

Hello Miriam and Itza,

I've been without proper internet and burning through phone data for a couple of weeks, so it's a bit tricky to do the form online, but I wanted to send you these thoughts as they took on a bit of a life after our zoom meeting. Let me know if there's info you need, I'm okay with being identified.

I started answering questions and then meandered into a bit of a long one, so left it at that.

It's been really enjoyable to reflect and frame some memories around 'haunting'. Feels like good work.

Hope you enjoy! And thank you.

Annabelle

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Reflections on Le Boudoir – Annabelle Chvostek

2020-07-27

1 --- What was it like to hang out with lesbians at the turn of the millenium?

The turn of the millennium was an exciting time for me as a twenty-something queer woman. I was surrounded by a wonderful community and there was much room to be out, proud and expressive. We didn't have a lot of our own spaces (as is generally the case... the one lesbian bar is always closing) but the gatherings and events that existed in Montreal, largely created and curated by Miriam Ginestier, were unique, creative and special, and our relationships with our host venues felt respectful and supported. Our lesbian culture managed to break away from the model that was created for and by gay white men. While we didn't have daily access to our public gatherings, our events were curated, crafted and well attended by our community. Montreal at that time was in recession, rents were cheap and it was flooded with artists and creatives from all over the place. We had time to dig into our hedonism, and enjoy the ways that our era was unencumbered by some of the prejudices of the past. We could be visible and celebrate who we were. There was also a feminist DIY model that had been well established in the 90's in conjunction with the identity politics of the time, especially visible to me in music, but abounding in all performance. We were able to manifest the idea that we were perfectly capable of carving out our own spaces, events and audiences and we carried that project forth in a spirit of mutual support.

2 --- How was le Boudoir different from other queer or lesbian events you attended (then or now)?

Le Boudoir was different in that it played with the cabaret shows of the past, invited all participants to dress up fancily and to embody a place of memory and nostalgia

that affirmed our place as queer women with a history and a context. It delighted in an aesthetic of antiquity. It wasn't just a dance party or a place to cruise, though it also had that. It was a beautifully crafted variety show that created a sense of timelessness and connection to herstory.

3 --- Do you remember how it was to have a Boudoir flyer in your hands? Or the first time you saw a poster? What did they mean to you? How did they make you feel?

Certain boudoir flyers still decorate my walls today. My favourite was an early photographic portrait of a beautiful mannish woman dressed in a very dapper suit. I don't have it still but I loved it so much. It was so affirming and exciting to me.

4 --- Please describe one of your most vivid stage memories.

One very fond memory for me was the year the Flor de la Canella performed Sappho and Artemis. Miriam commissioned me to write a musical duet using a Sappho poem translated to French as a key moment in the act. I wrote it in an operatic style and we had two very skilled classical singers from our community deliver its close harmony while I accompanied on guitar with the Flor dancers present in full regalia. There was an alert stillness as the audience listened during the song and the applause exploded afterwards. I remember it as such a glorious moment.

5 --- Could you share some offstage sensorial memories such as smells, texture, flavours, the feeling of the venue, the vibe of the crowd, sounds, the outfits, your body? What stands out most?

The excitement and anticipation at Lion D'or was palpable. The audience was open and ready to be engaged. I felt suave and sexy in my masculine formal wear. The Art Nouveau surroundings of the venue helped cultivate the illusion that we were actually living in another era. I could imagine that this feeling in the room must have rung true to earlier eras where entertainment revolved around theatrical spaces and gatherings. And yet there was no clandestine hidden aspect. We were expressing lesbian love, lesbian desire, lesbian drama and lesbian sexuality for ourselves. It felt wonderful.

6 --- Le Boudoir took place at Lion D' Or from 1994-2004. As of 2001, the event incorporated a Vaudeville play. In 2003, 2004 and 2006 the event was 2 nights. And in 2005, the event switched venues to Corona (2005) and le National (2006). If you attended early and later editions, how did you experience the event's evolution and transformations?

I think Le Boudoir grew into its intention of creating a timeless space that harkened to the past. Perhaps earlier there was more contemporary experimental performance, and then as things moved on it became more and more imaginative in its representations of historical eras. By its final year in a grand old theatre with its huge seething audience, you could be fully transported into the past, with all the excitement of a huge group of people together experiencing a big vaudeville show.

7 --- Do you remember feeling any moments of discomfort (possibly around class, race/cultural appropriation, gender/sexual identity, sexualization/objectification)?

I didn't generally feel discomfort at the time in terms what I did or performed at Le Boudoir, aside from being somewhat more challenged when performing in revealing feminine garb. I felt more comfortable and sexy in mannish wear and was very glad to have a place to enjoy that, though I also felt certain liberation in having a safe and exciting space (a room full of lesbians) to explore and perform a classic hyper-feminine showgirl aesthetic.

In reference to the idea of "haunting", I will say that there is one piece, based on an Argentine tango, that I would not perform again after having acquired a better understanding of the culture that surrounds the music.

I have many vivid memories of working in the trio "Damsels in Dress" which was first coined by Miriam as the trio "Annabelle et Les Demoiselles. We generally offered a kind of dream state of romantic suggestion. One of my favourite pieces was an interpretation of the Tango "Adios Muchachos," (1927, Julio César Sanders and César Vedani) using Louis Armstrong's lyrics "I Get Ideas" in which all three of us appeared in a Marlene Dietrich, Cabaret style drag. Two dancers became increasingly entangled in a tango-inspired choreography while I sang and accompanied on guitar. Armstrong's lyrics included the lines "When you're dancing and you're dangerously near me, I get ideas, I get ideas..."

For over a decade I've been going to Uruguay regularly with my Uruguayan wife, and have delved into tango culture more deeply, especially connecting with musicians. One of the first things I learned was that the tango I had sung so joyfully and earnestly at Le Boudoir was actually an incredibly sad song about saying goodbye to friends on one's deathbed. And nobody sings it because they associate it with the plane crash of one of the greatest tango singers of all time, Carlos Gardel. It's considered bad luck! So, at the time I had no idea, I'd just heard my parents' generation singing snippets of Armstrong's suggestive lyrics to that beautiful melody, and we created a piece with that version for Le Boudoir for some sexual-tension infused fun. We paid no attention to its cultural origins or significance.

I was so proud of our piece and still consider it one of my favourites. I loved singing it and the two dancers were gorgeous and exciting. And it was my introduction to tango. However, with what I know now, I wouldn't sing it again.

At the same time I think this history speaks to a kind of blind appropriation of cultural influences that we did to serve our purpose of enjoying our expression of queerness, but which also contained cultural entitlement. As someone who didn't experience being othered other than through queerness and womanhood, it has taken some time to peel away layers of understanding of privilege (Global North, Western, white, middle class) and the impacts of its inherent ignorance and exploitation. While I think that efforts towards inclusiveness, and the intention of that as uplifting to everyone may have been stepping stones, they also fell short in their blind spots.

To reference our discussion about the Annie Oakley in front of Tee-Pees flyer: At the time there was a bit of a bad-ass girl-with-gun thing going on in feminist culture – I'd enjoyed a book called *Angry Women* which included some gun-as-feminist-fierceness ideas (Kathy Acker and Diamanda Galas both had interviews in it). I think the aesthetic choice of the Annie Oakley image drowned out something that we have a better understanding of today. Seen through contemporary eyes, this image evokes a glorification of the genocidal treatment of Indigenous people. It needs to be reckoned with. The culture we existed in had only marginal representation outside of whiteness at the time, and while I think that the BIPOC members of our community were celebrated and truly appreciated, I didn't have a full understanding of the extent of my own privilege and the ignorance it allowed.

Another piece that I struggle with today, and have for a long time, has to do with the power and ubiquity of Black cultural influence in popular musical expression, including my own practice. I do think that as creators and interpreters we are all cultural sponges and the nature of art is cross-pollinating. However, considering the systemic theft of humanity that white supremacy has set up, how does one participate responsibly? I deal with it partly by advocating for BIPOC artists when I am enlisted as a peer assessor within arts funding bodies. I feel some peace in having music pioneered by Black artists as part of how I express myself because of my inter-personal and creative connection to a diverse community. Love is the predominant force and the emergent culture is an incredible gift. I am ever in tribute to Black excellence, and think that's a stance that must be held while playing any popular form of music in the Americas.

There was a piece I performed with one of the Damsel dancers for *Le Boudoir* that touches on this conflict. It was also the only *Boudoir* piece I ever received negative feedback for. The critique came after the show, from an apparently straight white audience member, and simply involved pointing out the one piece of the night she didn't like. "What WAS that?" for which I had no answer at the time, and, for better or for worse, it's stuck with me. We performed a version of "Miss Celie's Blues" or "Sister", a blues/ragtime style song by Quincy Jones, Rod Temperton and Lionel

Richie that was written for Steven Spielberg's movie "The Colour Purple". While I don't think that our interpretation was our strongest contribution to Le Boudoir, I'm still not sure why the piece stood out to this person.

While we gave no context or had no knowledge of it at the time, we were performing a song that had become an unofficial anthem in Black American lesbian communities. So then, were we appropriating, or were we proliferating something beautiful that moved us, as part of a living breathing culture? Was it out of place because we were white people performing Black music? Was it the Blues she didn't like in that context? Or did we just suck that night for that person? I'm not sure. What I am sure about is that the subject of appropriation vs. healthy cultural proliferation is complex. Culture isn't segregated. It is alive and organic and interwoven. The song itself was an inter-racial collaboration. We want to be together and make it happen. And yet there is a history of oppression and exploitation that must be understood and repaired. I have been wrestling with this on and off for decades, and it's on turbo right now during this moment of outpouring and action for the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and countless others, which most brutally affects our communities through the loss of Black Trans lives. We are in a state of emergency for the reparation of BIPOC experience.

In its time, Le Boudoir was radical for its creative imagining of a culture that represented us, Queer women, in a space of our own, with a history of our own, independent of male dominated gay culture. I do still believe we were engaged in something affirming, necessary and foundational. We were living a new era of feminism that emboldened our identity expression. I think the self-examinations we do today, acknowledging especially our racial blind spots, are part of that "arc of the moral universe that bends towards justice" as expressed so eloquently by Martin Luther King Jr. It's necessary work as we join the next generations in continuing to grow powerful intersectional networks in our evolving communities.

The influence of Le Boudoir continues to play out in my creative life, and has re-surfaced for me in the last years as I prepare to release a new body of work that references the eras of the 30's and 40's. I'm working on a record and accompanying media that is a nostalgic but lyrically contemporary cross-cultural collaboration between Canadian and Uruguayan musicians. It features a dozen songs including a self-penned tango and one early swing-infused tune I wrote for Le Boudoir and the Damsels back in the day: (Je t'ais vu hier soir/I Saw You Last Night). I'm so grateful to have been part of Le Boudoir and its bubbling collective imagination. It was a much-needed space of empowerment and delight in our Sapphic Montreal community. Vive Le Boudoir!