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Radical Transgenderism

Bronx-born, Puerto Rican photographer Elle Pérez explores queer identity in rural Tennessee.
By Elle Pérez



I arrived at the queer “Faerie” sanctuaries of rural Tennessee two and a half years ago in the midst of an intense gender identity crisis. I was in awe of the residents, as wild and free as the land they inhabited. Barriers between inside and outside space were trespassed in both directions; spectacles usually reserved for early morning hours at queer bars echoed throughout the hollow. It was here that I met Tripp—the first transgender person I knew who rejected the idea that to be transgender was also to be transsexual by default—an encounter that marked a seismic shift in my life and art practice.

Growing up in the Bronx’s Puerto Rican diaspora community, gender roles were clearly defined from the onset. I spent Saturdays watching *Sábado Gigante* with my abuela—stealing furtive glances at the shiny, shimmying, mujeres competing for Miss Colita—then serving as an altar girl Sundays at St. Clare’s Catholic church. My burgeoning queerness at odds with everything

around me, I made space for myself by photographing inspiring people in my various communities.

After returning from Tennessee, I mulled over ideas inspired by the concept of radical transgenderism. Propelled by questions about my own gender identity, I photographed those who shared my desire to live in the androgynous space between genders. In late 2011, I traveled across the United States to Southern gay bars, isolated vegan communes, midwestern universities, community centers, and academic queer conferences with the goal of making portraits. My wandering produced a body of work titled "The Outliers," which includes the photos published here.

This past fall, I spent two months living with my family in Puerto Rico, my artistic process there inspired by Junot Díaz's writings and Latoya Ruby Frazier's series *The Notion of Family and The Homebody*. I am presently grappling with the body's ability to express identity, my relationship to specific sites in the Bronx and Puerto Rico, and the intricacies of contemporary Puerto Rican queer communities.