

"OUR BORDERS ARE SHIFTING, OUR BODIES ARE TRANSFORMING": CREATING NEW
POSSIBILITIES OF GENDER, IDENTITY, AND COMMUNITY IN *QUEER & NOW: SYNC OR SWIM*

An Honors Thesis Presented

By

GARRETT WILLIAM SAGER

Approved as to style and content by:

**** Harley M Erdman 05/01/19 06:33 ****

Chair

**** Megan Lewis 05/01/19 11:27 ****

Committee Member

ABSTRACT

This thesis details moments of queer world-making in the devised physical theater project, *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim*. *Sync or Swim* is the second installment in the *Queer & Now* series, a fusion of drag, lip syncing, and choreography intended to create an evening of celebration and protest for the queer community. *Sync or Swim* has a centralized thematic focus of world mythology, inserting mythological deities into our contemporary world with shifting borders and transforming bodies – plagued by rampant patriarchal sexism, corporate greed, climate change, and the abuse of mother Earth. The research for this thesis was conducted through practice-based research: a rehearsal process, multiple public performances, and documentation of *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim*.

This thesis outlines concepts of queer world-making through the lens of José Esteban Muñoz's queer futurity and Jack Halberstam's Gaga feminism, implying radical reinventions of bodies, relationships, and social order. My thesis describes the development and content of *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim* as futuristic and Gaga feminist practice. *Sync or Swim* is a rich site of praxis; theories of queer world-making interact with the practice of live theatrical performance to enact queer futures on stage. Through analysis of queer future-making moments in *Sync or Swim*, I argue that the performance models directions for a changing world, one that embodies cultural synchronicity and unity through the celebration of new forms of gender, identity, and community.

Introduction: Fantasy as Reality

After discovering that her fellow *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* competitors selected her to be eliminated in the previous challenge, Valentina defends her right to stay in the competition. “What kind of jokes did you give, Valentina?” asks competitor Gia Gunn, referring to the previous episode’s comedy roast challenge. With her head tossed back against the Werk Room red couch, Valentina replies, “Oh, girl, I was hilarious. I was feeling my every fantasy on that stage.” The camera cuts to a gob-smacked Monet X Change as Valentina elaborates on her reception in the roast challenge: “The bitches were laughing, and they were like ‘You weren’t funny,’ but I’m like, bitch, you were laughing.” Monet X Change retorts, “We must not have been at the same roast.” After a flashback to Valentina’s poor reception from the judges in the roast challenge, Valentina explains, “I’m not going off of the critiques, I’m going off of what I *felt*.” The queens erupt in contagious laughter. “I don’t believe anything the judges were saying because I was *good*, girl!” (“LaLaPaRuZa”).

Once the scene plays out in the Werk Room, *Drag Race* cuts to Valentina in a confessional in all her gender fluid glory, sporting a black leather beret, a translucent black turtleneck, a flawless acrylic manicure, and shaved-off eyebrows. “Let me tell you something. When it comes to me and living in my world in this little coconut head that I’ve got, it’s a lot of fantasies. And when I feel the fantasy, it is my *reality*. And nobody can change that.” (“LaLaPaRuZa”). This episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* aired on January 18, 2019, only five days after Valentina came out as non-binary in an interview with *Out Magazine*. “I identify as nonbinary. I don’t completely feel like a man, I don’t completely feel like a woman. I feel like a goddess. I feel like I’m my own gender” (Rodriguez).

Although the episode was filmed months prior to its airing on January 18, 2019, the release of the two pieces of media in the same week feels cosmic to me. I am empowered by Valentina's perspective on gender and identity. As a drag queen, Valentina understands her persona as a space where fantasy and embracing the *desired* self trumps reality. As a non-binary person, she understands her identity as a *rejection* of the dominant, systemic gender binary. These two elements point to the revolutionary changes the culture is witnessing in its performances and understandings of gender.

Inspired by the thrilling, rapidly changing cultural discourse on gender and the explosion of drag's popularity in the past decade as a result of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I decided to direct, produce, and perform in a theatrical production using drag and its associated performance form, lip-syncing, to reimagine and reinvent gender. The result is *Queer & Now*, a devised and physical theater project that fuses drag, lip-syncing, choreography, gender play, and movement to create evenings of celebration and protest. Now at the end of its second year, the project has featured numerous collaborators, had four production runs, and visited two states. The first iteration, *Queer & Now: A Lip-Sync Spectacular*, was a series of disparately-themed vignettes centered on our varied queer experiences. The production performed twice on the University of Massachusetts Amherst campus in the 2017-18 academic year, in December 2017 and March 2018. The second installment, *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim*, centralized its focus to world mythology, ancient stories, and climate change. *Sync or Swim* debuted on the University of Massachusetts campus in December 2018, and recently completed a tour to New York City at the College of Humanities and Fine Arts' New York Professional Outreach Program (NYPOP) in April 2019. *Queer & Now* is a rich site of praxis. *Theories* of queer world-making come into play with the *practice* of staging queer worlds in performance. Although *Queer & Now* has undergone

various collaborators, venues, songs, and audiences, it has maintained a foundational through-line: enacting, through performance, queer futures for gender, identity, and community.

The audience for my thesis research is queer scholars, queer individuals and communities, and theater and performance artists. In defining my audience, I emphasize that my research engages with terminology and concepts that are familiar to most of these communities; still, in an effort to include scholars unfamiliar with this discourse, definitions to key concepts are provided in the research below. The current discourse on gender identity includes a focus on making language more inclusive around personal pronoun use. This accounts for individuals who do not use the pronouns *he/him* or *she/hers*, indicative of the gender binary, to describe themselves. This research includes company members who use the singular *they* pronoun, which I frequently use in the text below. In serving as director, producer, and performer on *Queer & Now*, I would also like to disclose the *participatory* nature of this research. I have not always been able to see every element of the project from an outsider's perspective, as I have worked intimately within the performance as performer and director. I ask that my readers engage with the knowledge that my thesis research is *practice-based*.

Queerness and the Future

Queerness, as Jose Esteban Muñoz suggests, is a future-bound phenomenon. Muñoz argues that we have “never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness's domain” (qtd. in Jones 1). Queerness then, by its futuristic principles, rejects the present – the *here and now*. The here and now functions as Muñoz's concept of “straight time,” both straight in the sense of flat, stagnant, reproducible progression, and *heteronormativity*, the belief that heterosexuality is normal, natural, and preferable to all other sexual orientations. Straight time is a “self-

naturalizing temporality” (Muñoz 25) that thrives in the present, upheld most strongly with no intervention. In opposition to straight time, as queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam notes, “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death” (qtd. in Farrier 198). If we can look beyond the limits of straight time and catalyze “queerness’ ecstatic and horizontal temporality,” suggests Muñoz, we will experience “greater openness to the world” (25).

Thus, queer subcultures *depend* on the creation of alternative temporalities for their livelihood, enacted through processes of utopia-building and queer world-making. Creating and witnessing queer utopias “allow[s] us to see different worlds and realities. And this conjured reality instructs us that the ‘here and now’ is simply not enough” (Muñoz 171). Queer utopias are explicitly in opposition to heteronormativity as an institution. For Angela Jones, “queer utopic spaces...suggest there is reason to hope for a better future, a future not constructed by the dictates of American neoliberalism, but by the needs and desires of queer people” (11). Queer world-making, then, arrives when we witness the performance of queer utopian memory, “a utopia that never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated – a utopia in the present” (Muñoz 35). Queer world-making is an essential act for queer communities to *survive*. In a normative world running on straight time, queerness cannot fully exist, as it depends on a separate set of rules, routes, identities, and senses of being that contradict and oppose normative understandings of gender and sexuality.

Moments of queer world-making created in the present can be explained through the lens of J. Jack Halberstam’s theory, *Gaga feminism*. Halberstam’s concept of Gaga feminism explains the production of queer futures in our contemporary performances of gender, sexuality, family,

and kinship. Its name has a two-fold: the deconstructive gender performances of pop star and gay icon Lady Gaga and her foremothers, and childlike babbling; that which “cannot yet be pronounced and what still takes the form of gibberish” (Halberstam xv). Halberstam acknowledges that our cultural understandings of identity and interpersonal relationships have transformed in the 21st century as a result of major advancements in technology. Gaga feminism is “a politics of gender for the post-capitalist world that we currently inhabit,” he writes, and “it examines how forms of family, intimacy, and belonging emerge, slowly and surely, from the wreckage of marriage, the nuclear family, and the boom/bust economy” (Halberstam xv). It implies new world *disorders* and a massive yet subtle dismantling of institutions of gender, sexuality, and the family. It “recognizes multiple genders, that contribute to the collapse of our current sex-gender systems, a feminism less concerned with the equality of men and women and more interested in the abolition of these terms as such” (Halberstam 25). Practicing Gaga feminism requires “letting go of many of your most basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires” (Halberstam 27). Through creating genders and relationships in a state-of-becoming, still-in-progress, state of experimentation, we witness explosive instances of Gaga feminism, creative anarchy, and queer futures. Valentina, as described in the introduction, operates on queer futurity and Gaga feminism, describing her non-binary gender identity as emergent, fantastical and goddess-like. The creation of new, wild, futuristic genders that challenge the institution of the gender binary is constantly happening in the world of *drag*.

Drag’s Potentials for a Queer Future

Drag is a transformative performance mode where a performer enacts a gender identity beyond, or exaggerating, their daily performance of gender. It is a space of gender fluidity and queer world-making. As Brooklyn drag artist Sasha Velour states, “drag has been an

experimental stage for queer performers since before we even had words for it” (qtd. in Sanoff). The Gaga feminist view of drag understands this performance practice as not a gender performance directly *across* binaries, but rather an explosive depiction of gender *outside* of our comfort levels in everyday spheres. Fellow Brooklyn drag artist Aja understands their drag as “really just me in makeup. It's me, it's just an extension of my gender identity, and it's my expression” (qtd. in Street). This is a transgender understanding of drag that breaks away from the archaic understandings of drag reinforced by RuPaul. RuPaul, one of drag’s biggest superstars, has famously refused to allow trans women post-surgery to participate in his reality competition show, claiming that their body alterations to appear more conventionally feminine would give them an “unfair” advantage (qtd. in Nichols). I suggest that RuPaul’s understandings of drag are a reinforcement of the patriarchy, giving ownership to men over an art form that is inclusive of all genders. Drag performed by cisgender men is not more inherently radical than other varieties of drag; the strains of the gender binary affect men, women, gender-queer, and non-binary folk equally. Everyone has the right to perform drag. Aja and Sasha Velour’s interpretations of drag are futuristic and Gaga feminist, recognizing multiple genders and working to abolish our current sex-gender systems (Halberstam 25). Sasha Velour explains:

Drag is unusually optimistic. If we don’t like something, we change it, contour it, corset it, put a wig over it, re-name it...Drag doesn’t admit defeat – it finds creative and communal solutions for success. I think that message grows ever more important in times when ordinary people feel very disenfranchised. There are ways to raise awareness and resources, and organize for change -- and you can look amazing while doing it! (qtd. in Sanoff).

Sasha Velour's suggestions of drag's optimistic potential for reinvention and re-imagining of gender speak directly to a transgender understanding of the body and identity. Trans individuals modify their bodies – through surgeries, binders, packers, breast plates, makeup, wigs and hair extensions, etc. – in order to realize a body *externally* that matches their *internal* sense of self. Non-trans people also engage in these practices of body modifications, but it is the *consciousness* to create gender on the body that differentiates the trans experience from others. And there is trans potential to Sasha Velour's suggestion of *renaming*, finding similarity to the ways in which trans people often reject their birth-assigned, government-recognized name in favor of something that instead reflects the futuristic bodies they create in the present. In the Gaga feminist spirit of “letting go of many of your most basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires” (Halberstam 27), drag can be seen as a space of denying body dysmorphia.

If trans theory can be applied to Sasha Velour's understandings of drag, then I theorize that the major difference between transgender identity and drag performance is its existence in the *ephemeral* nature of performance. Drag can serve solely as a performative mode for queer individuals to express an alternative mode of gender from their daily expression. But drag can also serve as the gateway through which trans performers discover their trans identity, developing the body they wish to live in day-to-day. From both performing in drag in *Queer & Now* and witnessing two companies of performers engage in the form, I argue that regardless of gender identity, drag serves as the gateway to discovering new things about the self for everyone who engages in it. The elements of ourselves that we have discovered by performing in drag – most notably, the confidence and celebration of our bodies – have rippled into our daily genders. I am empowered by Sasha Velour's suggestion of drag as a space for “creative and communal solutions for success.” I have witnessed this firsthand with leading a company of folks from all

different relationships to gender – trans men, cis women, assigned-male-at birth (AMAB) non-binary folk, assigned-female-at-birth (AFAB) non-binary folk, cis men, and genderqueer folk. Drag is communal because of its ability to hold all of these truths. The unifying link between all of these identities in relationship to drag is that drag is a space to create gender performance outside of the ordinary.

I would like to emphasize a point I made above about RuPaul’s understandings of drag. He suggests that there is a hierarchy of risk and radicalness with drag, placing cisgender men who perform as women at the top of the theoretical drag pyramid. This is not communal and not trans-inclusive. As a director and facilitator in ensemble members discovering their drag personas, I consciously aimed to emphasize a narrative of *self-determination*. I wanted to deny the implications of RuPaul – who, without a doubt, is the most powerful drag performer on the planet – in favor of providing a space for true embodiment of queer community. In *Queer & Now*, the drag performances of gender are futuristic, discarding “basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires” in favor of new possibilities of identity (Halberstam 27). Therefore, I suggest *Queer & Now* is a futuristic, Gaga feminist, and trans-inclusive drag project.

Lip-Syncing: Fakery Becomes Reality

Queer & Now employs the frequent marriage of drag and lip-syncing. One of the main performance practices for drag artists is *lip-syncing*, mouthing words to recorded music. The sentiments of a disparaged post-WWII United States made it difficult and expensive for gay bars to hire drag performers who required live instrumentation for their performances. Facing continued violence in the form of raids from the police, gay bars frequently had to pack up their items at a moment’s notice and escape in the event that their space was being raided. Therefore, it was much safer and cheaper to hire performers who could use recorded music without the

needs of live instrumentation. The union of drag and lip-sync was born (Langley 7). The demand for canned queer voices was “the vehicle that opened the flood gates to a new kind of drag performer” (Langley 7). Langley suggests multiple potentials of lip-syncing, a key element of “the gender toolkit” for drag artists (5):

It is a way of appropriating gender attribute; it enables the foregrounding of drag’s choreographic dimension; it underpins the part of the drag show that depends on the recognition of cultural markers; it provides texture, layering, and complexity; it is a means of making a political statement; and it plays a role in upholding tradition (8-9).

Extending Langley’s suggestion that lip-syncing can create cultural markers and uphold tradition, Stephen Farrier argues that lip-syncing is a site of queer *heritability*. Farrier defines queer heritability as the transmission of queer knowledge across generations. This transmission, however, is not synonymous with the heteronormative implications of legacy and inheritance; rather, it is a way “we can account for how gay culture passes on its ‘values’ (both positive and negative) without recourse to heteronormative structures of heritability and inheritance” (Farrier 2016: 199). These values are articulated in lip-sync performance via a visual and auditory vocabulary developed through the ritual and tradition of lip-syncing. Queer people learn their histories, often erased and not taught in school systems, through witnessing drag performance. “Live performance is one of the local sites where people might learn and participate in the local gay past while also engaging with a globalised gay vocabulary through the apparent worldwide status of some of the figures drag tends to represent” (Farrier 200). Though not genetically inherited, queer history, resilience, and power can still be passed on through connections to queer and trans soothsayers – drag performers, who are non-heteronormative links to the past (Farrier 199). I argue that elements of the *past*, through the content of the material being lip-synced, and

present, through the live nature of performance, coexisting within drag performers lip-syncing work in tandem toward the development of queer *futures*.

I want to address the ritualistic nature of lip-syncing and its relationship to creating queer futures. Although traditions function on the reproducible imagery of Muñoz’s “straight time” (25), the tradition of lip-syncing does not function on straight time because it twists temporality. Lip-syncing is used not to *reproduce* the history, but to *change* it. On the repetition of lip-syncing, Carol Langley writes, “much in the same way as Judith Butler proposes that repetition of gender performance re-writes gender, night after night, performance after performance, lip-syncing – the fakery – becomes the reality” (15). Lip-syncing as a performance mode takes markers and symbols of a queer past, enacts them in the present, and creates new directions for the future. Its repetitive, reproducible nature is necessary because it allows queer communities to thrive, and to find a space where collective dreams are realized.

The Origins of *Queer & Now*

In March 2017, as a student in Professor Judyie Al-Bilali’s course on devised theater and a burgeoning drag/lip-sync aficionado, I developed the concept of a piece of theater that would tell the story of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* using the tools of drag and lip-syncing. I believed the marriage of a canonical story and explosive, radical performance forms would offer rich possibilities for theater-making. As a young director with experience limited to scripted works, I planned for a project the following semester that would allow me to explore directing methods in devised theater. To develop the foundational work necessary to later produce a more narrative-driven lip-sync event, I sought to direct an evening of solo lip-sync performances. Armed with my knowledge of drag as an inherently political act, I turned to Professor Megan Lewis – who was offering a course titled *Theaters of Dissent* in the subsequent

semester – to develop an independent study centered on practice-based research in drag and lip-syncing as tools of political *dissent*.

Submitting my independent study proposal for Theaters of Dissent, I earnestly anticipated that the resulting project would be a collection of solo performances, utilizing *devised theater* techniques. *Queer & Now* is a devised theater project. Allison Oddey defines devised theater as “starting from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, painting or movement” (1). It is an ensemble-based collaboration that complicate the roles of more traditional, American capitalist modes of theater-making. In the case of *Queer & Now*, the initial framework for devising was the idea of drag and lip-syncing as tools of dissent. Oddey elaborates on the development of devised theater processes that informed the practice of *Queer & Now*:

Devising is a process of making theatre that enables a group of performers to be physically and practically creative in the sharing and shaping of an original product that directly emanates from assembling, editing, and re-shaping individuals’ contradictory experiences of the world. There is a freedom of possibilities for all those involved to discover; an emphasis on a way of working that supports intuition, spontaneity, and an accumulation of ideas (1).

Devised theater often has a close relationship to *physical theater*, a form that prioritizes the body as the form of communication in performance. Physical theater decentralizes language and the script as the main mode of storytelling, instead using the body as the *bridge* between performer and audience (Reznek, Lecoq). For me, the forms of devised and physical theater, and their almost symbiotic relationship, offer major queer potentialities. With Allison Oddey’s

suggestion that devising supports intuition and spontaneity, I believe that devising and physical theater provide foundations for Gaga feminist practice. Navigating the unexplored and the undiscovered within our bodies and relationships to others are key elements of both Gaga feminism and devising. Physical and devised theater's emphasis on *body* over spoken *language* works to build communities, as spoken languages are often divisive to individuals who do not speak the language featured in performances. The body, however, holds communal possibilities and universal knowledge. The modes of production in devised theater employ horizontal structures of theater-making, rejecting the traditional hierarchies that frame students and actors as repositories of knowledge under a single (male) director's vision, rather than a space of equal input from all collaborators. I suggest physical and devised theater are sites of queer futures.

Gathering a team of collaborators in design, performance, and dramaturgy over the course of summer 2017, the project began to blossom. After a summer of creating Spotify playlists with potential lip-sync material, I realized that the project needed to be a collaborative, *ensemble* piece of theater, as opposed to a string of *solo* vignettes. This consciousness came about through my understanding of Carol Langley's suggestion that lip-syncing "enables the foregrounding of drag's choreographic dimension" (8); I noticed myself drawn to music that could hold massive physical moments executed through multiple bodies onstage. While I knew from its birth that *Queer & Now* would be a piece of devised theater, it was not until I began collaborating with others and understanding lip-syncing's exciting possibilities that I realized that *Queer & Now* would additionally be a piece of physical theater. I arrived at this knowledge with several specific experiences while an undergraduate at UMass that informed my identity as a theater-maker. In the summer of 2016, I traveled to the National Arts Festival in Makhanda, South Africa with the Arts & Culture in South Africa course, offered by Professor Lewis through

UMass, witnessing gorgeous pieces of dance and physical theater. In order to account for South Africa's rich linguistic diversity, many of its theater makers take a physical approach to theater over text-based forms embraced by mainstream American and European theater. This was a turning point for me as a theater maker, informing the universality of body *as* language, a defining tenet in physical theater. Additionally, I was an ensemble member of UMass Theater's production of *Ta'zieh – Between Two Rivers*, directed by Nikoo Mamdoohi and written by Ifa Bayeza and Q-Mars Haedi. The piece, held on the UMass campus in April 2017, is an English adaptation of an Iranian tradition of music, spectacle, and drama that brings communities together in order to work through collective struggle. As an actor in the production, I understood Nikoo Mamdoohi's approach to directing as a method of *facilitation* that asks actors to work with the script first *before* receiving feedback and suggestions for future changes from the director. Mamdoohi's style illuminated new directing methods to me that used devising techniques in a successful, challenging, and fruitful way. That summer, I trained with Double Edge Theatre in Ashfield, MA, an ensemble of artists creating performance spectacles, utilizing intense physical training methods into their approach to theater-making. I was inspired by their methods of developing theater pieces with a sharpened focus on the body through *performance as research*. I was troubled by Double Edge's philosophy that does not have explicit language for self-care in the context of intense physical training; I often felt like I could not step back and rest briefly in their training sessions that demanded extreme cardiovascular endurance. I decided in my practice of directing and creating physical theater to *explicitly* encourage self-care and self-discipline for myself and for my team. All of these elements serve as direct influences on the theater-making I practiced as the leader of *Queer & Now*.

The original *Queer & Now* team, producing the first iteration, *Queer & Now: A Lip-Sync Spectacular*, consisted of a fierce team of collaborators, all students and alumni from the University of Massachusetts Amherst: myself (director/producer/performer), Finn Lefevre (dramaturg), Helen Woods (dramaturg), Olivia Holcomb (stage manager/producer), Jordan Mitchell (lighting designer), Jordan Reed (costume designer), Tom Kelleher (sound engineer/lighting programmer), Sarah Talaid (assistant director/makeup and hair designer), and Ethan Gourlay (sound designer). After auditions, the following cast of ensemble members was determined: Faolain Bobersky, Bry Belling, Ethan Gourlay, Lucas La Guardia, Cynthia Lizardo, and myself (see figure 1).



Figure 1: The ensemble of Queer & Now: A Lip-Sync Spectacular, December 2017. (from left) Cynthia Lizardo, Lucas La Guardia, Ethan Gourlay, Faolain Bobersky, Bry Belling, and Garrett Sager. Photo by Jennifer Gately.

The devising process for *Queer & Now* was rooted in the following practice: each ensemble member taking *ownership* of a vignette with the theme and drag persona of their desire. The result was a varied tapestry of queer experiences. The idea of ownership in *Queer & Now* reveals that the project is essentially a collective of performance artists working to create solo pieces that fit within the context of a singular evening's performance. Rehearsals involved bringing in songs for *flocking*, a devising strategy in which an ensemble mimics the movements of a single member taking the lead; the leader consistently switches throughout the movement. After flocking, we would hold conversations to discuss what specific movements were exciting and could be developed further as choreography in the performance. We compiled images into a Pinterest board, in order to demonstrate visual cues for the lighting and costume designers, and provide potential inspirations for movements, poses, ideas, and images to enact onstage. We had workshops in clowning with Professor Julie Nelson, physical theater with Professor Martha Cuomo, and developing the monstrous self with project dramaturg Finn Lefevre – all of which informed the drag, fantastical version of ourselves we were creating. Ensemble members struggled with being autonomous in their sections, familiar mostly with forms of theater and performance where less was expected of them in the creative process. Alternatively, ensemble members *thrived* in this setting, feeling empowered to take charge of their own work and develop new versions of their genders.

Queer & Now: A Lip-Sync Spectacular debuted in December 2017 in UMass French Hall, room 102, transforming an agriculture classroom into a queer runway space. The first production run experienced great success, leading to a remounted, tweaked version of *A Lip-Sync Spectacular* produced in March 2018 in the UMass Fine Arts Center, room 204. *A Lip-Sync Spectacular* features a variety of queer futures, some of which I will describe here. Lucas La

Guardia created *Mary & Oxum*, an exploration of giving justice to the exploited Virgin Mary, the highly venerated mother of Jesus Christ, in his upbringing with Catholicism. After embodying Mary and asking the audience to honor the Christian female figure, he transformed into Oxum, an Afro-Brazilian Yoruba river deity representing luxury, sexuality, beauty, and fertility, showcasing love and worship for his new religious practice (see figure 2). Faolain Bobersky and Bry Belling developed *Marie Antoinette*, a queer intervention into the opulent late 18th century queen of France's sexual endeavors by creating Tomas du Pan, a gender fluid lover that pleases Marie with cunnilingus under hoopskirts, phallic baguettes, and confetti orgasms (see figure 3). Ethan Gourlay created *Tundra*, an original story exploring their relationship to self-love and self-hate as a trans person, manifesting in performance as a snow queen covered in a sheet of ice. Throughout the piece, Ethan attempts to melt the ice, and succeeds, by unlocking statues that represent the elements they need to navigate themselves within the world (see figure 4). I created *Ode to Judy*, a tribute to Judy Garland – massive gay icon, monumental MGM film star, and cultural tragic figure known for her gross mistreatment from Hollywood executives that led to addiction problems eventually resulting in her unfortunate overdose. In my bearded depiction of Judy, I enacted a queer future in which she could be empowered by the #MeToo era, reject the vices forced upon her, and actually travel over the rainbow, represented onstage through the epic reveal of a rainbow flag hidden in my dress (see figure 5). All of these thematically-varying stories came together to create an evening of radical self-love, hope, and community.



Figure 2: Lucas La Guardia as Oxum in Mary and Oxum. Photo by Jennifer Gately.



Figure 3: Faolain Bobersky (left) as Marie Antoinette, Bry Belling (right) as Tomas du Pan in Marie Antoinette. Photo by Jennifer Gately.



Figure 4: Ethan Gourlay as the ice queen in Tundra. Photo by Jennifer Gately.



Figure 5: Garrett Sager as Judy Garland in Ode to Judy. Photo by Jennifer Gately.

The project's working titles went through multiple iterations. The first, *Heartbeats*, suggested drag performers as keeping up the pulse and livelihood of queer communities. It also implied the June 2016 tragedy of the mass shooting at queer, Latino nightclub Pulse in Orlando, FL. The second potential title, *Wig Flu*, took its origins from the vernacular of black queer and trans communities in the underground urban American ball scene – a wig being *snatched* means that something has left you speechless in a similar physiological response to having a wig removed from your scalp by someone else. A wig *flying* implies that something has left you so speechless that instead of a person removing your wig, the wig has flown away. The final title, *Queer & Now*, is a beautiful, non-appropriative illustration of what the project is doing for its performers and audiences. Instead of demonstrating the *here* and now, the present in “straight time” where queerness cannot fully exist, the project creates the *queer* and now – a Muñoz and Halberstam vision for the queer world, one filled with joy, hope, and possibility.

Transitioning to *Sync or Swim*

After two successful production runs of *Queer & Now: A Lip-Sync Spectacular*, intentionally *disparate* in its thematic content, I had developed the necessary directing and dramaturgy skills to create a more *interconnected* installment in the *Queer & Now* series. I was no longer interested in my original idea of telling a particular story, *The Little Mermaid*, but was drawn instead to implementing a cohesive theme among the vignettes. I was still drawn to *The Little Mermaid's* themes of water, anticipating that it would take a central role in the new installment. I chose the theme of *world mythology* – in order to represent performers in the piece from multiple geographies. I became excited to explore a variety of *ancient* stories and shine new light on them through the *contemporary* forms of drag and lip-syncing.

The following collaborators continued from the first iteration to the second: myself (director/producer/performer), Finn Lefevre (dramaturg), Jordan Mitchell (lighting designer), Tom Kelleher (sound engineer/lighting programmer), Sarah Talaid (makeup and hair designer), Faolain Bobersky (performer), and Bry Belling (performer). *Sync or Swim* added Christina Beam (costume designer), Sami Brzozowski (props master/assistant costume designer), Althea McCrory (stage manager), Allison Chen (costume dresser), Melissa Smith (lighting assistant/board operator), and Erik Long (NYPOP stage manager) to its production team. The ensemble consisted of Bry Belling (the Merrow), Faolain Bobersky (Circe), Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves (Nemesis), Emma Hollows (Antigone), Akira Rose (Mami Wata), Garrett Sager (Demeter), and Sebastian Salloum (Narcissus). The roles listed above in paragraphs next to the actors' names are the character they developed in-depth in their personal vignette (see Appendix A for detailed descriptions of each story). Throughout the performance, all ensemble members additionally play supporting roles in each others' pieces. *Queer & Now's* continued relationship with key collaborators is a reflection of its queer futuristic views in building community. Although it works to develop a consistent community of collaborators fostering deep creative relationships, *Queer & Now* also holds the ability to incorporate new members. The coexistence of commitment, continuity, and inclusion is, I believe, key to building a queer community (see figure 5).

Queer & Now: Sync or Swim debuted in December 2018 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Fine Arts Center, Arts Bridge room 434. After months of extensive planning and fundraising, *Sync or Swim* traveled to the College of Humanities and Fine Arts' New York Professional Outreach Program (NYPOP) in April 2019. Both production runs received rave reviews from its audiences (see Appendix B). *Sync or Swim* was chosen as the

project's subtitle as a reflection of the installment's thematic linkage of *water* in mythology. *Sync or Swim* features a selection of mythic figures from Greece, West Africa, and Ireland and the U.K., all of which are enacted through the modes of drag, lip-syncing, and physical theater. Throughout the performance, water, symbolized through strips of sheer blue fabric, accumulates onstage as each mythological figure overcomes a challenge. These challenges arise in the forms of rampant patriarchal sexism, corporate greed, climate change, and the abuse of mother Earth. By the end of the performance, bodies have transformed, borders have shifted, and the group of mythological deities must unite to brave a new, queer world.



Figure 6: The production team of Queer & Now: Sync or Swim at NYPOP, April 2019. (top row, from left): Finn Lefevre, Erik Long, Althea McCrory, Emma Hollows, Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves, Bry Belling, Faolain Bobersky, Sebastian Salloum, Garrett Sager, and Akira Rose. (bottom row, from left): Allison Chen, Sami Brzozowski, Jordan Mitchell, and Sarah Talaid. Photo by Jason Fisch.

For the remainder of the thesis, I will discuss four vignettes from *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim*. Each section below provides in-depth descriptions of these pieces' respective theatrical staging. These are outlined as findings from my practice-based research in directing devised, physical theater with drag and lip-syncing, in order to develop queer futures. The detailed descriptions below provide specific examples of the project's embodiment of futuristic, Gaga feminist, and trans-inclusive practice.

Nemesis: Queering the Survivor's Narrative

How can Nemesis win? This was the driving question for Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves as she created her piece in *Sync or Swim*. She wanted to embody Nemesis, the Greek goddess of divine retribution. Elisabeth wanted to depict Nemesis before she accessed her divine powers, first overcoming a major obstacle. When fellow ensemble member Sebastian Salloum expressed his interest in portraying the story of Narcissus, a vain mortal in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* so consumed by his reflection in a pool of water that he drowns, it clicked for Elisabeth: Narcissus, representative of perpetrators in domestic violence, would be Nemesis' obstacle.

Nemesis begins with a dim stage and a gentle hum crescendoing into the sound of bell-like percussion, the introduction to Christina Perri's "Human." Nemesis (Elisabeth), sitting gently in a black sequin floor-length gown, mimes scrubbing the floor. Narcissus (Sebastian) walks over to Nemesis with an intense look on his face, like a lion on the hunt for food. Sporting a crisp white toga and backwards baseball cap suggestive of college fraternity "bro" culture, he walks over to the glimmering Nemesis on the floor, instructing her through nonverbal pointing to complete various tasks for him. Unhappy with her behavior, he smacks away dishes, grabs her body, and pulls her hair (see figures 7 and 8). This violence escalates with realistic staging,

providing an intimate look into domestic violence. After a final slap that leaves Nemesis weak, powerless, and falling to the floor, Narcissus exits the stage.

Thunder fills the sonic world of *Nemesis*. An ensemble member (Bry Belling) representing water enters Nemesis' world. They strew water across the floor to symbolize a wave delivering a set of black wings. Nemesis is lifted up by her ensemble member – literally and figuratively – and she stands in the center of the stage to tear away her black sequin gown, revealing a matte leather corset, skin-tight leather pants, and combat boots made for battle. Through a reveal, the battered and abused Nemesis has transformed into a warrior. Carol Langley explains the history of the *reveal* in drag performance: “From the late 1800s to the early 1900s, the measure of success for female impersonators was their ability to deceive an audience into believing that they were women. The essential closure to the acts, however, was the removal of the performers’ wigs. This would ‘reveal’ that they were men, bring the audience back to reality and establish a sense of order.” Oftentimes performers would also break the illusion of lip-syncing by speaking out loud simultaneously to removing the wig, reinforcing the tied history of drag and lip-syncing (12). The term *reveal* also has close ties to experiences of “coming out” for queer and trans folks, in which we “reveal” our true identities that have previously been hidden. The reveal, then, is a liberating space for uncovering desired versions of the self. The reveal in *Nemesis* is not a reveal of the performer Elisabeth underneath the drag persona, as Langley suggests, but instead is a reveal of the true self of the character as warrior. Nemesis uses the technique of the reveal to unveil a new version of herself that is empowered and divine. She is engaging in Greek metamorphosis – a transformation into a totally new, more empowered person.

Post-reveal, Andra Day's "Rise Up" plays as Nemesis is assisted into her wings (see figure 9). Engaging the audience in the lyrics while standing atop a chair, Elisabeth lip-syncs, "I'll rise up / in spite of the ache / and I'll do it a thousand times again" (Day). Nemesis establishes her renewed sense-of-self gained internally and externally from the audience, whom she has been inviting into her story through direct eye contact and hand gestures to be included in her narrative (see figure 10). She has risen up. She is prepared for war.

The eerie electronic sounds and throbbing bass line of "Heads Will Roll" by the Yeah Yeah Yeahs serve as Nemesis' choice for the battle sequence against her abuser. Narcissus re-enters onstage with a shit-eating grin on his face, expecting his partner is going to accept his abuse yet again. Nemesis temporarily gives in to his advances to deceive him by getting kissing-distance away, but physically pushes him away with her newfound agency. What we witness is magical violence – Nemesis begins to control Narcissus' body through gestures from a distance, a stark contrast to the realistic violence that was just performed on her minutes ago onstage (see figure 11). In the queer world Elisabeth creates, she demands that we do not re-inscribe trauma by inflicting *literal* violence on our abusers, but instead punish them in alternative ways that are *divine* and only capable by goddesses.

After Nemesis has won the face-off, and Narcissus is left on his knees, Nemesis grabs a gelatinous prop heart that she places against his actual heart (see figure 12). Lip-syncing to a clip from the television show *Riverdale* in which the character Veronica states, "Oh well... karma's a bitch," Nemesis taunts Narcissus with her newfound power ("Chapter Nineteen: Death Proof"). This taunting is immediately followed by a sound cue evoking a tree being ripped from its branches; this sound, combined with Nemesis' physical gesture of tearing Narcissus' gelatin heart from against his chest, creates a moment of *camp*. Susan Sontag describes camp as

“dethron[ing] the serious. Camp is playful, anti-serious. More precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious.’ One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious” (qtd. in Goodman). Elisabeth’s choice to rip out the gelatinous heart of her staged abuser is an example of camp because it is a ridiculous representation of serious violence. Its playfulness encourages the audience to cheer at the sight of Elisabeth making the heart “throb” with her hands and licking it, creating a parody of real violence. In Nemesis’s queer world, sound effects and gelatin are used to terrorize abusers. Lip-syncing to Taylor Swift’s “Look What You Made Me Do,” Nemesis celebrates her victory, falls to the ground in a vogue-inspired dip move, and ends in a pose where she holds her head and Narcissus’s heart up to the light (see figures 13 and 14). A lightning bolt strikes and Nemesis is ready to take on the world. She is living in her metamorpho-sized, queer future.



Figure 7: Narcissus (Sebastian Salloum) takes control of Nemesis (Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves). Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 8: Narcissus grabs Nemesis' hair. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 9: Nemesis receives her wings from an ensemble member (Bry Belling). Photo by Jason Fisch.



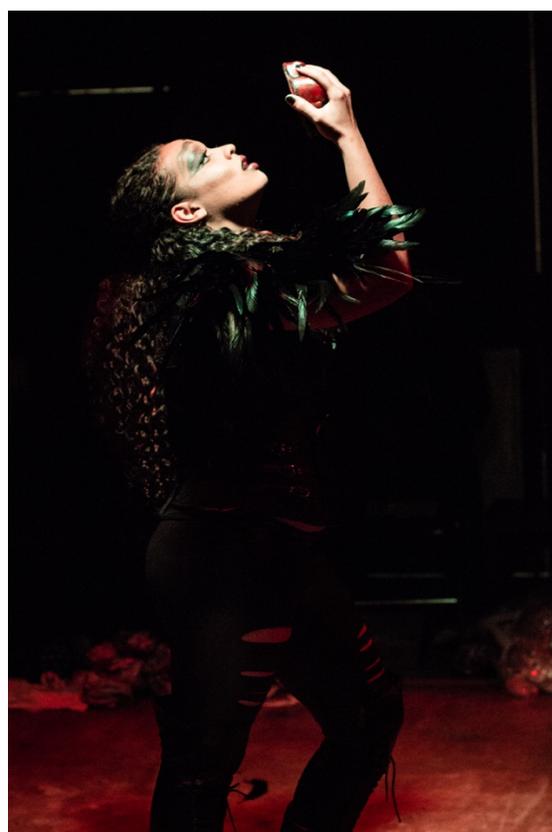
Figure 10: Nemesis lip-syncs "Rise Up" and invites the audience into her journey. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 11: Nemesis enacts magical violence on Narcissus. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 12: Narcissus is taunted by Nemesis, with a gelatinous heart on his chest. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figures 13 and 14: Nemesis showcases Narcissus' heart. Photo by Jason Fisch (left) and Tom Kelleher (right).

Narcissus and the Drowning of Hegemonic Masculinity

How does someone who has not been raised as a man still embody tropes of hegemonic masculinity? This question drove Sebastian Salloum's creation of a transgender retelling of Narcissus, a hunter from Greek mythology known for his abusive and vain behavior. In the story of Narcissus, Nemesis discovers Narcissus is behaving poorly to others. She decides to punish Narcissus for his behavior, forcing him to look into the river to see his reflection. He is so vain that he falls in love with the reflection, attempts to move towards it, and subsequently falls into the river. Sebastian wanted to queer this story by giving Narcissus an alternate ending where he survives and has to navigate the outcome as a trans man learning new ways of embodying masculinity.

Narcissus begins where *Nemesis* left off, a lifeless Narcissus (Sebastian Salloum) folded over on the floor. A fellow frat boy (Emma Hollows) arrives with two six-packs of beers, labeled "Co-bro-na" and "Dud Light" with a silver marker. Simultaneous to this, a woman (Faolain Bobersky) sits amidst the audience. The intro beats of Robin Thicke, T.I., and Pharrell's infamous "Blurred Lines" play as Emma gets Sebastian off the ground on "everybody get up!" (Thicke et. al.). The two become each other's mirror, with Emma's frat boy taking the lead, instructing Narcissus to puff his chest, flex his arms, and run his fingers through his hair. The two grab their cardboard boxes and indulge in the beer, stabbing holes in the cans, shot-gunning them, and smashing them on their heads (see figure 15). After a round of shot-gunning, Emma and Sebastian grab Faolain in the audience, luring her with the repetition of the lyric "I know you want it" (Thicke et. al.). The frat bros dance in the center and surround a visibly uncomfortable Faolain, who returns to her seat by the end of the chorus (see figure 16).

After failing to impress the woman, Narcissus and his crony break apart and grab bike pumps with condoms to show off their phallic size. On the lyric “you the hottest bitch in this place” (Thicke et. al.), both Emma and Sebastian start to pump up their condoms in a competition to see who has the biggest phallus made of rubber and air (see figures 17 and 18). This moment is another example of camp in *Sync or Swim*, as it dethrones a very real obsession that men have with the size of their penises, a marker of power. This performance moment lets two people without penises try them on for size. For Emma, a cis woman, performing this act allows her to reclaim phallic power and objectify men for their penis in a similar way to how her female body has been objectified. For Sebastian, as a trans man, performing this act allows him to play out a desire that he has experienced as a result of body dysmorphia. Sebastian has been wearing a trucker hat and toga in his role as Narcissus. The toga exposes his upper chest, which the audience can see has a visible scar from top surgery, an element of Sebastian’s own experience with transitioning. How does this complicate our ideas of violent cis-masculinity? AFAB (assigned female at birth) bodies are hidden from our media and cultural consciousness and left out of discourse on transness; featuring this in live performance is a radical act. The exposure of Sebastian’s top surgery scar coexistent with a phallus made out of a condom and a bike pump demonstrates that *Queer & Now* is practicing Gaga feminism. We are creating new versions of the body that reject basic assumptions and disrupt our current sex-gender systems.

After the condom blow-off, Narcissus stalks the woman and ultimately grabs her violently (see figure 19). The same violence the audience witnessed in Narcissus’ previous appearance in *Nemesis* is happening again; the cycle for Narcissus and violent masculinity continues. Set to Ciara’s “Like a Boy,” Elisabeth as Nemesis reappears onstage to save the woman and face off with Narcissus. Nemesis intimidates Narcissus, reproducing every

masculine trope he pulls out of his arsenal to win this battle (see figure 20). Nemesis is resilient; she is determined to serve justice and divine retribution. Nemesis takes control of Narcissus' body in a similar way to how he has controlled hers. Nemesis throws Narcissus into the river. The river is represented onstage by an ensemble member (myself) holding a piece of sheer blue fabric and moving it like the current of a river. The river fabric drops, and Nemesis re-emerges.

Sebastian changes the narrative of Narcissus here. In the original Greek story, Narcissus dies because he is so enamored with his reflection in the river that he drowns. In *Sync or Swim*, Narcissus survives and challenges the aggressive masculinity he has previously performed. What dies instead for Sebastian's Narcissus is a toxic version of the self. Emergent is a new, beautiful, soft, earnest, trans man. He is now decked out in a white, full-length gown with coral orange ombré trim, signifying a Narcissus flower. The fellow frat boy (Emma) and the woman (Faolain) are center stage in the same violent position he created with the woman before his transformation. Sebastian searches the stage to Lone's "As a Child," eventually approaching the staging of his former self. He intervenes. Sebastian literally moves their limbs, changing their pose from a grab to an embrace (see figure 21). He joins the two to become three, and the three all hold arms around each other. (see figure 22) Hard becomes soft. Aggressive becomes tender. Clenching becomes caressing. Narcissus has found *empathy*: a quality men are conditioned to not embrace. While the three perform gentle choreography, Nemesis grabs the river and moves with it held above her head (see figures 23 and 24). Nemesis places the river on the ground. The woman and the frat boy, now changed and free of the hegemonic violent masculinity that has tainted them, walk on the river. Narcissus follows them. Left onstage by himself, Sebastian holds the water fabric tautly to examine his new reflection. He smiles, seeing the new version of himself he has created. He has enacted a queer world that rejects the systems of masculinity

perpetuated in both cisgender *and* transgender male/masculine communities. Narcissus, instead of dying, has undergone metamorphosis, paralleling trans identity beautifully. What has been uncovered is the future.



Figure 15: The frat bro (Emma Hollows) and Narcissus (Sebastian Salloum) shotgun six-packs of beer. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 16: Narcissus and the frat bro dance with the woman (Faolain Bobersky). Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 17: The frat bro pumps up his condom. Photo by Jason Fisch. Figure 18: Narcissus pumps up his condom. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 19: Narcissus grabs the woman violently. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 20: Narcissus and Nemesis face off. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 21: The transformed Narcissus, frat bro, and woman caress each other. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 22: The transformed Narcissus, frat bro, and woman embrace. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 23: Nemesis holds up the river for Narcissus. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 24: Narcissus sees the river, and a transformed version of himself. Photo by Tom Kelleher.

Mami Wata's Reclamation of Bodies

Akira Rose discovered West African deity Mami Wata through her previous research into African and African diaspora mythologies about river goddesses. Mami Wata is a water deity appearing in multiple incarnations across West, Central, and Southern Africa, as well as across the world. Mami Wata possesses divine power, exercised through bestowing eternal wealth upon communities, healing physical and spiritual ills, and embodying danger and desire. She often visits mortals in their dreams; if they are loyal to her, she grants them riches. The identity of Mami Wata is *amorphous* as water itself, appearing as various genders and forms (Drewal 23). Henry John Drewal elaborates:

[Mami Wata] appears in myriad forms, including mermaid and snake charmer; engenders constantly varying devotional practices; and has such a host of names and associations that she is hard to pin down, categorize, or predict. Despite this, Mami is always

distinguishable as a fearsome, beautiful, and powerful water spirit who transforms all outcomes (9).

Mami's embodiment of and existence in the *water*, a natural element "hard to pin down, categorize, or predict" (Drewal 9), speaks to water's massive capability and power. Water is life. Every child swims in its mothers' womb before taking its first breath of air. It is revitalizing and essential to world survival. It can damage and destroy. Mami Wata embodies all of water's potentials.

Akira decided that out of Mami's possible forms, a hyper-feminine version would be the route for her performance. Akira notes that this choice grew out of desire to embody Mami Wata and "one-up" herself to perform the goddess that already exists within. Mami Wata's existence in the landscape of *Sync or Swim*, featuring mostly European mythologies, is already a queer intervention into this performance. It brings Africa and blackness into the framework of *mythology*, a term that evokes ideas of Greece, Rome, Europe, and therefore, whiteness. Akira's embodiment of Mami Wata is celebratory and provides a queer, black future of love and power.

Mami Wata begins with two women – Mami Wata in human clothes (Akira Rose) and her friend (Emma Hollows), out on the town partying to TLC's "No Scrubs." A fuckboy (Faolain Bobersky), the 2019 version of a "scrub," wearing a backwards baseball hat and saggy sweatpants, enters the scene and tries to join these two women dancing and having a good time (see figure 25). After multiple failed attempts to insert himself into these women's night out, including buying them drinks and showing off some horrific dance moves, the fuckboy is upset and slaps Akira's ass. A disgusted Mami Wata turns to face the fuckboy. The soundscape changes to Rihanna's "Rude Boy." Mami Wata and her friend work together to recreate the same disgusting behaviors the fuckboy has projected on them. Akira and Emma scheme, engaging

Faolain in a lap dance where they periodically steal her personal belongings. The lap dance is riotous, sexy, and sneaky (see figure 26). The fuckboy is entranced. Akira gets on all fours and crawls to the beat of Rihanna's "give it to me baby like boom boom boom," seducing the fuckboy to the point where he is hypnotized (see figure 27).

Casting a sleep spell on the fuckboy, Mami Wata leaves the stage as hypnotic harp music starts to play. The fuckboy is dreaming. Emma re-enters the space with a strap-on plastic dildo, carefully placing it on the fuckboy without waking him up (see figure 28). She grabs a piece of the water fabric and lays it over his sleeping body, enveloping him in a blanket of water. Akira re-enters the space as the pulsing synthesizer of Beyoncé's "Sweet Dreams" plays. Formerly wearing a black tank top and skirt, Akira is now Mami Wata in her fullest form. Atop her head is a gold headpiece with long appendages, evoking imagery of the sun. She wears a turquoise and gold dress, accented with a necklace of heavy chains. The dress has a flow reminiscent of waves. Mini golden skulls hang from Akira's waist. Mami Wata has fully transformed.

Mami Wata rips the water off the fuckboy. He is no longer cognizant. He does not know what to do with himself, sitting lifeless with a huge plastic penis across his pelvis. He follows Mami Wata's instructions, mimicking her head spin on the lyric "I'm going out of my head" (Beyoncé) and obeying her puppet mastery as she moves his arms from above (see figure 29). Simultaneous to this interaction, Mami Wata's friend circles the stage with a pair of large cardboard scissors. The audience, having just seen Emma placing a strap-on on him before, knows what's to come. Mami Wata lures the fuckboy to standing and makes him believe he will soon be getting some sexual action with her. Emma and Akira are now on either side of Faolain, as her fuckboy is pursing his lips out for an anticipated make out session. Instead, Emma opens the scissors around the penis as Akira holds on. On the word "nightmare" of a line from the

chorus “A sweet dream, or a beautiful nightmare?” (Beyoncé), Emma operates the scissors and Mami Wata pulls the penis off of the fuckboy (see figure 30). The audience gasps, thrilled at the sight of a disgusting display of heterosexual masculinity lose his appendage of pleasure. The fuckboy runs away and Emma exits the other side of the stage. Akira holds the white penis as a microphone, suggesting a queer black future where Mami Wata owns abusive white masculinity (see figure 31). Mami Wata lip-syncs to the chorus of “Sweet Dreams” and twirls in the audience, her skirt and its chains of golden skulls spinning in a stunning motion with her body.

Emma returns to the stage with a silver platter serving up three colorful dildos, each with its own name card. The tray displays a white penis next to Brett Kavanaugh’s name, a black penis next to R. Kelly’s name, and a red penis next to Satan’s name (see figures 32 and 33). The penis of Brett Kavanaugh, the Associate Justice of the Supreme Court in the U.S., was chosen to for display on this platter because of sexual assaulting Dr. Christine Blasey Ford in his prep school past. In September 2018, while the devising process of *Sync or Swim* was underway, Dr. Ford came forward in a highly public series of trials with allegations against Kavanaugh. She revealed that when she was 15 years old, a 17-year-old drunk Kavanaugh pinned her to a bed at a house party, groped and laid on top of her, covered her mouth to prevent her from screaming, and tried to take off her clothes (Hutchinson). Even with these allegations, Kavanaugh has kept his highly-influential political position. The second dildo on the platter represents that of R. Kelly, American R&B singer and songwriter, infamous throughout his career for allegations of abuse and pedophilia towards young black women (*Surviving R. Kelly*). In between the Amherst and NYC mountings of *Sync or Swim*, the Lifetime docu-series *Surviving R. Kelly* was released in January 2019, featuring accounts of survivors stepping forward to detail his physical, sexual, and mental abuse. As such, the response to seeing R. Kelly’s phallic power stripped and on

display was substantially more palpable in the NYC audiences. The final penis on the platter belongs to Satan, the Christian manifestation of evil. Because Christianity has been used as a tool by European colonizers to “civilize” African bodies and communities, seeing Satan’s penis on the platter suggests Mami Wata is reclaiming the ways her African body has been colonized and her spirituality deemed savage.

The audience cheers at the thought of Mami Wata cutting penises off contemporary and religious figures who signify abuse, rape, and evil. A community has been built in the performance venue, centered on a collective hatred for the dangerous cisgender masculinity that has infiltrated all of our lives. Throughout history, penises, and their association with male sexual pleasure, have been used as justification for heinous acts of harassment, rape, and abuse by cisgender men. Because cisgender men use their penises as rationale for abusing others, e.g. “I can’t be held responsible when I’m horny/aroused!”, they have become symbolic of wielding power. They can be understood as weapons. In *Sync or Swim*, Mami Wata creates a future where she owns these men’s weapons. Additionally, she demonstrates the malleability of phallic power, especially as a figure who can take a multitude of forms – woman, man, creature, water – and still be equally as powerful. Mami Wata’s ownership of the penis asks a question Akira has suggested to me about her piece: What are penises besides flesh and blood? How can we reconstruct them to become something else?

These questions are even more resonant in a transgender context, where transgender women, assigned male at birth because of their penis, do not have the phallic power that cisgender men exercise. On their Twitter, trans actor Indya Moore provides an alternative to mainstream, trans-exclusionary understandings of penises. “If a woman has a penis, her penis is a biologically female penis” (Moore). This is a Gaga feminist understanding of gender and the

body, requiring “letting go of...basic assumptions about people, bodies, and desires” (Halberstam 27); historic understandings and teachings of biology suggest that penises are *only* biologically male. Mami Wata’s reclamation of the penis demonstrates that, in addition to owning the penises of Kavanaugh, R. Kelly, and Satan, she owns the intersection where manhood and penises intersect.

Handing off the penis tray for an audience member to enjoy, Akira and Emma go through the items they stole from the fuckboy. They accept the watch and throw out the wallet filled with condoms, laughing with the knowledge that they have succeeded in their goal of both stealing from the fuckboy and cutting off his plastic penis. After sifting through today’s earnings, Mami Wata and her friend retrieve the tray from the audience and exit the stage, holding either side of the tray raised above their shoulders (see figure 34). Is the world that Akira creates onstage a sweet dream or a beautiful nightmare? For Mami Wata, it is a stunning future that gives power back to black, queer, and trans communities traumatized by rape, abuse, and violent masculinity.



Figure 25: Mami Wata (Akira Rose) and her friend (Emma Hollows) enjoy a night out. The fuckboy (Faolain Bobersky) lurks behind them. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 26 (left): Mami Wata and her friend perform a lap dance for the fuckboy. Figure 27 (right): Mami Wata seduces the fuckboy to “Rude Boy.” Photos by Jason Fisch.



Figure 28: Mami Wata’s friend puts the strap-on on the sleeping fuckboy. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 29: Mami Wata has the fuckboy entranced. Photo by Jason Fisch



Figure 30: Mami Wata and her friend cut off the fuckboy's penis. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 31: Mami Wata celebrates her victory of cutting off the fuckboy's penis. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 32 (left): Mami Wata's friend shows off a plate of severed dildos, showcasing the name card of R. Kelly. Photo by Jason Fisch. Figure 33 (right): Mami Wata displays Brett Kavanaugh's name card. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 34: Mami Wata and her friend hold up their plate of penises, showcasing Satan's name. Photo by Jason Fisch.

Demeter, Persephone, and Murdering Shell

When researching what myths would work for my drag retelling, I was particularly drawn to the Greek origin story of the four seasons – the triangular relationship of Demeter, Persephone, and Hades. Demeter, the Greek goddess of fertility, has a passionate bond with her daughter, Persephone, one that is threatened when Persephone is captured by Hades, the god of the underworld. As a result of Demeter's despair, the world becomes dry and experiences famine. Persephone eventually returns to Demeter via retrieval by the messenger Hermes; upon their reunion, however, Demeter discovers that Hades fed Persephone pomegranate seeds, indicating that Persephone belongs to Demeter for part of each year, and Hades for another part. The Greeks saw this as the origin of the four seasons – when Persephone is with Hades, we experience winter, infertility, and Demeter's longing; when Persephone is with Demeter, we experience spring and summer – a beautiful, blossoming, and fruitful relationship between mother and child.

My interruption into the story of Demeter and Persephone arrives with the urgency of climate change. The boundaries between our four seasons are becoming increasingly porous. Our climate fluctuates wildly. What we expect for climate in one season appears in another. The idea of four separate and distinct seasons with a consistent climate is a falsehood. Climate change will undoubtedly affect us all, and rapidly create new barriers to the ones we love. I have noticed that the cultural conversations on global warming and climate change often place blame and on the *individual*. This blame is enacted through tactics like emphasizing one's carbon footprint and suggesting recycling practices are the key to saving our planet. While individuals can absolutely change their daily practices to be better, eco-conscious citizens, the role of corporate *systems*, functioning on capitalism, is often undiscussed as being an accelerating force to climate change. According to environmental policy journalist Coral Davenport of *The New York Times*:

Avoiding the most serious damage [to our climate] requires transforming the world economy within just a few years, said the authors [of the October 2018 United Nations Climate Report], who estimate that the damage would come at a cost of \$54 trillion. But while they conclude that it is technically possible to achieve the rapid changes required to avoid 2.7 degrees of warming, they concede that it may be politically unlikely.

Davenport elaborates on the “political impossibility” she describes in the text above, suggesting how these changes could not happen in the United States. The U.S. is resistant to enacting carbon dioxide pricing programs in order to avoid major financial loss. The relationship between Persephone and Demeter represents the power of family – chosen, biological, or both. Hades and the underworld represent the greed that aims to separate us all. In my queer futuristic retelling of the Demeter and Persephone story, I wanted Hades to represent corporate resistance to change its modes of production in the name of *financial gluttony* – the propellant to rapid damage to the

Earth. In *Sync or Swim*, Hades is symbolic of the Shell Oil Company, chosen for its role as one of the most powerful fossil fuel companies in the U.S., its instantaneously recognizable logo, and its association with the ocean. Demeter and Persephone, in contrast to the disgusting Hades, represent community, kinship, and the beautiful, healthy, loving Earth we aspire to live on.

The *Demeter* section of *Sync or Swim* begins with Hades (Bry Belling) displaying a cardboard replica of the Shell logo to the audience. At this point in the show, the audience has witnessed aggressive fraternity bros, sleazy businessmen, and fuckboys, so they usually boo at the sight of the Shell symbol, knowing that because of his association with a corporate symbol, Hades will be framed as a villain. Wearing a sharp-edged mask with colors inspired by oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, Hades hangs the Shell logo (see figure 36). He places his hands over Persephone (Sebastian Salloum), who is hidden beneath a black lace veil. Ocean wave sounds, underscoring the beginning of *Demeter*, transition into the pointillist pop introduction of Robyn's "Missing U." During this, I emerge onstage as Demeter, sporting a black trench coat, fedora, scarf, and gloves to indicate my travels through black crude oil to find Persephone (see figure 35). "Missing U" serves as the foundation for a musical tug-of-war between Demeter and Hades, each vying for the love and attention of the magnetic Persephone (see figure 37). Bry and I move around the stage while Sebastian stands in the center as our anchor. At the bridge of the song, Demeter is able to hold Persephone in her arms, but as Demeter lip-syncs the lyric "this residue, it's all I've got" (Robyn), Hades snatches Persephone from Demeter's arms and she is alone again. The "residue" lyric holds a new meaning in this story's context, emphasizing that Demeter is left only with the *remnants* of the crude oil on her hands, not the daughter she has searched the Earth for. As Hades ties Persephone in braided black rope and feeds her pomegranate juice,

Demeter is center stage, longing for her daughter and “the empty space [she] left behind” (Robyn). Demeter vanishes as Hades and Persephone remain together.

As the lights shift to a deep red, Prince’s “I Would Die 4 U” fills the room and Hades declares his enduring love for Persephone. Persephone is veiled, bound, and entangled in rope as Hades freely performs a celebratory dance over the fact that he has effectively stolen her. Demeter reappears onstage, witnessing this gross display of affection from Hades. Demeter contemplates her next step. As Audre Lorde suggests, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (112). In *Sync or Swim*, however, they can. Scored by a recording of my actual high-pitched scream, I grab a sharp red cardboard spoke from the yellow Shell logo and use this to pierce Hades’ neck (see figure 38). Hades – and by association, Shell and the larger fossil fuel complex – dies. Greed cannot exist in a queer future where the flourishing Demeter, and her kinship with Persephone, thrives.

Hades is washed away into the ocean, suggested theatrically by an ensemble member (Akira Rose, who notably has just performed as the amorphous, aquatic Mami Wata) sweeping Bry offstage with a strip of blue water fabric. “Starting Here, Starting Now,” the final track from Barbra Streisand’s 1966 television special and album *Color Me Barbra*, begins to play as the lights shift from haunting reds to inviting whites. Barbra Streisand’s appearance in the *Sync or Swim* soundscape is surprising. It is the oldest piece of music in the *Sync or Swim* canon. Barbra Streisand existed as an American gay icon before the breakthrough of the contemporary gay rights movement, evoking nostalgia in a futuristic piece. It is queer for its dissonance with the hip-hop, electronic pop, house, and rock music that has provided material for the other ensemble members’ respective vignettes. The insertion of a track from Barbra Streisand’s early discography, harkening to peak popularity for the legendary gay icon, is an example of what

Stephen Farrier describes as queer *heritability*. Demeter's live performance of "Starting Here, Starting Now" evokes a gay past through a vocabulary, visual and auditory, that is articulated through my queer body in the present. A queer person could come to that performance, witness the Barbra Streisand song in performance, and learn about their queer histories and, if they're not familiar, be introduced to the musical and performance tropes that have pervaded the language. In this particular staging, there is an element of queer teaching happening onstage between Demeter and Persephone as well: a mother demonstrating love for her daughter by showing her the ropes of precise lip-syncing, selling a Barbra Streisand song, and executing a costume reveal – the last of which is described below.

As we hear Barbra Streisand sing the first "starting here, starting now," Demeter untangles Persephone from the braided black rope. Persephone twirls slowly out of the rope. The two smile at each other from across the line. They inch closer to each other with each beat of "when we walk, we'll walk together," enacting exactly what the lyric instructs (Streisand). Demeter leads Persephone to a chair amidst the audience and kneels down before her, lip-syncing "when we talk, we will say the most with silence" (Streisand). This intimate connection is followed by Demeter cheating out to all of the audience, spreading her arms and proclaiming "now when you sleep, you will dream a dream that's free from care" (Streisand). Demeter tosses her fedora to Persephone, unravels her scarf, and peels off her gloves, slowly and with intent, ensuring that she will always be there for Persephone. Demeter invites Persephone to "be still," and "take [her] hand," bringing her to the side of the stage to prepare for the "greatest journey heaven can allow" (Streisand). With another elongated "now" in the line "starting now" (Streisand), Demeter takes center stage and twirls, left only in the black trench coat we witnessed before. As Barbra's massive belt occupies the room, underscored by an instrumental buildup

driven by ascending orchestral strings, I twirl and absorb the audience's cheers and applause. At the climax of the song, the key changes simultaneous to an epic tear-away of the final piece of the oil-soaked clothing – the black trench coat. Underneath is the *true* Demeter – manifested as a gown ripe with green felt leaves, felt branches, brown tulle, and glitter paint to match my gilded beard (see figure 39). Whereas the reveal in *Nemesis* is a moment of *metamorphosis*, the reveal in *Demeter* is a *return* to the true self. Because she has overcome her obstacle, she is able to reveal the future she desires to see for herself, her daughter, nature, and the Earth. This is a tectonic shift in *Sync or Swim*. As the audience cheers at the sight of the glorious Demeter, she grabs Persephone and instructs her in executing a diva ending (see figure 40). The two stand back to back center stage as Demeter throws her head back to find her light. She and Persephone put out each hand, one by one, and raise them as the final note of Barbra's belting dominates the soundscape of the room (see figure 41). "Starting here, starting now," in this queer future, Demeter and Persephone are no longer separated by Hades' greed. They are together forever.



Figure 35: Demeter (Garrett Sager) caresses Persephone (Sebastian Salloum). Photo by Jason Fisch, edits by Uno Servida.



Figure 36: Hades (Bry Belling) demonstrates his Shell Oil Company logo. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 37: Demeter and Hades fight for Persephone. Photo by Jason Fisch



Figure 38: Demeter stabs Hades with a spoke from the Shell logo. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 39: Demeter reveals her true self underneath the black oil. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 40: Demeter and Persephone hold hands, preparing for the new world. Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 41: Demeter and Persephone execute a diva ending to “Starting Here, Starting Now.” Photo by Tom Kelleher.

In *Demeter*, I have created a queer future that rejects capitalism and embraces kinship. This future includes genuine intimacy between the “mother and daughter” pairing of two bearded men, realized in performance through lip-syncing to gay icons Robyn and Barbra Streisand. The

legitimacy of this relationship in *Sync or Swim* is Gaga feminism at its finest – celebrating language like “he is my mother; he is my daughter” and viewing it as beautiful and natural, instead of titillating and controversial. Capitalism creates desires to build borders that prohibit people from enacting relationships and worlds they wish to see. Hades is a manifestation of this *individualistic* greed. Suggesting that *cooperation* is key to unleashing the world from forces of greed, J. Jack Halberstam writes:

Gaga feminism leads the way to an anarchist project of cultural riot and reciprocation: what Kropotkin called “mutual aid,” the tendency for animals to cooperate rather than compete (in the way Darwin presumed all species competed for survival), becomes today a newly vital model for human interaction...this notion of working with others rather than in competition is probably the only thing that will save us from the greed of free-market economies (137).

It is precisely this goal of working *with* others instead of competitively that I have enacted in *Demeter*, as well as in the development of *Queer & Now* as a whole. *Queer & Now* creates queer spaces that are communal and capable of holding multiple truths and perspectives. Rather than seeing one another as a block to each other’s success, we are here to uplift one another to become the best versions of ourselves, using drag as the medium to invent them. We are truly syncing in the sense that we are *synchronizing*, uniting in a way that celebrates our co-dependency as a human species. We are prepared for a new, queer world with transforming bodies, because we are actively encouraging these metamorphoses, and shifting borders, because we have already begun to disintegrate them.

Borders are Shifting, Bodies are Transforming

I have just described, in extensive detail and analysis, four vignettes from *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim*. The other pieces of the performance also provide rich possibilities for the future. Faolain Bobersky reimaged Circe, *The Odyssey*'s villainous sorceress, as a fierce, sexy, vigilante heroine. With the help of two nymphs, Circe takes down two Trump-spewing businessmen and transforms them into pigs, slitting their throats and dancing in their blood (see figures 42 and 43). Bry Belling, in the queer spirit of shipping two characters across stories (Barker and Scheele 109), married the stories of an Irish Merrow and Scottish Selkie, both variants of the mermaid. Bry explored what it would look like if these figures had to navigate their ocean homes being polluted and their precious items being stolen by a greedy businessman. Through a dance and collaboration, the Merrow and Selkie retrieve their items, fart on their abuser, and return to their ocean together (see figures 44 and 45). Emma Hollows provided an alternative ending to the story of Antigone, a Greek tragedy figure who fights to get a proper burial for her brother, faces oppression from the stubborn king Creon, and commits suicide. Emma's version of the story aimed to keep Antigone "alive," defeating Creon with fierce feminine energy in the form of a group of divine *goddexes*, the gender neutral word for deity (Sorensen; see figures 46, 47, and 48). The scope of my thesis does not allow me to detail these vignettes extensively, but as the director of *Sync or Swim*, I witnessed how each vignette strewn together creates a collective vision for a queer future. Throughout *Sync or Swim*, each goddex has overcome struggle. They have transformed themselves and their worlds into sites of liberation and joy. The fantasy, as Valentina suggests, has become their reality.



Figure 42: Circe (Faolain Bobersky) and her nymphs (Akira Rose and Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves) cast a spell on the Trump businessmen. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 43: Circe stands in the circle of her nymphs and men-turned-pigs. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 44: The Merrow (Bry Belling) entrances the sailor (Akira Rose) on the “Wild Beach.” Photo by Tom Kelleher



Figure 45: The Merrow and the Selkie (Faolain Bobersky) sing “Shark in the Water.” Photo by Tom Kelleher.



Figure 46: Antigone (Emma Hollows) celebrates being alive. Photo by Tom Kelleher.

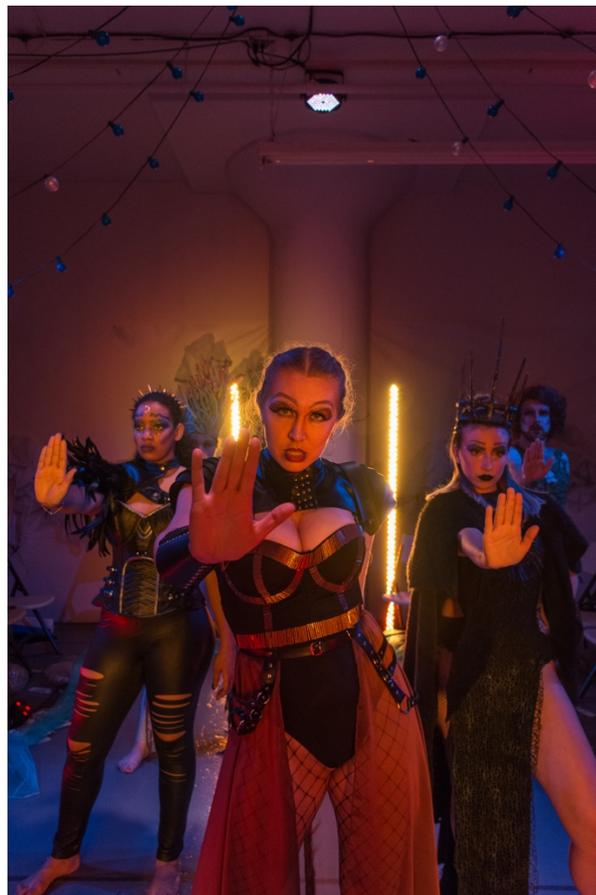


Figure 47: Antigone and the goddesses have a face off with Creon. Photo by Jason Fisch.



Figure 48: Antigone and the deities reclaim their power and show off their crowns. Photo by Jason Fisch.

The finale of *Sync or Swim* occurs after Antigone (Emma Hollows) has defeated Creon (Akira Rose and Sebastian Salloum), stealing their crowns with the assistance of the other divine goddesses (Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves as Nemesis, Faolain Bobersky as Circe, Bry Belling as the Merrow, and myself as Demeter). During each prior vignette, sheer water fabric has accumulated, lining the stage. As Antigone and the goddesses show off their crowns, the sound of a storm dominates the space and the lights fade. Each goddess is frightened for what's to come, searching for solace in each other as each lightning bolt strikes. Narcissus (Sebastian Salloum) and Mami Wata (Akira Rose) return to the stage, and the group forms a huddle on the floor. Ariana Grande's "God is a Woman" starts as the group of goddesses moves with each other like a lung breathing, perfectly in sync. The group rises and moves like a slithering snake, forming a beautiful line of mythological power. As we reach the climax of the song, each goddess grabs one of the seven pieces of water fabric that have been laid across the perimeter of the stage. Antigone, center stage, serves as the anchor as the goddesses literally become the storm, pieces of

water fabric held above their heads (see figure 49). They are braving the massive change the world is experiencing with passion and ferocity. They move in a circle with precise synchronicity, each a spoke on a wheel turning at just the right time. They are a singular unit, moving like the ocean. The goddesses share their water fabric with the audience, and grab hands with one another. Lip-syncing passionately and proclaiming “God is a woman,” each goddess is facing out to the audience and sharing their hope for a new queer future. Each ensemble member turns in and arches their back with the support of each other’s arms. The lights focus on the group and go to black; the audience screams and cheers at the sight of a collective working together so beautifully (see figure 50). The lights come back up, each ensemble member takes their bow, and the audience is invited into a dance party set to Le Tigre’s “Deceptacon.” The queer futures are trickling out beyond the stage.



Figure 49: Antigone anchors the goddesses as they create a storm. Photo by Jason Fisch.

Finishing *Sync or Swim* with “God is a Woman” was always important to me, regardless of what the gender make-up of my cast was. The song evokes a feeling of a new world, one in which our understandings of power and community are shifted. It embodies *divine femininity*, which I believe is key to embodying as we brace ourselves for the future. And it is drag performers, those who embrace alternative modes of being and reject power structures with glitter and joy, that can direct us to our next steps on this journey. Alaska Thunderfuck elaborates:

Most people don't realize that when we witness the art of drag we are taking part in a divine, sacred act. And we are performing our duty as citizens to a dying Earth to tip the energetic scales rightfully in the direction of the feminine. Drag is the ecstatic celebration of divine feminine energy. Drag queens are priestesses. They perform precise preparation rituals passed down painstakingly by the generations that came before them. They alter their appearances, and don ostentatious garb and costumery, in order to perform exuberant dance and movements before people who have congregated to witness the ceremony. Whether we know it or not, drag queens are the truth-tellers and soothsayers of our society. And we love them (5).

Queer & Now: Sync or Swim embraces the *feminine*, but not in relationship to womanhood or even femininity; that is limiting to trans-inclusive, Gaga feminist practice. To me, in the context of *Sync or Swim*'s celebration of divine femininity, *feminine* can be defined as all performances of gender that oppose the *evil* forces of masculinity. This inclusive understanding of the feminine is where we find the space to recreate our bodies, binaries, and borders, enacting Gaga feminist futures. Like Alaska Thunderfuck suggests, we as the ensemble of *Sync or Swim* are “performing our duty as citizens to a dying Earth to tip the energetic scales rightfully in the direction of the

feminine” (5), dismantling, rearranging, and reinventing world order. *Sync or Swim*, as a space where multiple drag performers work together in a collective, therefore, is a drag ceremony where audiences witness young “truth-tellers and soothsayers” of our society, raising awareness to the global evils at play and the lives at stake. The mythological content of *Sync or Swim* points to the urgent call for divine femininity. It is what the world needs in order to overcome the *damages* to the social and natural climate of the Earth, instigated by the patriarchy and corporate greed. As dramaturg Finn Lefevre wrote for the introductory speech to *Sync or Swim*, “our borders are shifting, our bodies are transforming,” all because of these aggressive forces. We must be able to embrace these changes with new modes of being.

As borders change as a result of the powerful forces of water – arising because of systemic abuse of the Earth – barriers and binaries are crumbling. Can the world (lip)-*sync* – synchronizing to combat forces of evil, abuse, and corruption by embracing new genders, identities, and communities – or will it *swim* – rejecting the future and reproducing its failing structures of power?



Figure 50: The goddesses end “God is a Woman” together. Photo by Tom Kelleher.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Program Insert for NYPOP: The Myths

All images by Tom Kelleher

CIRCE *Faolain Bobersky*

Circe is a sorceress from The Odyssey who lives on an island with her nymphs. Any man who sets foot on the island is fed a potion which turns them into pigs. Her goal is to make the outsides of these men match their corrupt insides. Because of her actions, she is often depicted as a villain. I am re-envisioning Circe as a fierce vigilante heroine.



NEMESIS *Elisabeth Castellon Gonçalves*

Nemesis is the Greek goddess of divine retribution and revenge. She shows wrath to any human being that commits hubris and arrogance before the gods. She ensured that there was balance in the life of man. It was Nemesis who ensured an equal balance of happiness and sadness, as well as good and bad luck. The way I embodied this myth was through asking the question: what would happen if Nemesis used her powers against the Gods, against the people who abuse their authority?

NARCISSUS *Sebastian Salloum*

Narcissus is a figure in Greek mythology who represents beauty. Many people were enamored with him. He saw his reflection in the river and this led to his tragic death. In a contemporary context the Narcissus story can be read as one of toxic masculinity and violence against women. My take on the story asks: what would healthy masculinity look like, or is that even possible in the world we live in today?

**MERROWS & SELKIES** *Bry Belling*

Merrows and Selkies are Irish and Scottish mermaids that can remove their magic items (a red cap or seal skin) and live on land. Should a human man steal one of these items from the creatures, they will be forced to live with the man on land as their wife. Only if the Merrow or Selkie finds their stolen piece will they be able to return to the sea. This was a popular myth to explain when a wife would leave their family. I am bringing these stories together through the lens of women taking agency and reclaiming what has been stolen from them. Together, the Merrow and Selkie find the strength to raise each other up.

MAMI WATA *Akira Rose*

Mami Wata is a water deity venerated in West, Central, and Southern Africa and in the African diaspora in the Americas. Possessing divine and endless power, she bestows



eternal wealth and heals physical and spiritual ills to those in need. She embodies danger and desire. She often visits mortals in dreams and if they are loyal to her, she will grant them riches. She is all-powerful, confident, beautiful, and mysterious. Mami Wata's story came to me at a time when I needed her to teach me something about how to be myself.



DEMETER *Garrett Sager*

Demeter is the Greek goddess of fertility. Demeter has a passionate bond with her daughter, Persephone - one that is threatened when Persephone is captured by Hades, the god of the underworld. Because of Demeter's despair, the world became dry and experienced famine. Persephone is eventually returned to Demeter; upon their reunion,

however, Demeter discovers Hades fed Persephone pomegranate seeds, meaning that Persephone belongs to Demeter for part of each year, and Hades for another part. Thus, this is the origin of four seasons -- when Persephone is with Hades, we experience winter, infertility, and Demeter's longing; when Persephone is with Demeter, we experience spring and summer, beautiful, blossoming, and fruitful. My interruption into the story of Demeter and Persephone arrives with the urgency of climate change, the family separation we see at the Southern border, and the corporate greed that aims to separate us all.

ANTIGONE *Emma Hollows*

Antigone is a heroine from ancient Greece. After the death of her father, Oedipus, her brothers killed each other fighting over the throne of Thebes. Being Ancient Greece the throne was not passed to Antigone but to Creon, her uncle, who passed



a law forbidding anyone to mourn Antigone's brother, Polynices. Antigone stoically defied him by burying her brother in an act of love and loyalty which ultimately resulted in Creon burying Antigone alive inside a cave. Antigone represents a haunting example of what happens to women who challenge the patriarchy.

APPENDIX B

Audience Responses

“Moving and beautiful. Genuinely one of the best pieces if not the best piece of theater I have seen since I started at UMass. I felt beautiful in that space and I have felt really beautiful since I left that space. I really feel like I left a piece of myself there and also took a piece of your show with me. I am so thoroughly impressed with your work and with all of the artists involved. I still feel like I can’t articulate myself. It was moving, it was beautiful, and it was fun. I’m honored I got to bear witness to something like this. Seriously. Thank you so much.” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“What does the future look like? The fierce and fabulous cast & crew of *Queer & Now: Sync or Swim* offer us a gorgeously designed, fluid, watery, wonderful array of options, drawing on ancient myths. The future is female. It smashes patriarchy with huge big scissors. It’s fierce AF. It’s Queer. Trans. Transforming. Transcendent. The future celebrates bodies of all shapes and modes and textures. The future moves like these stunning students do, like rivers and oceans do, like fluid identities do. It celebrates the gloriousness of difference, embracing it as a given not a point of contention. The future is aqua blue gauze, shiny golden crowns, witchy black feathers, sparkling gilded beards. It is feathers and leather and spandex and down with pigs and up with goddesses. It is in tune with the natural world. It is a beautiful and life-affirming dance party. It holds multiple truths. It’s queer. It’s now. It’s exquisite.” – Professor Megan Lewis, thesis committee member and audience member at both iterations of *Sync or Swim*

“Over the past 3 years I have absolutely loved going to see the different themes of *Queer & Now*. My friends and I still gush over this event and performances from years past. I am consistently stunned by the production, effort, costumes, performance, and excellency of the show. This has literally been the best event I have ever been to on campus and it seems every year it just gets better. The theme of *Sync or Swim* was so impactful and relevant to modern culture and this in conjunction with the beauty of the performance was breathtaking.” – Emily Czazasty, audience member at UMass

“You all could make a million dollars!” – Professor Julie Nelson, audience member at UMass

“Beautiful concept, amazing costumes and lighting, fierce attitudes.” – anonymous audience member at NYPOP

“Unique and unlike any other piece of theater I’ve ever witnessed in my life. The show effortlessly combined drag and theater culture into an amazing and conscious piece!! Can’t wait for more” – MarHadoo Jones, audience member at UMass

“I felt invigorated and very gay” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“It filled me with joy and pride to see your beautiful, fun, sophisticated work. Thank you for your generosity and talent!” – Professor Harley Erdman, thesis committee chair and audience member at UMass

“I loved seeing everyone feel so empowered and comfortable in their own bodies and that they felt they could share that with the audience. That was very special... Thank you to the actors for being comfortable and vulnerable with the audience in order to put on this show. I feel empowered when I see people in my community able to openly express themselves in all walks of life.” – Julia Bergh, audience member at UMass

“I was very grateful as a queer man that there was space for this” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“I think that QUEER & NOW: Sync or Swim was a fantastic and innovative aspect of theater! It brought together incredibly important themes that celebrated diversity, gender, sexuality, and more! I loved the message and way the show made me feel - happy, seen, connected, etc. From “A Lip Sync Spectacular” to “Sync or Swim,” this project has created a beautiful movement for queer representation and celebration. I can't wait to see what you do next :)” – Fiona McCann, audience member at UMass

“Good production – great costumes/makeup – great energy” – Kim Levinson, audience member at both iterations of *Sync or Swim*

“Beautiful, creative, fantastic...I hope this show runs forever! It’s so refreshing and affirming to be in queer normative spaces.” – Nancy, audience member at UMass

“Fabulous, sexy, inspiring...I remember being awed at the amount of work that went into it, and impressed with the dedication of the cast, crew, and director into putting something bizarre and fabulous on for the campus community. It also made me think about gender fluidity and representation and how gender fluidity comes to be embodied and materialized through dress, gait, movement, gesture, etc.” –Joshua Barszczewski, audience member at UMass

“The show was funny, engaging, and beautifully presented, but honestly queer wasn't my first thought. It felt very current, and highly feminist, but the vignettes seemed to be a lot of women gaining power over men, or gaining status in relationships with men. A lot of penis power destroyed by women. I didn't see much queer interaction between characters, or queer relationships of any sort being exposed the way hetero relationships were. Drag is, of course, a queer art form but that alone didn't project the energy I was expecting from something called “queer and now.” It was more “fuck men” than anything else.” – Lydia Utter, audience member at NYPOP

“I felt empowered, excited, and really just ready to have a great rest of my night.” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“Fun! The audience loved it. Everyone had a good performance, and the costumes were amazing. It was evident that the cast and crew put a lot of thought and hard work into the show. The cast was so in sync with each other. Bravo!” – Diane Sager, audience member at UMass

“Amazing! Fortunate to witness the progression, digestion and stages of this piece. It is radical, celebratory, and real. Thank you for creating a piece that is thought provoking and fucking fantastically entertaining.” – anonymous audience member at both iterations of *Sync or Swim*

“Inventive. Colorful. Playful.” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“Fun, irreverent, thought-provoking, in your face, dance party. It represented rebellion, and the exploration of a queer fantasy world/future. I would love to see the connection to the myths pushed further, and the idea of connecting how society treats femininity spills into how it treats “mother earth” pushed further.” – Jordan Reed, audience member at both iterations of *Sync or Swim*

“Artful, passionate, delightful” – Anita M. Bobersky, audience member at NYPOP

“Futuristic, otherworldly, and intense...an incredible piece of artwork. I'm excited to see what the artists do next. Thank you so much for this piece of art you have poured your soul into. Your work is so so important.” – Gabi, audience member at UMass

“Very entertaining, outstanding choreography, make up, hair and costume. Wished it was a bigger theater so more people could have watched it.” – anonymous audience member at UMass

“Every year the group of people that I have gone to this performance with has grown because when I tell people about the experience that Queer & Now is everyone wants to go. I love the setting of the stage and how the audience is surrounding the performance but I also would love to have more people at UMass attending this event. Everyone needs to see this. This performance has never felt like a play or just another show at the FAC, it truly feels like a unique experience. This past year I brought my boyfriend and his friend to the show and one of my friends brought her boyfriend as well. They would probably never go to a drag event on their own but they absolutely LOVED this and were hoping it was a once a month kind of thing. I am so thankful for this production and it is truly an eye opening, perspective changing experience. Thank you so much for sharing your incredible talents with us!” – Emily Czazasty, audience member at UMass

“It was delightful! A great mix of pieces, movement and performance. There were laughs, there were poignant statements and there was just beautiful, free expression. I was super impressed with the performers and producers. I felt the happiness and excitement that was on stage which was contagious.” – Zach Gelfand, audience member at NYPOP