

Article

“Lo que se ve, no se pregunta”: Creating Queer Space in the Work of José Villalobos

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Abstract: This article examines the work of multidisciplinary artist José Villalobos through a queer Latinx lens using the theory of “disidentification” as put forth by José Esteban Muñoz and argues that Villalobos makes space for queer visibility and representation within Tejano *norteño* culture by subverting culturally specific objects that often perpetuate, sometimes violently, traditional Mexican and Mexican-American gender norms. By critically analyzing two artworks, *Soledad (loneliness)* (2022), a mixed-media triptych that takes the form of an ex-voto, and a performance, *A Las Escondidas* (Hide-and-Seek) (2019), this study demonstrates how Villalobos challenges gender-normative thinking in border culture through his artworks by incorporating the body and its adornments. Villalobos utilizes his body in his performances and the implied body in his installations and assemblages to critique and subvert homophobia. By doing so, he grafts queer identity onto *norteño* iconography to carve out space for representation and inclusion for himself and other members of the queer community.

Keywords: José Villalobos; Latinx art; Queer Studies; contemporary art; *Norteño* culture; disidentification; performance art; border art; body; José Esteban Muñoz



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1. Introduction

During a televised interview in 2002, Mexican television host Fernando del Rincón asked the famed Mexican musician Juan Gabriel if he was gay. Gabriel responded, “Lo que se ve, no se pregunta”—you do not question what you see (del Rincón 2016; Morgan et al. 2020, p. 21). The sexuality of the much-loved performer had long been debated, even though he had a wife and four children, because of his “ostentatious dress” and “flamboyant” style (Sowards 2000). Many described him as displaying effeminate mannerisms and boasting a queer aesthetic, which included the use of sequins, rhinestones, and makeup. His response to this highly publicized interview question has been referred to as a “coming out” statement, or at least the closest to it that we have on record (Morgan et al. 2020, pp. 21–24). When Juan Gabriel died in 2016, the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “with his glittery capes, slinky dance moves, and ultra-romantic lyrics, Mexican superstar Juan Gabriel was an unlikely king in a country known for its machismo. He never spoke about his sexuality, yet was widely assumed to be gay” (Linthicum 2016).

Juan Gabriel’s performances were perceived in terms of providing queer visibility, and his displays of queerness resonated in the hearts and lives of many queer or questioning Mexicans, including the young José Villalobos, who was mesmerized by Juan Gabriel’s stage presence (Villalobos 2022, interview with the author). Today, Villalobos is a contemporary conceptual artist from the Borderlands of Texas, who is represented by the Liliana Bloch Gallery in Dallas, Texas, and is currently based in San Antonio. He has been the recipient of the prestigious Joan Mitchell Painters and Sculptors Grant and the Tanne Foundation Award. His work was also selected and showcased in the *Bienal Transfronteriza* (2018), the Atlanta Biennial (2021), and the Texas Biennial (2021). Additionally, he was most recently selected for forthcoming solo exhibitions at Museo de Arte de Ciudad Juárez in 2024 and El Paso Museum of Art in 2025, among others not yet publicly released (Villalobos n.d.; Villalobos 2022 pers. comm.).

This study examines Villalobos's work in the context of queer visibility and invisibility within multiple facets of identity formation. It focuses on two recent works: *Soledad (loneliness)* (2022), a mixed-media triptych explicitly connected to Juan Gabriel's statement on queer perceptions, and a performance titled *A Las Escondidas* (Hide-and-Seek) (2019), which accompanied the *Cicatrices* exhibition at the Presa House Gallery in San Antonio, Texas, and was performed at the gallerist's ranch on 17 March 2019. The following questions are considered: How does José Villalobos subvert toxic masculinity and the patriarchal hold on *norteño* culture? How does the deconstruction of masculine symbols, such as the breakdown of a *sombrero* and the addition of flashy embellishments, act as a reclamation of agency and a making of queer space? In both his sculptural and installation-based works and his performance works, how does he create and interrupt space? And why is the presence and absence of the body essential to Villalobos's practice?

Implementing queer Latino scholar José Esteban Muñoz's recognition of a process of cultural translation he refers to as "disidentification", my research demonstrates how Villalobos draws attention to the complex challenges facing 2SLGBTQIA+ members within the tri-metro area of El Paso, Texas, Las Cruces, New Mexico, and Juárez, México, by centering the body and various socio-cultural accoutrements that index the gendered, racialized human form.¹ I argue that Villalobos brings attention to and makes space for queer visibility and representation within *norteño* culture by subverting culturally-specific objects that have been used to perpetuate, sometimes violently, traditional Mexican and Mexican-American gender norms. In doing so, he produces a new visual vocabulary that makes *norteño* iconography more inclusive and provides an essential visibility for queers of color, especially in the Borderlands of the Southwest, which is vital to youth coming to terms with their own sexuality and gender orientation (Villalobos 2022, interview).² Furthermore, his work interjects queered *norteño* symbolism into the white-washed, coast-centered art world establishment by featuring primarily rural Mexican and Tejano elements containing racialized signifiers.

José Villalobos is from the *frontera*. Growing up on the El Paso–Ciudad Juárez, U.S.–Mexico border has informed his personal identity and his artistic practice. Given his community's expectations and customs, he was conflicted in his youth as a queer Latino of Mexican descent. He struggled to locate himself as machismo, and religious judgment surrounded him (ibid.). Villalobos states, "I often use objects that are prominent in my culture, as well as objects that carry a symbol of power. Sombreros, belts, boots ... all these objects empower the macho" (Moody Castro 2019). For example, he shares that in his childhood, he was sometimes disciplined with a belt and taunted by certain family members (Villalobos 2022, interview). Today, his art is a source of healing or catharsis from the oppressive and destructive effects of this upbringing. It articulates the tangled and clashing mores, which allows him to unpack and process his experiences. In his work, he often deconstructs cultural symbols that became signifiers of a toxic masculinity for him—ones that are hurtful and harmful physically, emotionally, and psychologically—and he reclaims and queers them.

Villalobos is a prolific artist and the pillars of his oeuvre include his sculptural/installation-based works, costume design, and performance art (Villalobos n.d.). Ensembles and attire are crucial components in his performances. *Charro* suits, *ranchero* outfits, and their varied accessories are unifying features in both bodies of work and primary elements in his overall aesthetic. In many cases, research on social, cultural, and historical topics and issues are essential to his practice, but it is always intertwined with his personal experience. Gathering collective histories of the *Tejano* or Mexican-American experience in Texas, he also incorporates personal accounts of racism and homophobia he endured on both sides of the border and in his own home. These stories are often told via performance through the body, where trauma is housed (Van der Kolk 2014).³ His output always centers on the corporeal—whether physically present, suggested, or absent. This reclamation of self and the body enables him to speak of pain while simultaneously instituting pride. He

makes visible what was once secretive, “sinful”, and scorned. In the process, he generates a queer space.

2. Reclaiming Agency: *Soledad (loneliness)*

Soledad (loneliness) (2022) is an ex-voto in the form of a mixed-media triptych that pays tribute to Juan Gabriel (Figure 1). Ex-votos—votive offerings left in churches, either requesting divine intervention or expressing gratitude for it—are a fundamental part of Mexican Catholic belief and practice.⁴ With this familiar sacred object in mind, *Soledad (loneliness)* features a wide-brimmed *sombrero*, the traditional hat of a *vaquero* or cowboy in *norteño* Tejano culture, which he deconstructs and embellishes across three panels, resembling a triptych *retablo*. The hat is sliced and peeled open to form the three parts. The two flanking panels contain a quarter of a hat rim on the top and lower portions of the picture plane, and the hat’s crowning center is slit, flattened, and adhered to the center of the panel in two portions. Within the center panel of the triptych, the divided hat parts are arranged in a counter fashion with the brims flipped so that the hollowed middle faces north and south. The hat’s crown maintains some dimensionality in the center panel, and the divided parts are arranged facing west and east. A rope sits in the center and three bejeweled horses’ heads cap the arrangement. Several photo transfer images adorn the hat. These come from Villalobos’s personal family albums. The references to the family would allude to communal/familiar belonging, yet the piece’s title points to isolation.



Figure 1. José Villalobos, *Soledad (loneliness)*, 2022, mixed-media triptych. Center panel is 40 × 30 in. and the two side panels are 36 × 24 in. Image courtesy of University Art Museum, New Mexico State University Photo by Marcus Chormicle, edited by the author.

To understand this work more fully, we need to consider the context of its commission. The work was created for the exhibition *Contemporary Ex-Votos: Devotion Beyond Medium* at the University Art Museum at New Mexico State University. This exhibition, guest-curated by UNM alumnus Dr. Emmanuel Ortega, an art historian of the Spanish Americas,

juxtaposes contemporary Latinx artists' work with nineteenth- and twentieth-century ex-votos from the museum's collection. The curatorial thread bridges time and tradition by asking living Latinx artists to produce works meant to be in dialogue with a historical-artistic tradition, while concurrently surveying and framing the historical artworks in a new light (Flores 2021; Dávila 2020).⁵

The intersection of Queer and Latinx is still an emerging area in scholarship, but this intersectionality is vital to understanding Villalobos's ex-voto. Proposed initially by legal and critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, the term "intersectionality" acknowledges that people have multiple facets to their personal identities and that the combination of these categories is how we experience the world, especially in the sense of oppression, access, and power. *Jotería* Studies (*Jotería* deriving from the Mexican word, *joto*, a derisive term that translates as faggot) also contributes to this discussion from a distinctly Latinx queer perspective by integrating sexuality into the race and class discussions established by Chicano and Chicana Studies. It recognizes that although the Chicano movement of the 1960s fought for human rights, the campaign did not generally acknowledge women and members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities as also needing autonomy and protection from oppression and discrimination. Chicano history has essentially left out queer Chicanos/as, just as Queer Studies have neglected Latinos/as/Chicanos/as. As queer Latino scholar, Juan Ochoa states, "a *Jotería* analytics exposes the lack of a racial and class analysis in mainstream lesbian and gay politics and simultaneously exposes the lack of a sexual analysis in Chicano movement politics" (Ochoa 2015, p. 191). Using a *Jotería* lens as an analytical tool is an effective way to recognize the layers of struggle and oppression that Villalobos's work addresses, which include race, nationality, class, and sexuality, as well as regionalism.

Today, the visibility of 2SLGBTQIA+ persons is growing, but this is a relatively recent phenomenon. As has been increasingly recognized, generations of queer people have suppressed their natural orientations due to violent homophobic and transphobic attitudes promoted by the heteronormativity that structures mainstream culture. It was not until the 1990s and early 2000s that queer visibility in the media in the United States started to become more salient and moved beyond stereotypes associating queerness with sin, illness, crime, self-hate, and/or the absurd (Eaklor 2008, p. 236). Juan Gabriel's powerful statement "*Lo que se ve, no se pregunta*" demonstrates a "don't ask, don't tell" mentality. This sentiment was (and still is) prevalent in many communities and contexts—on both sides of the border—including families in which members recognize queerness but prefer not to speak about it, just as it also became an official military slogan for the U.S. government.⁶ One recent study on queer coding and nonverbal cues considers how the idea of "coming out" might be a dated, cis-gender, white-male concept. In this study, published in the *Journal of Latinx Psychology*, the authors ask for a more nuanced approach to understanding a person's disclosure of sexual identity. They use Mexican-American men for the case studies to demonstrate cultural differences in verbalization, understanding, and acceptance (Morgan et al. 2020, pp. 32–33).

A significant issue with the lack of queer visibility is the damage done to youth who grow up without representation or a reflection of themselves in the society and culture surrounding them. This was the experience for Villalobos. Isolated in his youth, he found comfort in the captivating persona of Mexican pop singer Juan Gabriel, with his sequined outfits, accentuated femininity, and flamboyant stage performances (González 2017, p. 3). Juan Gabriel was also known by the nickname *Juanga* (a feminized version of Juan), which became the nickname jokingly if not derisively used for Villalobos by his more macho, homophobic relatives (Villalobos 2022, interview). Bombarded by such relentless micro-aggressions, Villalobos found solace in watching Juan Gabriel's extravagant dress and performances on television.

The word *norteño*, which literally translates as Northern, is perhaps most readily associated with the *norteño* music genre found in northern Mexico and the U.S. Southwest. In this context, however, I am referring to collective cultural elements found in these same Borderland regions, including music, dress, food, and customs. Specific regional

cultural elements that formed in this area reflect cultural exchanges and settlement patterns with a long history going back to older Indigenous populations and the settler colonial systems promoted first by the Spanish Viceregal presence, then the Mexican, and finally, the U.S. This history of waves of conquest and settlement resulted in an imposed border that artificially divides not just geography but history, cultural traditions, and communities. Ethnomusicology professor and author Cathay Ragland expresses this concept in musical terms: “The *norteña* music industry and the subgenres that have emerged in its wake (e.g., *ondagruper*, *banda/technobanda*, *sonidero*, *música duranguense*) have been shaped (and reshaped) by fluid notions of ethnic and regional identity, national affiliation, home space, and sociopolitical associations in both countries” (Ragland 2009, p. 4). *Norteño* dress is inspired by the *ranchero* dominance of the region, as well as the *vaqueros*, otherwise known as the Mexican cowboys, i.e., the first cowboys. The *vaquero*, whose gear and labor are tied to cattle ranching, differs from the elaborately dressed *charro*, a cowboy for sport, whose outfit is closely connected to the opulent dress of *mariachi* performers (Henriques n.d.). The boots, hats, belts, and varied accessories commonplace in working-class *norteño* culture are the staple iconographic elements in Villalobos’s work. *Soledad* (loneliness) is no exception. These cultural objects also carry specific memories of the artist’s father, who was a musician himself and played locally in *norteño* bands, and also worked as a mechanic (Griffis 2020).

As a contemporary ex-voto, *Soledad* (loneliness) offers thanks to Villalobos’s own “patron saint”, Juan Gabriel. A traditional ex-voto, which has origins in antiquity (Weinryb 2016, p. ix), normally consists of an image depicting an event or accident accompanied by a text describing the event that is illustrated. Art historian Ittai Weinryb explains that an ex-voto can be anything in shape and size as long as it refers to an object that has “the intention of being votives charged with votive meaning once they have been consecrated to a deity or deities” (Weinryb 2016, p. 3). By arranging it in three panels, as a triptych, which is a typical layout of altarpieces in the Christian or Catholic tradition, Villalobos heightens the religious connections of the assemblage,⁷ with its already strong connections to Church tradition, as required by the exhibition’s focus on contemporary ex-votos for which it was made.⁸

Two formal elements of *Soledad* (loneliness) provide the viewer with greater insight into the depth of meaning in the work: the text and what can be regarded as kitsch or camp elements. By kitsch elements, I refer to the sequins, golden crochet features, dangling crystals, and sparkling rhinestones that appear in the horses’ eyes and that are also peppered throughout the entire triptych. Kitsch is mass-produced and imitation versions of something regarded as beautiful. The craft-store-purchased rhinestones are stand-ins for diamonds. These small, sparkly objects amidst a dark background evoke the idea of stars in the night sky, and, in many indigenous cultures, stars are symbolic references to ancestors. Kitsch is often tied to less-than-positive descriptors like lowbrow and tacky. However, by reframing Villalobos’s kitsch choices in terms a queer aesthetic or context, these elements become forms of camp, which is also similarly referred to as a sensibility of taste for the overdone. Camp elements, in the queer sense, can function as a critical commentary on heteronormative society, as well as an expression of marginalized sensibilities. Moreover, camp has also been associated with subversion strategies for gay men and a subtext reading of “secret codes” (Verstraten 2022). Overall, this interest in highly ornamented application, i.e., color, pattern, reflection, etc., has been associated with the baroque sensibility that has historically shaped aesthetic norms coming out of the Catholic Mexican cultural framework. Most importantly, it may also be read as Chicano Camp.

Ramón García describes the nuances of Chicano Camp at length in *Against Rasquache: Chicano Identity and the Politics of Popular Culture in Los Angeles*. García states, “it is the artist’s insider’s place within a working-class community and his/her relation to Chicano everyday culture that changes the configurations and meaning of what, in North American art, has been termed kitsch or camp, and explains why *Rasquache*, which has come to define a Chicano style in art, is neither of the above” (García 1998, p. 5). This statement addresses the overuse of the term *rasquache* in ways that is many times misapplied to

equate to camp. Chicano Camp as outlined by García is an aesthetic that questions and criticizes Chicano culture from a standpoint of within the culture" (6). To elaborate with García's words: "Camp is a border sensibility; it is a queer aesthetic that criticizes gendered and heterosexist paradigms in Chicano culture, while simultaneously criticizing a gay Eurocentric identity and the apolitical posture of camp that it promotes. Chicano Camp promotes an insider's criticism of both the Chicano community and the gay community" (6). Perhaps most compelling for this analysis is García's noteworthy example used to illustrate Chicano Camp through a figurative representation. He draws a parallel between the *charro* and the dandy, demonstrating how they serve as foundational examples of camp that are well-suited for theatricality and performance (12).

The textual elements in *Soledad (loneliness)* are in two forms: the large print in the center and the script within the *sombrero's* brim on the side panels. The bold print element in the center panel reads "*Lo que se ve, no se pregunta*", and the handwritten script on the side panels harkens to the historical ex-votos found in New Spain and their inscription of the narrative that inspired the piece's creation. Villalobos's inscription is as follows:

Descendiente de Villalobos y Villegas, Zacatecas y Durango en las tierras fronterizas en el año 1988, nació un pequeño niño que por dentro su ser era diferente. Al tratar de entender muchas cosas, entendió que las tendencias que el tenía eran pecado. El niño se ponía en las manos de dios y oraba que el señor lo curara. Cuando no podía luchar contra esa tendencias, se escondía.

[Descendant of Villalobos and Villegas, Zacatecas and Durango in the Borderlands in the year 1988, a little boy was born who was different inside. Trying to understand many things, he understood that the tendencies he had were sinful. The boy put himself in God's hands and prayed that the Lord would heal him. When he couldn't fight those tendencies, he would hide.]

Al ver la dinamica de su existencia y las expectativas, su verdadero se se disnina en la soledad.

[Seeing the dynamics of his existence and expectations, his true self became lonely.]

Las melodías y la gran voz del divo de Juárez hizo entender a José que su verdadero ser era maravilloso y poderoso.

[The melodies and the great voice of the famous artist of Juárez made José understand that his true being was wonderful and powerful.]

The text in the work indicates the state of loneliness and isolation Villalobos experienced growing up—feeling like he was different and that he did not belong. As author Sergio Troncoso writes about growing up in El Paso, "it is through our families that we live *nepantla*, that we negotiate it, that we have questions about our identity and choices, that we are convinced to fall one way or another, or even to balance perpetually between many different worlds" (Troncoso 2021, p. 2).

The term *nepantla*, originally an Indigenous Nahuatl term that refers to a state of "in-between-ness", captures the Mexican-American experience as a result of the dominant cultural attitudes in the U.S. and Mexico, in which many do not feel fully connected to either Mexico or the U.S.; in the U.S., they are typically seen as immigrants or recent arrivals (although incorrect) and thus foreign to the Anglophone American experience, and in Mexico, they are seen as culturally corrupted, as traitors, and as *gringo* or not Mexican enough. This sentiment relates to what Chicana poet and feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa wrote in her seminal work, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Regarding homosexuality in a Borderlands context, she states, "we're afraid of being abandoned by the mother, the culture, *la Raza*, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged . . . to avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage" (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 42). As a queer person of color, Anzaldúa speaks to the experience of simultaneous alienation from her own culture

and separation from the dominant culture, and to the space in between, in which she feels caught (ibid.). The shadow-beast can be interpreted as one's sexuality, in this case, and the choice seems to be to assimilate to the expectations of gender expression and sexuality, and to deny oneself for fear of rejection by family and community.

The text in *Soledad (loneliness)* clarifies that witnessing Juan Gabriel perform was crucial for young Villalobos in terms of seeing an alternative way of enacting masculinity and being in the world. Juan Gabriel demonstrated an alternative example of existing that did not reject his Mexican culture but embraced it, yet in a way he made his own. Just as the traditional ex-voto narrates a mishap or misfortune in which the saint or religious entity intervenes, the event, in this case, is Villalobos's loneliness and fear of rejection from his culture and family, as seen in the photos steeped in ranch customs that convey a sense of a traditional upbringing. The intervention was Juan Gabriel illustrating an alternative way in which Villalobos identified and in which he could also potentially operate. Villalobos emulates this experience in his own practice.

It is important to note that although this work is a devotional piece intended as a tribute to Juan Gabriel as a saint-like figure, Gabriel is not literally visible in this work. Instead, his presence is indexical; he is invoked via his quote, the scattered rhinestones throughout the piece, and the flashy sequin trim that embellishes the hat. The viewer visually encounters the emblem of toxic masculinity as identified by the artist—the hat—and it is sliced into its component pieces and broken down. Cutting this symbol is in itself an act of taking power away from the object. He repurposes or reconstructs it, like Frankenstein's monster, reinscribing its meaning to a point where the source is legible, but added changes speak to a transformed meaning that goes beyond the original. By conceptually alluding to Juan Gabriel and including an image of Villalobos himself at the top of the dismantled hat, the artist adds another layer of agency. He reclaims space in both memory and presence.

Additionally, by using a devotional medium (the ex-voto) and the triptych construction typical of altarpieces, which are centerpieces of religious art, Villalobos's work, much like the work of Nahum Zenil and Alma López, aligns queer space with the realm of the Church and religion. The institution of the Church has contributed to what is referred to as machismo culture, which can be traced from "Spanish colonial and religious influences imposed on Mexican Indigenous populations, partly in response to these populations' having more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality" (Morgan et al. 2020, p. 24). The Church, an institution of colonial origins, has played a major role in oppression, guilt, and the construction of the patriarchy. In *Soledad (loneliness)*, the artist reclaims his power and identity from both the Church and homophobic machismo society. He does so by dismantling the object (the toxic signifier), altering it to disempower and reclaim it, and physically inserting himself and Juan Gabriel's memory within a visual display often tied to the Church.

3. Visibility and the Body: A *Las Escondidas* (Hide-and-Seek)

Villalobos's performance art pieces are essential to understanding the concepts of visibility, invisibility, and the body within his oeuvre. There is a consistency between his sculptural/installation-based works and his performances. The object-based iconography he employs always centers on the Border experience. The symbolic references can be divided into two parts: objects from the lived experience of the physical environment of the border (the wall, dirt, hoes, trucks, and barbed wire) and culturally prescribed elements used to adorn and identify the masculine body (plaid shirts, *charro*-like suits, cowboy hats, boots, elaborate belts, and buckles). Undertones of violence, oppression, and surveillance are carried throughout each of these objects and their symbolism, but in different ways. The sculptural and installation-based works tend to deconstruct the signifying objects, create space, and use implicit notes of violence; the performance works, on the other hand, tend to interrupt space and reenact in real-time acts of brutality, using pain as a universal element for understanding.

The symbolism of dirt, in particular, is important in Villalobos's practice. Using dirt from the Borderplex (the area of El Paso, Las Cruces, and Ciudad Juárez), he symbolizes the motherland. In many of the performance works, he brings the dirt to the white cube.⁹ In *Deeply Rooted, Cultured and Silenced* (2021), for instance, he forces fistfuls of soil down his own throat, as he repeats the word, *silencio* (silence). He is literally silenced by the dirt, *la tierra* (the earth), which symbolizes the homeland. *Deeply Rooted, Cultured and Silenced* was performed in traditional gallery establishments, otherwise referred to as the white cube.¹⁰ Many of his installation-based works also include dirt. His iconic piece *Sin la 'S'* (2017) incorporated soil taken specifically from Ciudad Juárez.¹¹

A Las Escondidas is an example of a performance in which Villalobos brings the gallery to the ranch, in this case Luna Ranch, a private ranch outside San Antonio (Figure 2). Bringing the cosmopolitan art world to a rural space is indicative of Villalobos's subversion strategies. U.S. American critics, collectors, and art historians have focused primarily on major metropolitan areas and, in the United States, on artists and movements primarily found on or associated with the east and west coasts and their respective hubs, New York and Los Angeles. As a result, artists working in the middle of the country have historically been marginalized, if not erased altogether, from conversations around art; in the U.S., curators and gallerists are not readily venturing into farms, ranches, and rural territories to find creative talent. With this in mind, the ranch setting of Villalobos's work is an intervention in the art establishment. Since the ranch and all it encompasses is at the heart of his work, it is fitting for him to bring the audience to the ranch, just as it is for him to bring *la tierra* into the gallery.¹² Both are acts of intercession. Inserting the dirt into the high art establishments is an act that highlights the elite's discomfort with lowbrow connotations of ranch culture and the desire to relegate Latinx artists, presumably working class, brown, and possibly immigrant, to the periphery.



Figure 2. José Villalobos, *A Las Escondidas*, 2019. Performance photo by Jenelle Esparza.

Furthermore, since Villalobos's art also centers on queer discourse, bringing the art audience to the ranch also works to counter the urban/rural gay myths and the assumptions that "gay culture is rooted in cities, that it has a special relationship to urban life" (Halberstam 2005, p. 35). Metronormativity is a term coined by scholar Jack Halberstam, also known as Judith Halberstam. It refers to the popular speculation that living in cities would be better and safer than rural areas for persons who identify as 2SLGBTQIA+. Halberstam states that metronormativity is the route of the narrative that states the sole trajectory of a healthy queer lifestyle is to be out, loud, and proud, and that one needs to flee the countryside for the major cities to do so (36–37). Consequently, with his *A Las Escondidas* performance, Villalobos ruptures a multitude of assumptions and asks a number of constituents from the art spectatorship, including the queer urbanite, to potentially face their biases.

A Las Escondidas takes place within the gates of a corral, the area for livestock. Villalobos is dragged in by a man holding a lasso and riding a horse, invoking the violent history of Mexican-American lynching in South Texas (Villalobos 2019). Art critic, Neil Fauerso (2019) writes, "Villalobos has a preternatural gift to swing fluidly from cultural symbolism to psychology in his imagery. Immediately, this introduction conjures the tragic history of Black people, Latinos, and Native Americans being tied up and dragged across the ground—a legacy of conquest and murder".

Upon entering the corral, the artist disrobes from working-class coveralls to reveal a denim outfit lined with fringe, an embellishment Villalobos commonly uses to queer an otherwise masculine costume. He sits at one of the edges of the fence on a rectangular bale of hay to roll up his pant legs, revealing the tattoos on the top of his feet that resemble the decorative motif on the vamp of the cowboy boot. These marks are from another performance, *Cultural Reminders* (2019), during which Villalobos tattooed boot stitch designs onto the top of his feet, perhaps an emblem of the permanent, psychological scars of gender prejudice he and so many others have endured. He changes his foot attire to high heels, then straps the bale of hay to his back and hauls it ritualistically to the center of the corral. Once in the center of the circular area, he drops the bale of hay, cuts his shoes off with a knife, and returns to the other side, only to repeat the process with another pair of heels. He does this four times prior to settling on cowboy boots and stacking the bales to build a wall of hay, onto which he then spray-paints the derogatory terms "Fag" and "Joto". Finally, he runs from a distance and collides with the haystack, bringing it down. Cutting the straps off the bales, he loosens the hay bundles from their rectangular forms, and stuffs his clothing with the straw, thus processing and transforming the material into something other than its original, traditional, structured form.

Fauerso interprets Villalobos's actions as an attempt at the embodiment of the toxic man archetype. He writes, "he then painfully stuffed hay into his shirt, creating an exaggerated hay gut. This was Villalobos becoming a literal straw man of masculinity, the intrinsic chafe in assuming that illusory stance" (ibid.). Fauerso poetically concludes his analysis by stating, "Villalobos had created a near-perfect and haunting cycle that meditated on racism, gender, the weight of the past hanging on one's back—the universal desire to knock the walls down, cut the binds off, drop the mask, and be free" (ibid.).

4. Villalobos's Work through a Queer Latinx Lens

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), queer scholar José Esteban Muñoz explains his theory of "disidentification" as a lens for understanding experience-based identity formation "that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social" (8). The process of disidentification can be understood by looking at identity formation with three different acts: identification, counteridentification, and disidentification. To partake in the dominant culture would be to assimilate; this is identification. To do the opposite of the majority would be counteridentification (11–12). In this way, identity is a multifaceted negotiation in which disidentification offers an additional avenue. Disidentification is not a complete rejection

tion of identification but a reworking of it. Muñoz explains disidentification as a process of “working on and against” social and cultural norms (11). The subject takes elements from the dominant culture and alters them in such a way as to make them not only signifiers of something else but also something else altogether; this process goes beyond reinscription or repurposing, because it is a radical transformation. Disidentification leads to the creation of another space, one that does not simply identify or simply counter; it makes a possibility for a new way and a new world. Putting it on display opens the possibility for others to follow.

For Villalobos, the elements he acquires—the hats, belts, and boots—are symbols of a concept of machismo. The artist is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by these objects because they represent regionally specific elements of his upbringing and cultural roots. He uses them regularly in his installation and assemblage work, as well as in his performances, in which he dresses in *charro* or *ranchero* styles. Rather than incorporate the accessories of *norteño* manhood to participate in the traditional roles of masculinity (identifying with the dominant *modus operandi*), or taking style elements and dress from outside *norteño* culture (counteridentifying), Villalobos incorporates ranch styles and accessories in new ways, by using camp elements and referencing his queer hero Juan Gabriel, thus making them his own and signify anew.¹³

Through the act of disidentification, Villalobos, like Juan Gabriel before him, engenders new spaces, both imaginary and actual, for queer people of color in the present moment and the future. By utilizing recognizable cultural elements in their work, both Juan Gabriel and Villalobos carve new facets of culture by queering those elements and the body in creative acts of public display and performance—e.g., sequined *charro* jackets, feminine fringe on traditional ranch shirts, and glamorous makeup. In Muñoz’s words, disidentifications are, in part, “survival strategies [that] the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). Like artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Félix González-Torres, whom Muñoz offers as examples of successfully deployed disidentification, both Gabriel and Villalobos disidentify so effectively that they not only create new worlds for themselves but also provide a gateway for other BIPOC 2SLGBTQIA+ people to visualize and create their own survival paths and new worldmaking (200).¹⁴

Queer space, as accepted in the mainstream, has been a predominantly white, cisgender, male space while U.S. American society has mainly conformed to and promoted heteronormative expectations. People of Mexican heritage in the U.S. are often discriminated against—think, for example, of the “go back to Mexico” commentary that became prevalent during the Trump administration—when, in fact, the Southwest was part of Mexico before the U.S.-Mexican War (1846–1848), and New Spain before that. The signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 gave a large portion of Mexico to the United States, and overnight its residents found the border redrawn and themselves in a new country that was hostile to them.

With these facts in mind, we can see how Villalobos takes up a positionality within three identity poles that are and have always been targets of discrimination and hate: to be a person of color in the queer community; to be queer in a heterosexual-dominated society, and to be of Mexican heritage in the Anglophone U.S.-American context. With the most recent nightclub shooting in Colorado Springs in 2022 that wounded seventeen people and killed five (Wolfe 2022), we are reminded of other similar hate crimes, like the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando¹⁵ that killed forty-nine innocent people who were targeted because they were gathered in a gay club (Ellis 2016). Mass shootings that target the queer community cause immense fear and anxiety about expressing one’s sexuality if it does not follow heteronormative expectations. The mass shooting in a Walmart store in El Paso (2019) that left twenty-three people dead is another example of a hate crime specifically targeting Latinos in the Borderplex (Dearman 2020). These crimes target people based on what are considered from a mainstream, hetero, cisgender, white normativity to be visible

markers of difference, such as gender expression, sexuality, nationality, and race. To live within this intersectionality is to live within multiple groups that historically have been and still are hunted down for kill sport. To merely exist within these identity poles is sometimes dangerous. To publicly perform queer Latinx identity in a society that perpetuates these acts of violence is a significant, meaningful act.

Visibility is key for cultivating subcultures that create safe zones and spaces for queer expressions, acts that with repetition and familiarity may become accepted and normative over time. Both the spaces and the social aspects are critical to healthy identity formation. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Muñoz poses that a person cannot craft themselves individually without “proper identifications” (Muñoz 1999, p. 7). Finding oneself outside of the space of mirroring the dominant norms creates emotional challenges; these can be stabilized once a person finds others who reflect their identificational behaviors. Because human consciousness inevitably possesses multiple facets of identification, given how identity categories are structured and instrumentalized in our society, intersectionality is key to understanding how the identities fluctuate (8). Creating a group with which to identify is what Muñoz calls “subcultural circuits” that “envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres” (5). The realms for such “subcultural circuits” are spaces like the clubs that are the safe havens for communal gathering, and these are the spaces that are explicitly under attack.

Muñoz elaborates on the psychoanalytic perspective of this process through Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis’s explanations of identification, which describe it as “a psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides” (7). The French philosopher Louis Althusser employed the term “interpellation” as a way to describe the act of subjecting yourself to another’s ideology (Nguyen n.d.). Muñoz positions the failing to assimilate the subject role as outlined by the dominant culture as “identities-in-difference” (Muñoz 1999, p. 7).

5. Conclusions

Villalobos’s incorporation of cultural symbols is not an act of assimilation but, rather, of forging his own identity by using the emblems from the subdominant culture that surrounds him—*norteño* traditions. However, he also takes power away from these objects by deconstructing them. By cutting the hat into multiple pieces in *Soledad (loneliness)*, he subverts or undermines the power of those cultural symbols. In addition, he overlays images of himself, using photo transfers, in order to insert himself into the signifying framework of the work—to create an emblem that represents his cultural roots and makes a space for himself. Furthermore, Villalobos uses his corporeal body in his performances by dressing in a *ranchero* ensemble, and he restructures its elements to fit his identity. In this manner, he uses disidentification in a way that Muñoz would recognize; he would say that Villalobos “retools and ultimately is able to open up a space where a subject can imagine a mode of surviving the nullifying force” that they faced (Muñoz 1999, p. 47).

Villalobos’s work neutralizes toxic masculinity by exposing its fictive foundations. He creates his own agency, not only in a queer context associated with the Borderplex, but also to contend with the whiteness and citizenship status of what the dominant Anglophone culture in the U.S. deems to be “American”, in addition to addressing the racist tendencies of the art world. The artist stands amidst an entanglement of multiple power struggles in which he must fight for existence and for visibility. Thus, his treatment of the *norteño* emblems is not only a restructuring of the symbols to Queer them but also an assertion of these symbols against the Anglo society that tells him and others like him to “go back” to Mexico. Furthermore, as a visual and performing artist who holds on to border culture throughout all of his work, he is additionally fighting the white predominance in the art world, which has long relegated artists who use Mexican and Mexican-American cultural iconography to the status of regional folk artists or low art—not among high art. Along

these same lines, although Villalobos often incorporates Mexican and Mexican-American histories into his work, he does not do so in the Chicano tradition of figurative or narrative art; even within a hyper-niched narrative, he contemporizes an activist visual stance with a conceptual art practice that speaks to larger conversations in the art world today.

Using elements of dress and accessories, the body is always implied in Villalobos's sculptural and installation works. Hats, belts, and boots are all items that would adorn the body. For Villalobos, they contain memories of a complicated generalization of a type of man with which he did not see himself aligning. There was a social and cultural expectation, however, that he would aim to develop his character into this archetype that he feared. These objects became signifiers of the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual oppression with which he struggled and in which he was silenced. In the exhibition catalogue for *José Villalobos: Joto Fronterizo/Border Faggot*, Emmanuel Ortega writes the following:

“being a queer artist from the Border places Villalobos’ oeuvre in a similar state as *lo que se ve no se pregunta*, which can only find meaning in deconstructed objects that simultaneously hide and reveal a process of being from the Borderlands, but not belonging to them” (Ortega 2019).

Within the main pillars of his practice, Villalobos creates visibility and raises a critical awareness of the oppressive elements of the cultural framework into which he was born. Through the body (in his performances) and the implied body (in his installations and assemblages that feature objects that adorn the body), Villalobos performs a new way by enhancing and reshaping meaning. By physically representing and implying the Latinx body in the context of the white cube, he concurrently disrupts art spaces to incorporate the Latinx body it so commonly neglects. Furthermore, he highlights the queer within the rural. Through his art, Villalobos creates visibility. He makes declarations of existence on a matrixed set of levels in which he lacks visibility; so, he stakes his claim to time/history/space by the conspicuousness of disidentifying to perceive existence. In a way, he incorporates his hero, Juan Gabriel, to state: we have always existed. Both artists transform toxic elements of society into elements of pride, replacing hurt with self-determination, promise, and a little bit of sparkle.

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Notes

- ¹ 2SLGBTQIA+ stands for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersexual, Asexual, and additional queer spectrum.
- ² As per the interview with the artist, coming out and visibility were important to him. He did not come out until he moved from El Paso, where he was born, and relocated to San Antonio in his twenties. There are scholars, including Carly Thomsen (2021) in *Visibility Interrupted: Rural Queer Life and the Politics of Unbecoming*, who make a case for the public process of coming out and the concept of needing greater visibility as metronormative agendas. El Paso and San Antonio are both major cities in Texas.
- ³ Dr. Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) discusses this at length in his book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Trauma can shut down typical brain function. But it is not only a psychological issue, it is also a physiological one. Traumatic experiences can lead to long-term physical symptoms in the body.
- ⁴ Villalobos did not grow up Catholic but Evangelical, though his family on his father's side were practicing Catholics.
- ⁵ Intended as a collective designation, “Latinx” is a term designed to embrace broader inclusivity, replace the Eurocentric “Hispanic”, and avoid the gendered associations of “Latino/a.” However, Latinx is controversial too, as it can be embraced or contested by community members. It is used as a label primarily for people in the United States who identify with a Latin

American heritage, and that is inclusive of queer people. Like the original census terminology, applying this nomenclature encompasses a plethora of histories, customs, and cultural norms, all lumped into a homogeneous one. However problematic it is to use broad-ranging labels, the benefit is found in the unification of different groups to counter the underlying unifier, i.e., all are assigned minority status and participate in ongoing colonial projects (Flores 2021). And, as Arlene Dávila (2020) argues, Latinx artists are largely neglected and missing from the curriculum, criticism, markets, collections, and art history in general. Through the gathering of a broad range of communities with distinct histories, cultural traditions, and racial demographics under the umbrella term Latinx, the neglect of these artists by the art world infrastructure becomes more apparent.

- 6 The DADT “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy had gone into effect in 1994.
- 7 As in the tradition of ex-votos from the past, the works of the artists in this contemporary exhibition were commissioned. Since the curator selected all Latinx artists for the project, we can assume he wished to connect specifically to ex-voto traditions from New Spain.
- 8 Ex-votos in the Mexican tradition can be divided into two categories: paintings and sculptural or object-based art. Such works have been produced for centuries in the Americas—since the early sixteenth century. However, they reached a height of popularity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most commonly, painted ex-votos were on a tin support, which is still popular today, and with more exclusive or expensive ex-votos painted on copper. Ex-votos could also take the form of any object used to thank a saint for their divine work. Many times, this included “cast metal replicas of body parts; discarded crutches, casts, and braces; locks of hair; and within the last forty years or so, X-ray plates, photographs, and hospital identification bracelets.” *Soledad (loneliness)* is more akin to the object-based ex-voto and represents a continuation of Villalobos’s assemblage practice. See (Giffords 1991, p. 33).
- 9 Examples of Villalobos’s performance works that incorporate dirt include *Sin los Callos en la Mano* (2018), *Ni De Aqui, Ni De Alla, Pero Siempre Regreso de Arrastrado*, *Lo Que No Existe*, *Calldo Como Hombre*, *Sequenced*, and *Deeply Rooted, Cultured and Silenced* (2021).
- 10 *Deeply Rooted, Cultured and Silenced* was first performed at the Atlanta Contemporary in Atlanta, Georgia, on 5 June 2021, and again at 516 Arts Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 30 September 2023.
- 11 *Sin la S* was first exhibited in *¡Ahora!* (YLA 2017) at Mexic-Arte Museum, Austin, Texas, curated by Alana J. Coates, and the work was reproduced in the accompanying catalogue and nearly all media coverage for the exhibition. It was then displayed at the *Transborder Biennial 2018*, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas. *Sin la S* is also within the catalogue *José Villalobos: Joto Fronterizo/Border Faggot*, which accompanied a major survey exhibition that traveled to multiple locations, including Albright College, Reading, Pennsylvania, 2019 and Texas A&M International University, Laredo, Texas, 2020. In 2023, the artwork is included in two group exhibitions: *Fluid Gaze* at 516 Arts Contemporary Museum in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the *Mud Kin* exhibition at the University of Southern California’s Roski Mateo Gallery in Los Angeles, California. *Sin la S* may be the most reproduced artwork image by the artist in media coverage to date.
- 12 Villalobos broke away from the white cube with other works as well, including in *El Amor y su Entierro* (2020) and *El Peso Del Rio (The Weight of the River)* (2021).
- 13 This concept is inspired by Muñoz’s discussion of disidentifications and, specifically, his take on Caliban in William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* on p. 185.
- 14 Muñoz states, “the minoritarian subject employs disidentifications as a crucial practice of contesting social subordination through the project of worldmaking”, p. 200. BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color.
- 15 Villalobos created an installation titled *Forty-Nine* (2016), a hanging piece that, when it was originally displayed, commemorated the victims of the Pulse nightclub massacre.

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