 2010.

	Name	Type	Gender 1	Gender 2	Race	Ethnicity
1	Manish	Performer	Cisgender	Male	Asian	South Asian Indian
2	Amir	Performer	Transgender		Mixed/Arab	Syrian, Lebanese and White
3	Yosimar	Performer		Two-spirit	Latino	Mexicano
4	Nico	Performer	Transgender	Male	Mixed	Filipino-Chicano
5	Leo	Audience	Transgender		Mixed/Mestizo	Native, Mexican and Irish
6	Jack	Audience	Transgender	Male	White	
7	Soledad	Audience	Cisgender	Female-bodied with tomboy tendencies	Latina	Guatemalan-Salvadorian
8	Alana	Audience	Cisgender	Femme	Black	
9	Junsu	Audience		Genderqueer	Asian	Korean
10	Shana	Audience	Cisgender	Female	Black	
11	Leah	Cofounder	Cisgender	Femme Woman	Mixed	Sri-Lankan

Findings:

Mangos with Chili helps let queer and transgender people of color know that they are not alone in several ways. First, by coming to see a Mangos performance, queer and transgender people of color have the opportunity to be in a room full of people “like them,” sometimes for

the first time in their lives. Second, Mangos offers representations of queer and transgender people of color's lives with which they can identify, giving them an opportunity to see themselves as part of the world. Additionally, seeing and hearing experiences like their own reflected on stage validates queer and trans people of color audiences by showing them that other people are struggling with the same issues. This helps them understand the oppression they face is real, that they are not alone and that they are not crazy. Lastly, Mangos performances give their audiences hope that it is possible to overcome the obstacles they face, by showcasing the resilience of other queer and transgender people of color who have struggled with the same challenges and survived.

Community:

We need one another, we need to connect, to talk story, to share those painful parts, those beautiful parts, those sexy parts, those rage-filled parts. We need to hold them and name them *in the presence of others who know them* and sit with our whole selves and live that, love that. –Junsu, audience member

Mangos with Chili reduces social isolation by helping queer and transgender people of color building community. By bringing queer and transgender people of color into a shared physical space, Mangos makes it easier for them to meet and build relationships with one another. This allows queer and transgender people of color to see who else is part of their community and how many people are part of it.

Participants described this as an important aspect of the Mangos experience. For at least one participant, going to a Mangos show was the first opportunity they had to be among other queer and transgender people of color. Junsu, who identifies as Korean and genderqueer, explained their excitement at going to their first Mangos show by saying,

“After, my head was just spinning, so full. I wanted to be near [the artists]. Talk to them, or just be like, ‘WOW! Queer people of color talking about real shit!’ I went to the local bar where I knew they’d be. I just spent the rest of the night with

them. I was totally lost but just needed to be close to their energy, their beauty. I felt real goofy after but I understand the significance now. *I'd just never been with queer people of color before.* I had always compartmentalized myself. Cut myself apart. But then...that changed. They changed everything.” (emphasis added)

Being with other queer people of color enabled Junsu to experience a sense of belonging as a queer that they had never experienced before. Additionally, this first-time experience of belonging both as a queer person and a person of color allowed them to stop thinking of these aspects of their identities as separate and be able to see themselves as whole.

The ability to feel accepted in both their queer and racial/ethnic identity was a theme echoed by several participants as a positive and rare experience gained by attending Mangos shows. For example, Shana, who identifies as black, queer and female described Mangos as a place where she feels able to be her full self, saying,

“I feel when I go to a show like Mangos, all parts of myself are held, and that’s a rare state for us, I think, as queer people of color, as trans people of color, so in that way I’m impacted because I feel I’m not alone and... *there’s so many parts of myself that I think I close off every day depending on what space I’m in,* but when I go to a Mangos show I have this opportunity to be fully held.”

Like Junsu, Shana describes Mangos as a place where she doesn’t have to compartmentalize herself, and feels fully accepted or “held” in both the Black and queer of these aspects of her identity. It is noteworthy that she describes this experience as rare. Many participants described this feeling of full acceptance and belonging as something they experience few other places besides Mangos.

For example, Alana, who identifies as a queer Black femme, described the experience of having the opportunity to be in a room with so many other queer people of color as “a relief,” saying,

To see *my people*, it’s like, ‘Oh, here you are! I’ve been looking all over for you. Why didn’t you tell me sooner I could just come here and see you? Good to see everyone!’ It was a relief. It really was. (emphasis added)

As the first part of her quote demonstrates, Mangos has helped some queer and transgender people of color find others like them, helping to reduce their social isolation. The second part speaks to both the existence of this social isolation and the longing for community that it spurs. The fact that participants described finding community with other queer and transgender people of color through Mangos as something they've "never experienced before," "a rare opportunity," and "a relief," suggests that Mangos is filling an important in this way.

Though just being in a room with others "like them" seems to be enough to create a sense of community for some, many of those who come together to see these performances also form and build relationships with each other, varying from professional to social to romantic in nature. Though some people who come to see Mangos performances already know each other, Mangos often brings together somewhat disparate parts of broader queer and transgender people of color communities. Commenting on this, Alana explained,

[At Mangos] you meet so many people that you're amazed you didn't know before and it just always builds so many more connections...going to Mangos gave me another opportunity to build [relationships] with specific people that I maybe wouldn't have as deeply otherwise.

Mangos has provided audience members both with the chance to form new relationships and also the opportunity to deepen existing ones. This sense of community is strengthened when run into these new friends, colleagues and potential love interests out in the world or at future Mangos shows, and decreases our isolation.

Representation:

[Mangos] was world-building. It was making the rest of the world and filling in all those spaces that get left out or they get silenced or they get hidden under makeup and 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' and skin lightening cream and all that shit; not white, not straight, not vanilla, not conservative. –Leo, audience member

A number of participants commented on the significance of Mangos showcasing representations of queer and transgender people lives that are racially diverse and represent the complexity of queer and transgender lives. They described Mangos as offering an alternative to mainstream media representations, which they characterized as limited and predominantly white. For example, Alana commented,

I think there's not enough visibility of queer community and experiences and histories and realities of queer people of all sorts... a lot of the visibility around queer is white, skinny, hipster and that's not what queer is, that's not what I am... It's really important for young, brown queer people who... don't look like the messages of what queer looks like that they've been fed from *The L Word*. What those images look like ...that's not them and they're never going to be that and they shouldn't want to, but if that's the only example they have, it can be very discouraging.

Alana notes that media representations that portray queerness as exclusively the domain of "skinny" white people can be discouraging for queer people of color who cannot identify with the images and representations of queerness available to them. This might contribute to the social isolation many of my participants referenced when they said Mangos helped them realize they were not the "only" person who identified the way they did and struggled with the challenges they faced.

Leo, who identifies as a queer, transgender and mestizo (mixed-race Mexican, Irish and Native), compared a specific Mangos performance with a specific popular gay television program to describe the difference between mainstream representations of queerness and those offered at Mangos with Chili. Speaking of the Mangos performance, Leo said,

[At Mangos] one gay male did a piece about kissing, and he [demonstrated on] a Mister Potatohead... It was cute and it was funny. Where else are you going to see that in popular culture? It was positive and light-hearted. I feel like this huge piece that's missing from our major conceptualization of what sexuality is, or

what love is, of what gayness is, especially gay males, what gay men are all about...”

Comparing this performance to representations of gay male sexuality on the television show

Queer as Folk, Leo said,

[Mainstream representations of] gay male sexuality [are] white guys having [anal sex] and for the most part conforming to our sexist ideas of what heterosexuality is about; submissive younger white partners with older colder more reserved breadwinner types. [Referencing an example of this kind of representation he saw on “Queer as Folk,”] It was just really harsh and really sad, [but] seeing this young, but obviously viciously intelligent East Indian guy like pretend to make out with this Mister Potatohead, that’s awesome. If I was a 14 year old gay boy... It’s like, ‘Why don’t you find a guy who’s really cute and why don’t you kiss him and he can kiss you?’ That would be awesome. I feel like that’s missing and it’s so important that’s represented and supported, in whole society, but if you’re going to do it in art, I’m about that too.

Leo suggests that not only are mainstream representations of male sexuality generally white, but they also often depict an overly simplified and somewhat depressing version of gay male sexuality. Leo identifies an additional lack of representations of positive portrayals of gay male sexuality that might have a more positive impact on a young gay man struggling to understand his identity.

Mangos serves as a particularly important vehicle for diverse and complex representation of queer and transgender people of color’s lives. As the next section will show, this is partly because their stories have historically been suppressed and invalidated.

In/validation

In a heteronormative history our stories have never been validated, but we have been here since the beginning of time. It is crucial that we document these narratives because we are present and continue to fight against the powers that try to erase our lineage. For me queer performances are a form of defiance against the opposition, the ignorance and phobias that continue to attack our communities... As poets, dancers, artist, revolutionaries we wake up every day to this battle against ignorance. From the destructive cycles of imperialism in our homelands to

the continual colonization of our minds it is our life mission to not get trapped in the conformity these oppressive systems offer. This is what it means to be Queer/Trans of Color, to be a Freedom Fighter. – Yosimar, Mangos featured poet

One of the most prevalent themes appearing in conversations with Mangos artists was the experience of being silenced and invalidated when they had previously attempted to tell their stories. This suggests that queer of color stories are not only hard to access because of lack of QTPOC access to mainstream media channels, but because these stories are actively suppressed. For example, Manish, a Mangos artist who identifies as a queer, South Asian cisgender male, identified his queer of color subjectivity as a reason he was discouraged from telling his stories before becoming part of Mangos, saying,

For most of my life I was told I was too brown, too queer, too effeminate, I was never enough. And I actually was really discouraged from speaking... When I would name my experiences, I was told that they were wrong.

This feeling of being discouraged from speaking specifically because of who they were was echoed by other Mangos storytellers. It is significant that not only were Manish and other queer and transgender people of color discouraged from telling their stories, but when they did tell their stories, they were told their personal experiences were “wrong.” This is perhaps one of the reasons it is so hard for queer and transgender people of color to access stories that reflect our experiences; because other queer and transgender people of color are discouraged from telling them.

When these stories are shared, the artist can be transformed as well as the audience.

Manish went on to say,

I’ve felt objectified for so long, I’ve felt like an object that folks in other positions of power do something to; someone they could subvert to make themselves feel stronger and more powerful and more in control. And for me, [when I’m on stage] I control the story, I get to tell the story on my terms. And for me that’s part of survival. I’m not such an object anymore. Now I’m the subject.

The transformation Manish describes confirms Muñoz's theory that the "minoritarian subject," in this case a queer person of color, is able to use the stage to "seize social agency," and reclaim power over their lives through telling their story the way they've seen it as opposed to the way it has been told to them. For Manish, reclaiming this agency is an integral part of survival.

As the next Mangos artist demonstrates, the suppression and invalidation of these stories can leave queer and transgender people of color feeling "crazy" and alone without a way of knowing if others can relate and identify with what they experience. Amir, a Mangos-featured artists who identifies as queer, transgender, Arab and mixed-race, also experienced hostility when he attempted to tell his stories before becoming part of Mangos. Speaking about his previous writing and performing career, Amir said,

I lived in Portland, Oregon from 1996-2005. It was a really difficult time for me. There was not an identifiable QTPOC crew of artists. I was surrounded by a lot of white people who thought they had oppression all figured out. I was under attack a lot because of who I was... Just my presence on the stage elicited a reaction. So often, I wasn't heard. People didn't focus on my work, because they felt so threatened by my body, my person in front of them... People lashed out at me when I named the oppressions I was dealing with. I had numerous intense mental health break downs and 'went crazy'. I 'went crazy' because I needed to be supported in my path as a writer, as a poet. I needed community. When I moved to the Bay in 05, and later started hearing about Mangos, I could finally exhale a little. I just needed to be with other QTPOC artists.

In naming experiences of oppression, both Manish and Amir were shut out and invalidated by those with whom they attempted to share their stories. For these queer and transgender artists of color, the mere act of acknowledging that racism, homophobia and transphobia exist was enough to elicit a hostile response from white audiences. This is perhaps why queer and transgender artists of color have found solace, or been "able to exhale" when given the opportunity through Mangos to co-create with other supportive queer and transgender artists of color and share their work with audiences who could relate to experiences they were writing about.

Speaking about how Mangos audiences have responded to his work, Amir said,

“When I went on tour, I had no idea that my work would have so much impact. I’d say that every show I did on tour, I made folks on the masculine spectrum cry. I was not expecting that at all. I had trans guys, cis[gender] guys come up to me and thank me with tears in their eyes or weepy...They’d say, “Wow I’ve never heard anyone talk about the barbershop like that, or talk about testosterone or transition or the impact of misogyny as viewed through transition like that, etc...”’

Amir’s experience illustrates the significance of being able to speak to an audience who can identify with your experiences. Unlike the hostile responses he got in Portland, Mangos audiences of tour were moved to tears by Amir’s work because they identified with it so strongly. This again speaks to the importance of the spaces that Mangos creates which center the experiences of queer and transgender people of color and allow them to speak directly to and validate each other.

This sense of belonging based on shared identity, which Ramirez describes as “cultural citizenship,” was described as “feeling at home,” by another Mangos performer. Yosimar Reyes, a Mangos featured poet who identifies as a two-spirit *mexicano*, compared the experience of performing for Mangos audiences to the straight audiences he usually performs for, saying,

Performing in a Mangos show I feel at home. For once I don’t have to explain my work because people get it. It’s like I’m simply holding a mirror to one part of our story. When performing with Mangos I feel free to question and let loose. I do poems that celebrate our survival and feel a lot more comfortable speaking about more personal narratives since *there is no better place to heal than with people that understand where I am coming from.* (emphasis added)

As conversations with audience members from the next section testify, they are indeed able to relate to where Mangos performers are coming from. The stories from this section speak to how the artists have been validated and supported by the audiences. In the next section, we will see how by sharing stories the audience can relate to, the artists also validate the audiences and allow them to see themselves as part of the world.

Identification

[At] some of [the performances], I was like “Damn, I felt that, but I didn’t know how to say it, and I’m so glad that you’re saying it to me. I’m so glad that somebody can say it, because I felt just like that.” –Alana, audience member

Perhaps the most validating part of the Mangos experience is not seeing people “like you” on stage, but hearing them speak experiences that mirror your own. Because queer and transgender people of color’s stories are often suppressed, many of us feel isolated. The lack of representations of people like us out in the world contributes greatly to these feelings of isolation. Being able to identify with stories that Mangos artists share helps to reduce this isolation. For example, Jack, who identifies as a white, gay, transgender man makes a clear link between seeing his experience reflected on stage in the work of mixed-race Mangos artist Nico Dacumos, and the realization that he is not alone, saying,

As a transgender man... the way he talked about himself I just found really moving and validating of my own personal experience of not being a ‘man’s man’ or whatever... In one performance, he was talking about looking in the mirror, dressing up, binding and presenting mixed gender cues... how he wanted to be presenting himself versus how he perceived himself in the mirror. He was... wondering about what other people would see when they saw him on the street and I was like, ‘*Yeah, I identify with that...* I think go to Mangos show to be reminded of that I’m not the only person like me, period. Even as a white person, there’s not white people on stage at Mangos, but there’s a lot of resonance there in a lot of different ways.

Despite their different racial backgrounds, Jack was able to identify with Nico’s experience of presenting mixed gender cues to the world and wondering about how he was being perceived by others. He describes this ability to see an experience like his own reflected on stage as letting him know he’s not the only person like him. In this way, for Jack, Mangos helped reduce the social isolation that many queer and transgender people face, created by the difficulty of accessing other queer and transgender people’s stories.

For example, Soledad, who identifies as a second-generation queer Latina, spoke to an experience she saw reflected in Mangos that she felt often get overlooked in other queer spaces, saying,

I think that a big part of my experience as a queer person of color is that my family is very, very, *very* against that stuff [homosexuality], you know? ...I'm not out to them. Sometimes I feel like the fact that that's a big issue in communities of color gets pushed aside... People often say that 'coming out is hard, but it's necessary, and if you lose your family, it's ok, you have your queer community.' But to me, my family is everything, so things like that are nice to hear, but that's not really an option for me... [I felt like] in that specific community [at Mangos] that these folks could talk to me about this and that they were like 'Yeah, this happens to us too,' ...so that was really important. Whenever the fact that it is difficult to come out [is not considered *it makes me feel like I'm like the only person who has this experience...* (emphasis added)

Soledad raises an important point here. Dominant narratives of queerness put a strong emphasis on the "coming out" process as a definitive part of the queer experience (Ross 2005). However, many people cannot risk the possibility of losing their families and/or communities of origin by "coming out." Without the benefits of white and/or class privilege, coming out may be especially difficult.

The valorization of "coming out" often suggests that remaining "in the closet" is a less authentic or less liberated way of being queer. Thus people who cannot risk being out in all aspects of their lives can be marginalized within queer communities (Ross 2005). By centering the subjectivities of people marginalized by both their race and their sexual orientation, Mangos avoids giving primacy to queerness, and centering the "coming out story." Mangos artists have specifically addressed the difficulty of coming out in marginalized communities, something which is often overlooked or oversimplified in dominant narratives and other queer spaces.

A number of my participants noted that Mangos being not "just about being queer" is one of its strengths. In Shana's words,

[Mangos] was so beautiful because it had so many different voices, and it wasn't just about people being queer. It was about being people of color, it was a spectrum of our identity and our experiences, which is beautiful because... it spoke to our shared experiences as having these identities and surviving in this place called America.

As Mangos audience members have articulated in this section, having our shared experiences reflected is an important part of survival which Mangos has provided when we have been unable to find it in the mainstream media. As Mangos artists and audience members articulate in the next section, being able to share our stories and hear stories like our own is an important part of feeling like we have a place in the world.

Survival

To see people you don't know talking about something that you've gone through - something that you were like, 'Oh my god, I only ever wrote this in my journal, I didn't know that somebody else had this experience' - is what helps you continue to exist in the world day-to-day when there are so many factors saying you should not be here or making it hard to continue to exist as the full human being that you are." –Jack, audience member

In what way, if any, does performance and storytelling by queer and transgender people of color save lives? Participants identified a number of reasons; it made them feel less alone, it let them know they weren't crazy, and it allowed them to see themselves as part of the world when they could rarely enjoy these experiences elsewhere.

Some of my participants told me explicitly how Mangos helped them survive the racism, homophobia and transphobia of everyday life. For example, when asked if he thought performance by queer and transgender people of color was important, Amir said,

“I don't just think it's important. I think it can be live-saving. *QTPOC performance saved my life*, in particular writing by QTPOC folks. I think that QTPOC art can remind us of the horrors of the systems we are up against, that we aren't making this shit up, and that it isn't just all in our heads... And at the same time that *it reminds us of these systems, it reminds us that we are beautiful*,

brilliant, powerful, sexy, and have the capacity to heal, and to change.” (emphasis added)

Amir identifies performances by queer and transgender of color as helping him survive by letting him know that he wasn't crazy when others invalidated his experiences of oppression and made him feel like it might all be in his head. As he describes, Mangos not only helps queer and transgender people of color see that the oppression that they face is real, but proves that they can survive it, and thus offers hope to other members of the community who may be feeling like the challenges they face are insurmountable.

Alana references this hope as part of what she takes away from Mangos performances, saying,

[Mangos] gives me hope for all the young queer people coming up that we're setting a strong and positive example... for people who are going to look back and be like, "I'm not the only one, I'm not the first queer person ever. Look, these people are just like me." And this happened, you know, well on the DL¹⁰, some people in the Harlem Renaissance, right? It's good to know that *you're not the first one*, you don't have to reinvent the wheel, you don't have to hold all that responsibility on your shoulders, that you're the only queer person and if you fuck up, everyone's going to look at you and go "oh, that's what queer means." –Alana (emphasis added)

Alana posits that by providing positive role models for queer and transgender youth, Mangos helps take some of the pressure off of young queer and transgender people of color who may feel that they are forging their own path without guidance. Her reference to how many prominent same-gender-loving artists of the Harlem Renaissance, and how much of that history has been erased, speaks to how the erasure of queer and transgender people of color's history makes it harder for them to know they're not "the first queer person ever." By giving us history and points

¹⁰ The "DL" refers to people having same-sex encounters, but not being "out" as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

of reference we can use to understand our own identity (“these people are just like me,”) Mangos allows us to have a context in which we make sense in the world.

Feeling as if one makes sense in the world and that the world has “room” for you are other important aspects of queer and transgender people of color’s survival, as Leo articulates below. He specifically identifies being able to identify with stories told at Mangos as helping create a sense of place for him in the world, saying,

To have somebody that you’ve never met speak so intimately about your experience... you see yourself and you think *I am a part of the world*... I’m not just some piece of trash that doesn’t match with anything and doesn’t work with anything and doesn’t have anybody to talk or fuck or relate to. I’m part of this world and so are all of these people... *It’s a reason to be alive*, it’s a reason to participate. It’s a reason to get up and deal with the magazines and the television and the bureaucracies all the bullshit that everybody has to put up with. It’s a reason to keep going and to feel like it’s not just some joke that *we can heal the world and we can heal one another*, if only for an hour. (emphasis added)

Leo describes hearing Mangos artists speak to his experience as allowing him to see himself as part of the world and giving him a reason to be alive. Additionally, he alludes to hope (“that we can heal the world”) as another part of what he takes away from Mangos and another reason to “keep going.” These findings suggest that Mangos with Chili’s work has been life-sustaining for people in queer and transgender communities of color, if not directly “life-saving.”

Conclusion

I... believe that people are drawn to attend live theatre and performance for other, less tangible, more emotional, spiritual or communitarian reasons... Audiences are compelled to gather with others to see people perform live, hoping, perhaps, for moments of transformation that might let them reconsider and change the world outside the theatre...I believe that theatre and performance can articulate a common future, one that’s more just and equitable, one in which we can all participate more equally, with more chances to live fully and contribute to the making of culture.

–Jill Dolan, “Performance, Utopia and the ‘Utopian Performative’”

Mangos with Chili provides valuable support for queer and transgender people of color in a number of ways. Here I have chosen to focus on the ways it helps to reduce social isolation because this is a phenomenon that many queer and transgender people of color experience, which Mangos intervenes in directly.

One of the most concrete ways Mangos helps reduce social isolation is by bringing queer and transgender people of color together into shared physical spaces where they constitute the majority. This, in turn, fosters the building of relationships which lead to stronger communities of color and less isolated individuals. Participants have described this sense of feeling “less alone,” fostered at Mangos, as making their lives easier. Importantly, the spaces Mangos creates for queer and transgender people of color give them the rare opportunity to stop self-policing for fear of homophobic violence and just be themselves.

Secondly, Mangos reduces social isolation for queer and transgender people of color by offering them access to representations of others like them. Though they have been largely “locked out of the halls of representation or rendered static caricatures” in mainstream film and on television, Mangos offers proof they exist, allowing them to feel like there is “room” for them in the world.

Third, Mangos offers queer and transgender people of color not only the opportunity to hear stories like their own. This allows them to know that they are not alone in the oppression which they face, which helps them understand that the oppression they face is real and part of a collective experience of marginalization of queer and transgender people of color. By helping validate this knowledge and bringing this group of people together who experience marginalization in similar ways, Mangos creates the potential for collective action. This potential gives queer and transgender people of color hope that they can change things for the better.

Lastly, Mangos offers validation not only for the audience, but also for the storytellers, who often have previously been silenced and invalidated. The access Mangos gives them to an audience who understands where they are “coming from,” enables the artists to see that others can identify with their stories, and that they are not alone. Additionally, being able to tell their stories in their own words allows them to take back agency after experiences of objectification. The stories told at Mangos also offer hope and inspiration for the next generation of queer and transgender people of color coming up that it is possible to survive the oppression they face, even when it seems overwhelming.

By bringing us together, validating our experiences, giving us hope, and inspiring us, Mangos with Chili “transform[s] experiences previously lived as individual, privatized and even pathologized problems into the basis for a sense of collective agency” (Mercer 1993, 238). It is in part this sense of agency that allows us to feel that our queer and transgender of color lives are worth living. It gives us the sense that not only can we survive in the face of racist, homophobic and transphobic oppression, but we can change our lives and our social environment for the better.

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