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TOPPING FROM THE BOTTOM: A CONVERSATION WITH KEGELS FOR HEGEL AND PATRICIA MONTOYA



BY AMY SARA CARROLL (<https://asterixjournal.com/author/amysaracarroll/>)
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(<https://www.4cbeetle.com/4cbeetle3.htm>)
from the bottom of the bottom



In bone-crushing times, don't mourn, organize.
And, reach for a torch song.
Or two.

For years I've been a groupie of the conceptual art project making queer love songs to philosophers called Kegels for Hegel (K4H). It's consequently my pleasure to do this flash interview with them for Aster(ix). To make an ideal situation even better, I'm thrilled that Patricia Montoya—a recent collaborator with K4H whose video/film installations have equally mesmerized me—was willing to join the conversation.

Spoiler alert: speaking of longitudinal queer influence and kinship, many thanks to Angie Cruz for soliciting this piece for Aster(ix).

Get out your go-go boots and have a look at/listen to a few of K4H's music videos: [I Wanna Fight You to the Death](http://asterixjournal.com/i-wanna-fight-you-to-the-death/) (<http://asterixjournal.com/i-wanna-fight-you-to-the-death/>) (Love Song to G.W.F. Hegel) and [Take Me to Yr Borderlands](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4IXZhMXNXU) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4IXZhMXNXU>) (Canción de amor a Gloria E. Anzaldúa). Exercise your kegels! Lean into our exchange below.

AMY: Describe the delectable project of Kegels for Hegel (K4H). Possibly begin by detailing K4H's ecstasy of influence, or, more specifically, by offering an account of the band's humorous name as it relates to *I Wanna Fight You to the Death (Love Song to G.W.F. Hegel)*.

K4H: We were graduate students in 2010 when we created Kegels for Hegel and wrote our first song to German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. One of us had a pretty memorable orgasm while reading Hegel, but it wasn't inspired by anything hot about Hegel—it was really just a way to try to stay awake while reading hours upon hours of dense social theory.

At the time we wrote our first song and created a name for the project, we were living in a rat-infested dirty hippie co-op in Rochester, New York. We became kegel evangelists once we learned that it's possible for one's organs to fall out of one's vagina (Prolapse! It's real! Google it!). There's a profoundly practical component to this project! Another practicality: Our kegel within was awakened as a conceptual art project, and we started synthesizing interdisciplinarity with our super smart friends, composing most of our songs with GarageBand, making music videos, and performing the work live.

AMY: Come again, can you go into greater detail about K4H as a conceptual project? There are many debates in contemporary poetry about the merits of conceptual writing. For some time, I have been thinking and writing about ways of reframing and reclaiming the conceptual. Selfishly then I'd love to hear you expand on your ideas about the conceptual.

K4H: Knowledge is often described as penetrative and ideas as seminal. We wanted the project to consider knowledge or inquiry from the other end of the penetration metaphor: the grabbing onto something and making it a part of you. We wrote an invagination manifesto about it:



[_http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel/manifesto-](http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel/manifesto-)

[invagination](#)).

It's worth invaginating this interview with it, too. And, of course, vaginas do this, but we are definitely not into reproducing this idea that vagina = woman. Everyone has an anus, and anal kegels are possible, too! We were also thinking about re-framing classic models of power and penetration, considering the potential of "topping from the bottom," or thinking of grabbing onto things as an active act, à la filmmaker and theorist Nguyen Tan Hoang's *Bottomhood is Powerful*, and musicians Lady's "Yankin" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvN9YwiveXc>) and Ely Young Red's "Throw that Boy Pussy" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4iBBfEHNae>).

AMY: I suppose that my prior questions implicitly have wondered about the following, but now I want to explicitly ask: How does this collaboration intersect—or not—with other aspects of your solo and shared life/work? In particular, I am interested in your "day jobs" as art historian-curator and anthropologist and the way that K4H challenges "prudish" boundaries maintained between the critical and the creative.

K4H: We are a collective that works with anyone who wants to join us, and those people are often academics. We have had anthropologists and art historians, among other colleagues and friends, as collaborators. And as academics, the founders of K4H, and some of our collaborators, are semi-

anonymous for a few reasons. Some of those reasons have to do with the way we wanted to foreground collaboration. But another key reason is that several people involved in the project are in precarious situations in relation to their day jobs in the academic and museum worlds. And what you mention about the prudish boundaries between the critical and the creative is one reason they are hesitant to come out. Another reason is the raunchy, sexually-explicit nature of our work. As far as the founders go, one of us kept K4H a secret from most colleagues for the first few years but has increasingly given fewer fucks and is now totally out about it. The other is still more careful at this particular moment. During our worst moments of anxiety, we both imagined some kind of a prudish cis het white dude dean googling our names before signing off on something having to do with a hire or tenure or something and then being like, “NOT THAT DIRTY SLUT!”

AMY: Yes, sadly such a scenario is very plausible and sounds all too familiar to me. I’m so glad you’re finding ways to navigate these hazards in your life/work juggling acts. But, let’s not give those cis het whites dude deans any more time in our interview. I’d like to shift gears to travel further into the realms of institutional critique. Returning to the flesh and the flash: for now and in perpetuity, what does “Love” have to do with all of the above?

K4H: Love comes into play in the collaborative aspect of the project. We are always trying to imagine forms of connection that are alternatives to the hetero-monogamous nuclear family structure. For our [Pastelegram](http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel) (<http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel>) issue we created a [Queer Kinship chart](http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel/kinship) (<http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel/kinship>) that was inspired by both the kinds of kinship charts that anthropologists make and the chart made on *The L Word* showing who all of the queer women were fucking. We are also thinking of [Tim Dean](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/U/bo6485469.html) (<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/U/bo6485469.html>)’s reading of men giving each other HIV as a form of creating kinship. We will probably not have children, but we think of our K4H collaborations as a way of generating new things and creating queer kinship through playing/working with our friends and colleagues and lovers and crushes and mentors.

AMY: Okay, I’m hooked. I absolutely love this! I also have to confess that I’ve been obsessed with drawing queer kinship diagrams in part because I do have a child and I need for him to know that myriad alternatives of connection exist. I take seriously Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay”! To that end, I think I need your help drawing a diagram for an essay I’m currently completing on the work of Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe. And, following that tangent: all this reminds me that I believe that the first time I met one of you we later went to see an evening of cabaret at [El Vicio](http://www.elvicio.com.mx/) (<http://www.elvicio.com.mx/>), formerly El Hábito, in Mexico City. Rodríguez and Felipe’s work has been amazing in its reclamation of the cabaret genre and it’s hugely impacted my own thinking, writing, and artmaking. Could we collaborate on a song for them one day in the near future? Pivot: staying on track, can you talk more about your own past, current, and future género-bending torch songs?

K4H: Ooooooh, yes, we should absolutely collaborate on a song for Rodríguez and Felipe! Like you wrote, Amy, torch songs — sentimental songs about unrequited love — these were what we thought of as our genre. We were originally thinking of the banality of most love songs and wanting to make them more ambivalent to reflect our strange feelings about being shaped by these white Western philosophers whom we felt inspired by and interested in yet also had gripes with and felt we needed to talk back to. But we were also influenced by the genre of the *narcocorrido*. The narco ballader writes songs to people, often to larger than life anti-heroes. So our love songs hit somewhere in the range of ambivalence. And the songs also became about an ambivalence toward philosophy with its dead white dude canon upholding the archetype of the Real Philosopher. So we have used the project to write love songs to thinkers who we believe should be considered philosophers, too.

We call them love songs, but most of them can probably be more accurately characterized as lust songs! Thinking of them as lust songs perhaps makes more sense in that there’s something about getting turned on by ideas.

Amy, you actually wrote a love song of sorts to José Muñoz as part of the Pastelegram project. Well, actually it was a poem, and we were supposed to put it to music, but we loved the way it sounded and never found the right music to add to it. Could you tell us a bit about [that poem](https://asterixjournal.com/) (<http://pastelegram.org/y/kegels-for-hegel/the-day-jose-died>) in relation to love and queer kinship?

AMY: Hmmm.... Thanks for indulging me here and validating my tendencies toward the tangential. Long live the flipped script—talk about queering genres! For starters, I'm absolutely honored to be on your queer kinship chart. I wrote the poem that you included in *Pastelegram* spontaneously on the afternoon it details. As I wrote it, I was thinking about how Muñoz writes about the ordinariness of queerness in the Frank O'Hara poem, "Having a Coke With You," but also about what I can only read as Muñoz's prose poem, his compact provocation on queer methexis (note the "me" and the "mex" versus the "methe," "x," and the "is" rising to the surface in this curious word), published under the title "[Toward a Methexic Queer Media](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/521111) (<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/521111>)" in *GLQ*. I also was thinking about the brilliant poet-scholar Fred Moten's collection *B Jenkins* (<https://www.dukeupress.edu/b-jenkins>) (bearing the name of his mother) wherein he wrote poems to and about people in his life centrally or peripherally—another queer kinship chart, to be sure.

Mostly, however, I was trying to work through a mourning that I wasn't entitled to claim. I had met, but did not know, José Muñoz. Still, as a graduate student, I was deeply impacted by his book *Disidentifications*. I frequently tell that story to students in the seminars I now teach like this: In undergraduate school, I first read Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The book was so important to me, I couldn't leave my dorm room without it. I carried it everywhere like a talisman, or better put, like a tailswoman. In graduate school, *Disidentifications* had a comparable visceral affect on me. I remember a dear friend and I spending so many joyful hours loving *Disidentifications*. We treated it something like *the* lustful torch song of our generation. We staged engagements with it in a performance workshop that we took with the incomparable Holly Hughes. We swooned over it in an art history class with the equally incomparable Kristine Stiles. It became our touchstone and deep point of connection... and, so I shamelessly loop back to queer kinship and love!

PATRICIA: José Muñoz is a great influence in my development as artist, very supportive of the work I made in [NYC in the 90s](http://patriciamontoya.space/1990s-nyc/) (<http://patriciamontoya.space/1990s-nyc/>) through a paper that the cultural critic, Berta Jottar wrote on my piece "El Culebrero, la muerte de un Colombiano y el acordeonista que no esta" (1996). José made artmaking sound possible, part of everyday life for the wandering soul I was in NYC in those days.

I've pursued a career where love and work are interchangeable in the way that love, in fact, *is* the work

ONE MEMBER OF K4H: Ugh, *love*. I just recently realized that the academic book I'm in the middle of revising is actually about love, which it wasn't supposed to be, originally. So I'm currently dealing with my own anxieties about saying something smart about love that's connected to the smart things other people have said about love. In my academic work, I'm thinking through love as non-sovereignty, love as obligation, and love relationships as entailing both coercion and support. But I'm writing about the love between sex workers, their families, their pimps, and the missionaries who hope to turn them into former sex workers, so my approach to love is grounded in those complicated relationships.

AMY: I can't wait to read what you write. I know you won't revert to the missionary position in your scholarly speculations. Keep on Kegeling across your practice! If you want to tell us more about this, please do; or, shifting gears again, can you reflect on on K4H as a queer Latin/x American intervention/durational performance?

K4H: Most of our songs and music videos engage some of the ideas of the thinkers we write about in a way that sexualizes them—and also ourselves—and makes reference to non-normative sex acts. One of us writes about the whore stigma, which is used to discipline all women but is most violently deployed against sex workers, racially marked people, poor people and gender non-conforming people. Some of our songs invoke conquest scripts in ways that invoke ideas about race, gender, and

power. Jillian Hernandez, our friend and collaborator, developed the concept of raunch aesthetics to refer to cultural production that engages explicit sexuality and humor for the pleasures of minority audiences, especially queers and POC, who are often seen as sexually excessive or freaky. This is something we were always doing on a more instinctual or visceral level, but now we've got a concept for it, which is cool. We need to write a love/lust song to Jill. *Queridx reader, please consider collaborating with us on this!*

AMY: Speaking of collaboration, you've said so much already about the latter as act and concept, I hope you will forgive me for trying to pin you down on one collaboration in particular. Could we talk more specifically about the impetus behind your Valentine's Day 2018 music video *Take Me to Yr Borderlands (Canción de amor a Gloria E. Anzaldúa)*? I suppose I could reframe this to also address another of my repetition compulsions in this interview, too. Broken record: what does "Love" code-switching into "amor" have to do with all of this? Also, Patricia, would you join us again?

K4H: Regarding Conquest scripts, we wrote the Spanish hook on after a disturbing trip to the Border Patrol Museum in El Paso, Texas while thinking about colonization, neocolonialism, and the militarization of the US/Mexico Border.

Te quiero conquistar
Como las Americas
Te quiero saborear
Como un elote
Y vas a trabajar
No hay beneficios
Y te va a gustar

We were then trying to come up with a philosopher to dedicate this to, but we couldn't find someone we hated enough, so we dedicated it to the makers of the Arizona bill to ban ethnic studies, made a 1 minute video, and called it Aztlán. Like yeah, motherfuckers, you're afraid that if we teach young people history, they will rise up and plan a *reconquista*? Fine, let's do it.

But then we had the idea to re-frame it as dyke power play and to write it as a love song to dyke chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa. We titled it to honor her transgressions of linguistic borderlands, her code-switching.

AMY: I am fascinated by your careful recounting of the transformation of this song! And, the changes continue! Patricia, would you also be willing to answer question #2 as it relates to your past and future work as a video/film/installation artist? Or, perhaps you're interesting in reflecting (more) on "queer methexic media"?

PATRICIA: My collaboration with K4H started when I saw their videos for the first time and was presented with the 30 sec teaser for the [Gloria Anzaldúa music video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZnxeIhNBkE) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZnxeIhNBkE>) that was shot in Mexico City. My aesthetics and sensibility are very different from K4H's and I wasn't sure if I could match the electricity of their videos and the song itself.

K4H: Well, you pulled it off!

AMY: Tell us more! Can you describe in greater detail your aesthetics? One of my favorite things about collaboration is the ways that the process transforms everyone involved. My own aesthetic has shifted dramatically and continues to do so via collaboration, itself a vehicle of invagination. Does this explain why so many of our academic (especially in the humanities) and artistic "parents" warn against producing collaborative work?

PATRICIA: I'm rather a slow, old school, Pablo Neruda, Dulce Maria Loynaz, kind of poet; but as a documentarian, my experimental videos are absurdist theater adaptations. I was excited to collaborate in a project with K4H's contemporary, queer and trans youth of color aesthetic. But in a

generous, curious, open spirit, both K4H's and my own, I offered footage I had shot in Tijuana from previous projects. They intervened with their vast research, ~~imagination and enthusiasm~~, and we joined forces.

~~(<https://asterixjournal.com/>)~~

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The three of us teach at universities and made the video during academic breaks, which prolonged the process more than we had anticipated. Also, I struggled to deliver what I could to the project, a contribution that was original to me. But this is the creative process, as I understand it, anyway.

AMY: Patricia, can we hear more about how you understand the creative process? One of my favorite moments in this music video is when you “float” through it, levitating to the tune. In particular, I love how you are horizontal, yet still in motion in that sequence. It becomes a sly signature, a signaling of your presence in the project, but is “understated” in comparison to K4H's delightfully excessive presencing. How does your position as such relate to your current project addressing the legacies/ghosts of Gloria Anzaldúa? And/or, do you consider yourself to be a border filmmaker?

I've written about post-1980s border documentaries, many originating in the Tijuana-San Diego corridor at the close of my recent book *REMEX: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era* (<https://utpress.utexas.edu/books/carroll-remex>). It's the portion of the book which feels the most unfinished and hurried to me, which is ironic because a goodly number of the films I consider are indebted to slow or art cinema. I know you received your MFA from the University of California, San Diego? Can you talk about that department's and region's lasting influences on your work? Finally, per my tired recourse to the cut and the loop: I'd welcome any insights you have re: amor (vs. everything).

PATRICIA: I am exploring the documentary and the essay film and experimental cinema in relation to music video production and imagining ways to cross pollinate these genres in future pieces.

Regarding my love for Gloria Anzaldúa in my work, making the video enabled me to play with and confront my own ghostly haunting. The lingering presence of my uptight Catholic upbringing began to disperse as we followed Anzaldúa's borderlands theories, as we composed together a polyamorously sexual, raunchy, and anti-purist aesthetics. The creative process afforded unexpected convergences and coincidences. We filmed the video in Houston, Texas, although we had hoped to film it in Anzaldúa's hometown. My love for the cities of Houston and Tijuana as places of inspiration, history and connectivity informed the work. My family is from Colombia, and an entire portion of my extended family moved to Houston in the 80s and calls it home. My grandmother is buried in Houston. I had spent a great deal of time in San Diego and Tijuana, but filming with K4H in Houston helped to make the Texas link to the borderlands real to me. I had visited periodically ever since the 1980s but did not know the city in the ways that K4H presented it to me.


My experience at UCSD was life defining. The many good memories of my time there are still vivid; the friendships still strong. Looking back, I realize that we were supposed to learn how to be artists in the VisArts program. I did not know that at the time, though. Only now, after I've had a few detours, do I see how invaluable that lesson is. I guess the essence of things is in the obvious.

AMY: In a scent or taste that lingers...

PATRICIA: Regarding the lingering effects of life experiences, I would say that the connection between political artwork, education, identity formation, the constant process of becoming, the recurring themes in my work such as the fluidity of borders and urban landscapes, are tied to my desire to live fully, to be open more than ever to intellectual curiosity and experiences, to new challenges and transformations. These are the spiritual ruminations that connect me to Gloria Anzaldúa's work and the gift I was given by collaborating with K4H.

K4H: Patricia, We had fun introducing you to our strange Texican spicy and sweet snacks. The video features many shots of Texican and Northern Mexican treats like chamoyadas, Flamin' Hot Cheetos® smothered in nacho cheese and jalapeños, and pickle juice snow cones. We don't know if Anzaldúa

consumed these kinds of snacks, but making this visual reference to the culinary borderlands was important to us.

 (<https://asterixjournal.com/>).

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AMY: Yum! *Note to the reader: it might be best to view the videos and read this interview over again while snacking on the aforementioned.* I never expected this conversation to turn on and return to Texas! I'm from Corpus Christi originally, somewhere in between Houston and Anzaldúa's birth/burial grounds. Patricia, I love that you are pushing us to connect kinship charts and maps. Again, do you think of yourself as a border artist? K4H, could you chime in to respond to the same question? *Note to the reader: I definitely identify as a borderlands writer.* Previously, I asked about a queer Latin/x American aesthetic, but could/should we get *both* more specific *and* more general to accent queer borderlands' praxes? It might make for a nice open end for and to our conversation.

PATRICIA: Yes, I do consider myself a border artist. I found myself at the Mexico-US border. I loved being able to cross back and forth from "the end of the USA and the beginning of Latin America," as my former professor at UCSD, Teddy Cruz, would say of the fence traversing the beach into the ocean in Playas de Tijuana. *No olvido lo que sentí al verme mirando el continente entero desde el cerco*, right there and then my work found its place, its purpose. I love that fence because it is a reminder of the ugly, painful, and horrific in US imperialism and of Latin America's defiance and fight for freedom embedded in its culture. I'm developing project ideas that will take me back to San Diego/TJ. More on that, I hope, soon.

K4H: Yes, we both identify as borderlands artists, among other things. The space of the hyphen, or that phrase that Word® underlines as a spelling error because it doesn't know it to exist; those theoretical space of signification and resignification seem like home— places of creation, of dissent, of resistance because their meanings are still being defined or we haven't yet made words to define them. We both ended up pursuing academic projects that had to do with the US/Mexico relationship—one of us in a Mexican border city and the other in Mexico City. So as a grounded response, yes, we grew up in Texas and California, as well as bouncing around between Mexico and Anglo-Europe, in families where the borders between Mexican and White infused the way that we learned about the world.

—Amy Sara
Carroll

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Amy Sara Carroll's books include *SECESSION*; *FANNIE + FREDDIE*/The Sentimentality of Post-9/11 Pornography, chosen by Claudia Rankine for the 2012 Poets Out Loud Prize; and *REMEX*: Toward an Art History of the NAFTA Era which received honorable mentions for the 2017 MLA Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize, the 2018 Latin American Studies Association Mexico Section Best Book in the Humanities, and the 2019 Association for Latin American Art-Arvey Foundation Book Award. Since 2008, she has been a member of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0, coproducing the Transborder Immigrant Tool. She coauthored [()] *The Desert Survival Series/La serie de sobrevivencia del desierto* which was published under a Creative Commons license and widely redistributed. Carroll was a 2017-2018 Fellow in Cornell University's Society for the Humanities and a 2018-2019 Fellow in the University of Texas at Austin's Latino Research Initiative. Winter 2021, she was an artist-in-residence with other members of EDT 2.0 at the University of California, Los Angeles's Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy. Fall 2022, Mexico City's Centro de Cultura Digital included her chapbook ¡NIFTY! [an intimate oral history/una historia oral íntima] in the exhibition catalog for *Cuánto tiempo lleva todo esto derramándose sin desbordarse*. Previously she taught at The New School in New York City, currently she's an Associate Professor of Literature and Writing at the University of California, San Diego.

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