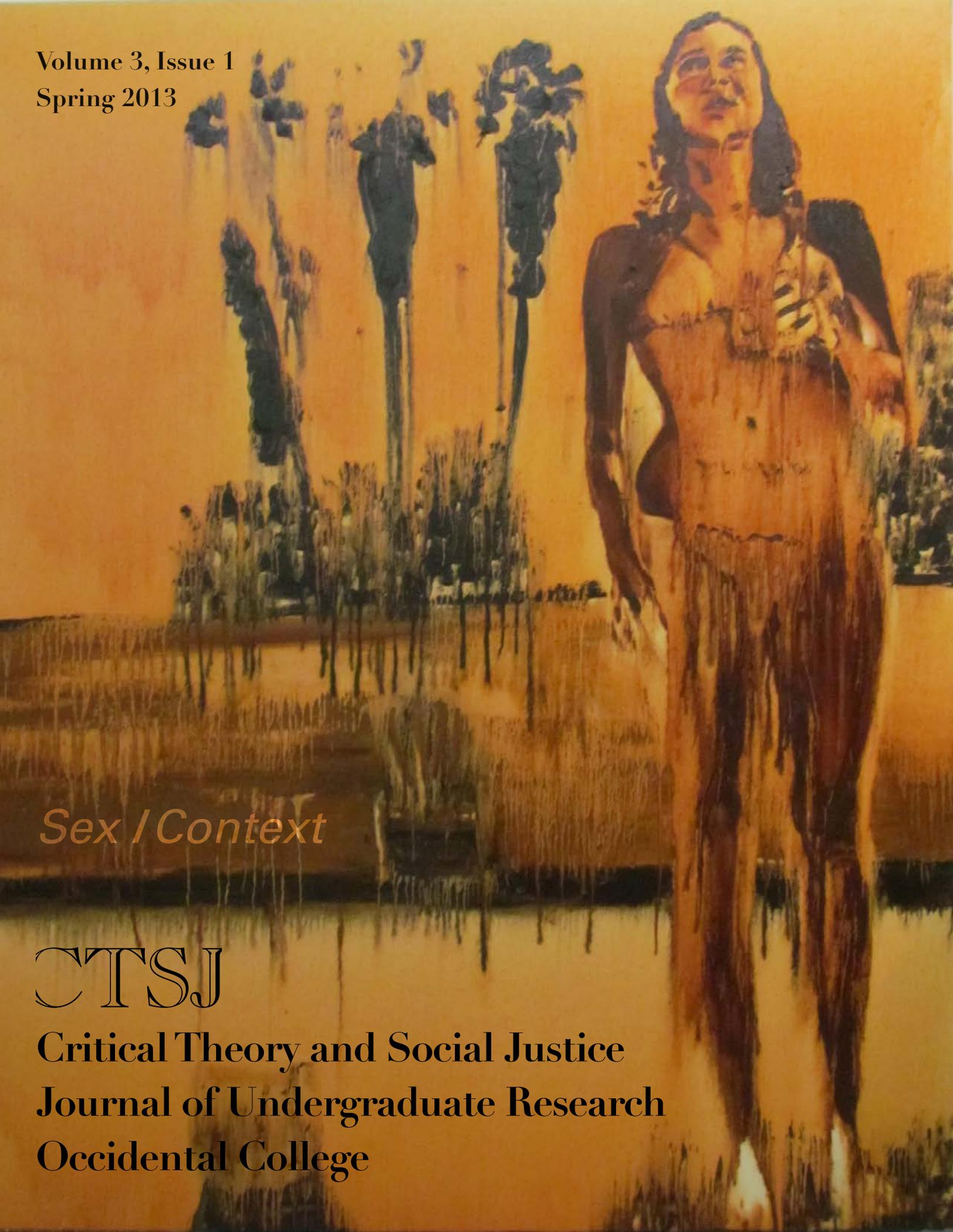


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Sex / Context

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Introduction to this Issue

Sex/Context

As critic Michael O'Rourke has recently noted, "there is a certain discourse which propagates the idea that queer theory (and not just its politics) is always already dead, buried, over, finished."¹ By the late 1990s, some of us started calling queer theory "the theory formerly known as queer" in joking homage to journalists' attempts to name Prince when he began issuing records under the aegis of an unpronounceable symbol. Even (or especially) by its own practitioners, queer theory has seemed destined to die young given its birth in the last decade of the twentieth century at the nexus of the dark advent of HIV/AIDS and the neoconservative assassination of "theory" as such. Yet if queer theory appeared self-immolating from its birth, it might be due not only to its conscious resistance to theoretical consistency or canonical stability but also to something ontologically unstable about sex itself.

In the urgency to answer the question "What is queer theory?," we have perhaps lost sight of the more basic question, "What exactly *is* sex?" This question may be of particular interest with regard to the current "ontological turn," a term that describes a variety of contemporary critics' rethinking of materiality beyond the epistemological, linguistic focus on post-structuralism in the preceding decades. Yet this turn has tended to neglect sex, even among queer theorists who are more likely to turn to virtuality, affect, or even desexualized applications of the presumed components of sex like ecstasy or the psychoanalytic drive.²

The essays in this special issue of *CTSJ: Critical Theory and Social Justice, Journal of Undergraduate Research* by no means define what sex or sexuality is, but they all make powerful arguments for dismantling many of the assumptions that have accrued in the last twenty years of work on these topics. The general question that animates this issue is whether the concept of sex—a field of inquiry dominated by continental twentieth-century studies ranging from Freud to Foucault—still animates critical theory in a global context.

1 Michael O'Rourke, "The Afterlives of Queer Theory," *Continent* 1.2 (2011): 102-16.

2 See, for example, the following queer thinkers who approach the question of ontology from a Lacanian, Deleuzian, and Hegelian-Fanonian approach, respectively: Levi Bryant, "Lacan's Graphs of Sexuation and OOO," web, 28 June 2010, <larvalsubjects.wordpress.com>; Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2007); and Eric Stanley, "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture," *Social Text* 29.2 (2011): 1-19.



All of the authors here take up the ontological question of sex with a firm insistence on understanding it in its historical and cultural contexts. The places they take us are often uncomfortable as they cross borders of nation, history, childhood, and the visible world. Two of the four authors overtly evoke queer theory and two do not, demonstrating that an attachment to the word “queer” can be both helpful and limiting if we want to take seriously new directions in the study of sex and sexuality.

Maana Sasaki’s essay “Gender Ambiguity and Liberation of Female Sexual Desire in Fantasy Spaces of *Shojo* Manga and the *Shojo* Subculture” examines scenes of female homoerotic connection and self-mutilation in the first volume of the 2006 Japanese graphic manga novel, *LIFE*. Of all the essays in this volume, Sasaki’s demonstrates most clearly that sex and context mutually condition each other. As her title’s pairing of artistic form and subcultural meaning indicates, this essay outlines an interactive production of (and reaction to) personal subjectivity, cultural nationalism, transnational encounter, and the ambiguities inherent in representing sex and making sexuality represent. Sasaki shuttles between the presumptions made and leverage provided by hegemonic Western notions of how to “think sex” and a deep—and deeply different—history of Japanese sexual and gender embodiment. Engaging both Japanese and English-speaking critics, the author subtly points out that each analytic tradition might gain from and define the limits of the other. Moreover, *shojo* manga’s thrust toward a graphic language of radical empathy as well as its exploitation of the ways in which feminine embodiment is always already portrayed as cartoonish might, in fact, become a common meeting ground (given manga’s international consumption) for a global feminism that aims to occupy new terrains in culture below and beyond “rights” discourse and policy.

Sasaki combines an account of Japan’s historical vicissitudes of control over and acceptance of gender and sexual fluidity with a formal analysis of manga’s constructions of reader/character identification to locate potentials for female sexuality in seemingly negative behavior. Teen female cutting emerges as a literal and figurative opening into a gendered contemporary version of Japan’s “Floating World” tradition, which portrays scenes ranging from middle-class pleasure culture to interactive fantasy-scapes. Though her disciplined focus on Japanese cultural history rightfully places comparisons to Western notions of sexuality in the background, Sasaki’s article implicitly underscores the critical myopia of what the West accepts as common terms for scholarship on sexuality. Indeed, her essay might evoke Foucault’s contrast in *The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction* between Eastern *ars erotica* and Western *sexualis scientia* only to highlight the fact that a glancing mention of Asian “others,” even in the service of



condemning the Western mind, is still a form of Orientalism if the critique does not invite the topics and critics of the othered culture to enter the conversation on their own terms.

Mary Zaborskis, likewise, addresses how youth culture grapples with sexuality and gendered embodiment in her essay “Orphaning Queerness.” This essay compares *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), *The Secret Garden* (1911), and *Harriet the Spy* (1964) to examine how English and American children’s books of the twentieth century correct the developmental narrative of the gender non-normative and spectrally sexualized orphan girl character. Zaborskis suggests that recent queer theoretical analysis of the child figure is ironically complicit in the ideological absenting of homosexual children, in part because these theorists tend to ignore the genre of children’s literature. The genre should be central to analyses of heteronormativity since this literature functions both as a common cultural representation *of* children and as a potent pedagogical apparatus in the familial and educational scenes of reception *by* children.

If queer theory seemed dead on arrival, then the queer child as its counterpart seems forever unborn and only ever recognized through the veil of prolepsis or analepsis, moored to adulthood as the proper domain of sex and sexuality. Zaborskis accordingly asks, “Can, then, ghostly gay children become fully fleshed in the time of childhood?” The answer from both queer theory and classic children’s books seems to be *not for long*. But for all their obvious heteronormativity, these texts nonetheless yield a curiously disembodied ontology of queerness that haunts the generic subtext. Gender queerness, sexual queerness, and the general “off-ness” that the word “queer” marked in the early-twentieth century seem to congeal here less as a perverse turn from the right path than as some *thing*, an ontological orphan of normative twentieth-century epistemologies.

By tracing in these literary texts the collaboration of adult and child characters in their mutual “orphaning” of each other’s queerness, Zaborskis leads us to wonder if there might not be a similar unwitting collusion of a theory and politics, formerly known together as queer, and now utterly divided in a broader contemporary context. If queerness is located only in a utopian future, an irretrievable personal origin, a lost or never manifest critical past, or the unoccupiable death drive, then academic queer theory seems destined to turn to the child as the necessary impossible—the acceptable human property, the consummately unorganizable proletariat, the very limit of sex and consent.³ The ghostly ontology of the queer child matched

3 For more on these trends in rendering “queer” as an elusive presence/present, see: Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2004) 2; José Esteban Muñoz,



with the insistent indefinition of “queer” in theory contrasts dramatically with the political realm. Advocates’ push to incorporate gay politics into normative models of kinship has yielded “the gay child,” a new essentialist category that takes on material insistence (if not existence) in its immanent need for protection from bullying, which is seemingly directed mostly at transparent homosexual tendencies over perceived race, class, abled, “nerd,” or (most curiously) gendered embodiments of children. This bullied gay child is not queer, as the combination of “born-that-way” and protected-category logics combine to drive out what Kathryn Bond Stockton identifies as already queer about childhood. In this broader context, Zaborskis seems to suggest that queer is still here, but it may indeed be an orphan.

Sam Nasstrom’s “Composting History: The Terrifying Melancholia of *Pornoterrorismo*” reminds us that Zaborskis’s theoretical queer orphan may lack supportive ideologically stable parents, but it certainly carries all the marks of its national, political, and cultural patrimony. As with Sasaki’s essay, this article’s analysis of sexual and political trauma across the Spanish postcolonial Atlantic indicates that a broadened sense of the queer might take root if its Anglo-American parents would only let it leave home—even if to die, rot, and regenerate in new form.

As this essay makes clear, you have to see a pornoterrorist performance to believe it. Suffice it to say, there will be blood, sex, consensual torture, and disturbing spoken word in a performance in which the personal and political meet in their darkest and arguably most generative forms. Nasstrom dutifully provides readers with a thick description of a 2010 staged encounter between Argentine artist Leonor Silvestri and Spanish performer Diana Torres and analyzes its import through the lens of current US queer theory. The language of sex-positive lesbian feminism referenced in this live sex show is infused with the political significance of an Argentine’s violent encounter with the Spanish colonizer. While performing variously amusing, shocking, and titillating sexual acts on stage, Silvestri and Torres’s words, props, and actions invoke incest, European colonialism, The Dirty War, and the Holocaust. The result is at once a damning critique and an uncomfortable refusal to break from the erotic embrace of patriarchal systems—as long as that break is anything less than collective and revolutionary. As

Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2009); and Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham and London: Duke Univ. Press, 2009).



the essay's epigraph from Silvestri demands, "Fight with us. This is as much an invitation as it is a mandate. May it rain blood."

Nasstrom posits that "these blissfully counterhistorical reworkings of pleasure demand that violent histories be read in conjunction with consensual/performed violence on stage." It is as difficult to establish a critical distance from this kind of terrorizing art as it is to take a critical stance relative to such self-theorizing and theoretically informed artists (in the case of *Pornoterrorists*, involving a heady brew of transatlantic direct action political theory and self-situation in a genealogy of "action art"). Yet Nasstrom finds firm analytic footing in the "compost" pile of history, in this case at the nexus of transatlantic personal and political histories festering with bodily fluids rarely acknowledged.

The critical act of "composting" that she locates in this performance outlines a critical horizon for US queer theory. Nasstrom demands that critics become performers and vice versa. Decay and regeneration are not natural but rather politically and performatively forced processes in which the times of personal sexuality and political context are out of joint for *Pornoterroristas*. Nasstrom's reading of temporality as it strains through recent US queer theory evokes a powerful hermeneutic of and for disjointed times, even as she also indicts its culturally myopic ontologies of time (truly a stew of Protestantism, Catholicism, and their secular imprints) that presume death as the end of life or, might we say, the beginning of queer.

As with Zaborskis's proposition that queer indicates less a constitutive outside or lack than the materializing residue of its own impossibility, Nasstrom claims that both time-oriented US queer theory and *Pornoterroristas* seem "to desire loss to come back in physical form, a form of material-loving melancholia." More than suggesting their mutual ontologizing of loss, Nasstrom insists that the national biases of these theorists and artists violently collide: "The idea that we might be forced to consider histories that do not directly affect our subjectivities might produce such manically pleasurable forms of melancholia for others' pasts that it produces queer worlds only possible after their mutual corrosion, where the destruction of one past bleeds into another." Thus, Nasstrom does not effect an asymmetrical application of theory stenciled onto an ethnographic record. Rather, "Composting History" adopts the techniques of *Pornoterrorismo* itself by forcing readers to view an erotic but violent cross-cultural, transhistorical, and transgeneric encounter between theory and performance.

Julia Sills's essay "Resisting Containment: Relocating Subjectivity in Sandra Cisneros's 'One Holy Night'" takes up many of the issues raised by the other authors with an elegance and focus that in itself argues for the ongoing importance of critical traditions specific to genre,



discipline, and, indeed, feminism. Sills provides critical context and a close reading of Cisneros's "One Holy Night," a short story relatively unexamined in the subindustry of scholarship inspired by her anthology *Woman Hollering Creek*. According to Sills, this neglect is no coincidence, as the story deals with a young teen girl who defends her pregnancy and romance with a 37-year-old serial killer. The vein of child sexuality and agency running through all the articles in this issue finds its end game here, but Cisneros's point is not simply to shock. Sills argues that the story occupies a kind of aporia created by the Venn diagram conjoining the marginalization of women of color and children.

Drawing on Cisneros scholarship as well as a number of classical feminist-of-color texts that address the stakes of authorship and representation, this essay isolates the paradoxical construction of Third World women: On the one hand, their literatures are expected to assert agency toward racial and gender uplift; on the other hand, they are theoretically rendered in an impossible positionality. Sills explicates this paradox through Trihn Minh-Ha's concept of the "triple bind," Emma Pérez's notion of a "third space" unimaginable in the dialectic thinking of the West and North, and Gloria Anzaldúa's articulation of a border on either side of which Third World women are decompleted.

The realm of (hetero)sexuality already complicates this overburdening, as Cisneros's other stories often make clear. But "One Holy Night" pushes this challenge to its limits, both the legal limit defining age-of-consent and the limits of conscious subjectivity that even in Freud's cosmology of the unconscious finds its most troubling manifestations in child sexuality. Counterintuitively, it is at this point of excess that agency and the third space become mutually productive, fulfilling the realms of possibility that Chicana and Third World feminist theorists outline but less often flesh out. Employing historians and critics who trace the rise of the child as a social character and literary narrator, Sills claims that the "child" grounds the very concept of "agency" as its ultimate excluded other. Where Nasstrom identifies adults' reference to childhood sexual abuse as a way to force personal and political decomposition toward the goal of producing new fertile material, Sills's reading of Cisneros joins Sasaki's analysis in suggesting that "recomposition" is possible only by passing *through* the veil of adolescent female sexual desire asserted at the precipice of disaster. Like Zaborskis, Sills traces how the specter of children's inherently queer sexuality haunts the genres (in this case of reluctant criticism) that work to exclude it.

"One Holy Night" strategically delays the revelation of its narrator's age to construct less a spectacle of exploitation than what Sills argues is "an impossible hybrid of both child



and adult.” The narrator’s awakening and transformation is neither corruption nor maturation, but rather an allegory for Anzaldúa’s “Coatlicue State.” Like Cisneros’s short story, this fourth mythical female archetype outlined in Anzaldúa’s “New Mestiza Consciousness” has received less critical attention than her articulation of the figures of La Virgen de Guadalupe, La Malinche, or La Llorona due to its extraordinary blend of sexuality and violence, according to Sills. More a turbulent process of becoming than a site of identification, the “dark sexual drive” of the goddess Coatlicue is a fusion of life and death, the phallic mother of the Aztec people, unassimilable to colonial repurposing. Sills performs a detailed exegesis to show that Anzaldúa’s myth of violent sexualized feminist resistance and unbearable transitional temporality finds its ironic figuration in Cisneros’s interrogation of how the “eroticized innocence of the child is only visible from the retrospective perspective of its collapse, and thus the child’s insisted-upon innocence is intertwined with and entirely dependent on its corruption.”

The essay takes a step further, however, in demonstrating how Cisneros interrogates Chicana feminists’ fetishization of pre-Columbian indigeneity through the figure of a Mexican serial killer who seduces by posing as the direct descendent of Mayan royalty, a ruse unmasked at the end of the story alongside the revelation of the narrator’s age. Like Nasstrom, Sills argues that a more rigorous feminism and robust critique of violence is made possible by shifting the conversation from positive uplift versus victimization to one of containment versus self-shattering.

At the end of this issue of *CTSJ*, readers will find themselves thinking about sex, and perhaps thinking about it beyond the available terms of queer or sexuality studies, area studies, ethnography, literary theory, and other traditional disciplinary optics. The point here is not simply that sex, sexuality, and gender must be contextualized with respect to national, ethnic, or historical differences. Rather, these essays suggest that the fundamentally disorienting nature of sex should be embraced in order to *reorient* hegemonic epistemologies for a scholarly practice sharp and flexible enough to engage the facts of globalization in terms other than the neoliberal rhetoric of late capitalism. These impressive undergraduate essays implore us not to take a colonialist adventure elsewhere but rather to sit still and listen, to let the world as both geography and meaning penetrate us.



Coda/requiem/dedication

This issue is dedicated to the memory of Katharine “Kai” Allen (1988–2011), the first Managing Editor of *CTSJ: Journal of Undergraduate Research*. At the time of her death, Allen was on a Fulbright scholarship pursuing a Master’s degree in psychoanalysis at the Universidad Nacional de Rosario, Argentina and was conducting independent research about the potentials for combining community mental health services with political organizing in sexual minority communities. She was also making connections between grassroots queer activists in the United States and the Southern Cone toward hemispheric cultural collaborations, efforts that her friends and colleagues in both locations continue to engage. I can hardly do justice to Allen’s extraordinary life and achievements as a poet, scholar, activist, and overall inspiration in these pages. So I leave it to her work to show how and why she was the deserved 2010 recipient of Occidental College’s award for the student who best integrated critical theory and social justice, a prize that will bear her name as of this year.

Allen’s essay “Visible Body, Invisible Organs: Micropolitics and the LGBTTTTI Movement,” translated by Marjorie Camarda for this issue, was originally published in Argentina’s leading leftist newspaper *Página/12* on July 20, 2011 for the anniversary of the passage of Argentina’s marriage equality law. The editorial begins as an impression of a LGBTTTTI Pride Parade, experienced but somehow missed if you happen to occupy the “absence” that Allen lyrically locates in a flag’s undulating folds and the conceptual negative space between the letters of “that syrupy abbreviation” intended toward an inclusion “where all fit, where all are named, where all are trapped.” As a critique of queer macro versus micropolitics in contemporary Argentina comes into a focus, the leitmotif of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s idea of the “body without organs” guides Allen’s thesis that “the LGBTTTTI body-movement, by becoming an *individual* body, is everyday less capable of comprehensively articulating the multiple needs and desires of the organ-subjects that inhabit it.” The essay makes clear that this body is anything but a ruse of theory: Allen juxtaposes the media attention showered on a gay wedding with the concurrent arson attack on the house of a trans activist, which was ignored by news sources, government offices, and NGOs alike; a proposed quota of a minimum one percent trans representation in public administration positions does little to honor trans subjects as part of the whole body politic when basic health care is dispensed in humiliating and dangerous ways for trans people.



Allen's essay resonates with the other articles in *Sex/Context* in myriad ways. To honor her life as well as her point in this piece, I have set it apart and hope that readers will return to it as a touchstone for the whole issue. Her model of "micropolitics," with its open-ended intimacies and expansive specificities of attention, direct us toward new ways of pursuing critical theory and social justice, the forms of which we cannot necessarily know in advance. As Allen concludes, "Micropolitically, the organs speak with the body, beside the body, apart and parting from the body."

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