

Out of the Fringe? Out of the Closet

Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance in the 1990s

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When I first sent this article to TDR my hopes of being published were tempered by my understanding of the type of performance (and not text) orientation of this journal. I sent in what was equivalent to a type of introduction to an anthology LA playwright Caridad Svich and I were coediting, Out of the Fringe: Contemporary Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance (Theatre Communications Group, 2000). When Richard Schechner wrote back, accepting the article because he felt that a number of the works and playwrights discussed were unknown to the TDR readership, I was thrilled. Not only because of the evident publication “brownie point,” but because the notion that TDR would accept a half-baked article on the promise of a better one, and because Schechner thought the works and playwrights themselves deserved the exposure, I thought: “Cool. All along the only one who’s been preventing me from breaking out of the wonderful Latino and Latin American publications and into a broader, English-language spectrum has been ME. Chicken! ¡Cobarde!” Yes, I know. Historically TDR has dedicated quite a bit of space to Latina/o works. But hey, I thought, those articles were written by (with all due respect, but not kneeling) the “sacred cows” of contemporary cross-cultural theatre and performance. I’m NOT a holy cow. And I don’t even live in NYC, SF, or LA, I live in Cowtown (Fort Worth) Texas. What do I know? Anyone out there saying, “Yeah, sister, I hear ya”? Good. Because, I think the point is this: some of the barriers are within. In many ways, this article has to do with breaking both internal and external barriers. By no means an exhaustive list, the artists whose work I discuss here, in my opinion, are expanding the threshold of Latina/Latino representational possibilities: Luis Alfaro, Migdalia Cruz, Nilo Cruz, Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante, Marga Gomez, Naomi Iizuka, Oliver Mayer, Pedro Monge-Rafuls, Cherríe Moraga, Monica Palacios, Caridad Svich, and Alina Troyano. All of the works discussed have existed as performance, though I may not have seen them. It is a small list. They represent a fraction of the Latinas/os out there creating work. This is not meant to be a “definitive” statement on Latina/o theatre and performance, just one among many.

Constructing Latina/o theatre and performance art histories necessarily is a pluralistic and fragmentary endeavor. The first and most obvious reason is the geographic amplitude and the lack of a unified communication network dedicated to the dissemination of information (productions, performances, reviews, etc.) on Latino theatre in the United States. As researchers we reconstruct theatrical histories from sporadic personal observations and from available published sources. Granted the disadvantage of not having access to some of the works as performance, it is nevertheless important to maintain traces of these works. These traces—anchored in memories, interviews, photographs, and playbills—function as silent witnesses to the ephemeral and unrepeatable performance. While Peggy Phelan makes the observation that, “Performance’s being [...] becomes itself through disappearance” (1993:146), Diana Taylor counters that the efficacy of performance “whether as art or as politics, stems from the way performances tap into public fantasies and *leave a trace, reproducing, and at times, altering cultural repertoires*” (1999:65; emphasis mine). Traces from now silent performances speak, telling a story of expanding cultural repertoires in Latina/o theatre and performance art. And while Taylor proposes that “the power of seeing through performance is the recognition that *we’ve seen it all before*—the fantasies that shape self and community, that organize our scenarios of interaction, conflict, and resolution” (1999:65; emphasis mine), I would add that there are some cases in which “we” (in this case both members of hetero- and homosexual Anglo *and* Latina/o and other subaltern communities) have not seen it *all* before, because it has not been allowed, because we have not allowed ourselves. Some types of representational possibilities have had to hard-elbow their way into public, collective consciousness. Imagine: a tough, muscle-bound Mexican homosexual boxer; a hairy, beastly woman who devours bloody live rabbits as the object of male desire; or a lesbian surfer Chicana *chola* in Venice Beach, California (yes, I know—*anything* is possible in Venice Beach!).

What I am interested in are the *possibilities* of representation that have been available to Latinas/os since the 1960s, as well as new possibilities currently being carved out. A sense of history, then, underscores this analysis; a positional historicity, which I hope will persuade you to contemplate the expansion of our representational possibilities since the early days of El Teatro Campesino. I’ll do so by first taking a look at how gender and sexuality initially were subsumed by nation-building and political concerns (later to be addressed as the result of the AIDS epidemic), and ultimately how these representational possibilities have multiplied in Latino theatre and performance in the late 1990s. Some of the Latina/o work written and produced from the mid-1980s through the 1990s radically displaces and challenges heterosexual and patriarchal privileges, both within and outside of Hispanic cultures. I suggest that this stands as a distinguishing characteristic of the new Latino work. What are the representational possibilities emerging from Latino playwrights and performance artists, and why does their “coming out” matter?

Because we live in a market-driven society, where value and success are tied to profits, who and how many of us are accessing national stages requires attention. The still lingering problem of limited financial investment in Latino productions by both commercial and not-for-profit venues will be addressed in my concluding remarks.

Chicano Nationalism and Chicana Women in Teatro

In the 1960s through 1970s Chicano theatre/cultural movements responded to a then necessary nationalism that excluded a diversity of sexualities. Within this *machista* ontology, the early Chicano teatro movement responded to the

need for an identity construction that was community-oriented. This community in early teatro works hubbed around the United Farm Worker's Union, headed by César Chávez and Dolores Huerta. The works of El Teatro Campesino's political activist period were constructed as binary oppositions: good guys = the farmworkers; bad guys = the Anglo or Anglicized Mexican bosses. This two-dimensionality served the political activist movement well. El Teatro Campesino's messages were clearly discernible by the targeted audience of farmworkers. As the Chicano political activist agenda grew, teatro's involvement expanded into urban community settings, where different local issues were addressed. In time, the agendas diversified, representational tactics began to vary, audiences became plural—and, in some cases, found common ground. (I am thinking of the TENAZ, or Teatro Nacional de Aztlán festivals of the 1960s through early 1990s, where Mexican, Chicano, New York Puerto Rican, and South American leftists of the Nuevo Teatro shared an ideological space.)

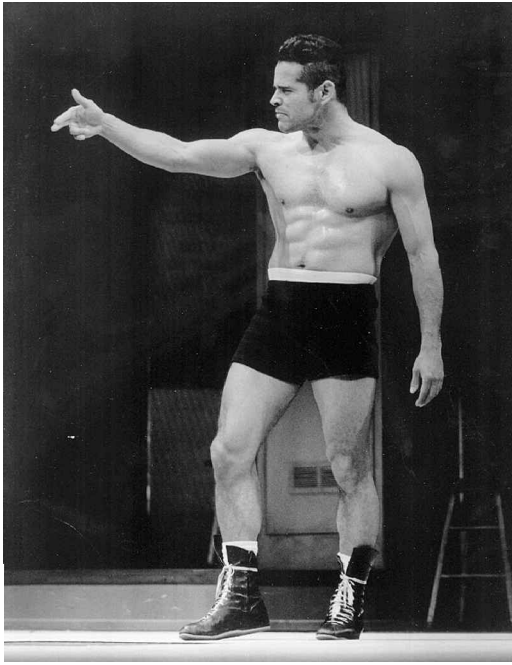
However, like some other sociopolitical revolutionary movements of the late 20th century (the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions, but *unlike* the present-day Chiapas Zapatista uprising), issues related to women's and alternate sexualities were subsumed by the overriding imperative of "the cause." This "cause" demonstrated a marked tendency to assume the characteristics of the ruling sectors usually led by heterosexual males. The desired goal was political change that left intact culturally ingrained (and therefore relatively invisible) patriarchal male privileges. To borrow from Benedict Anderson (1994), the Chicano and later Latino "communities" that were *imagined* were also (unintentionally or intentionally) exclusionary, fictionally homogeneous, and singularly constructed as "heterosexual."

El Teatro Campesino's evolution is inextricably tied to the development of Chicano theatre and to the Chicano sociopolitical movement as a whole. A rereading of the paternalistic nature of the early Chicano theatre structure has been the subject of heated debate. Yolanda Broylez-González's *El Teatro Campesino* (1994) suggests that the paternalistic nature of ETC's organization under Luis Valdez informed all representational opportunities for women (as fictional representations in a performance) and by women (as the physical creators of such representations).

Socorro Valdez makes an insightful observation about the women's growth process within El Teatro Campesino. At the time of her initial participation she was a girl of 15, while her brother, Luis, was already a grown man. Now, as an adult woman, she concedes that, "There is more of a consciousness of women—in oneself—that there wasn't then" (in Broyles-González 1994:165). Retrospectively, Valdez comments that the roles available to women within the early ETC were limited to *la mamá*, *la novia*, *la abuela*, or *la hermana* (the mother, the girlfriend, the grandmother, or the sister): "The way those female roles were laid out are for the most part very passive and laid back, *y lo aguantaban todo* (they put up with everything)" (166). Nevertheless, original El Teatro Campesino ensemble member and long-time Chicano theatre veteran José Delgado ascertains that it is important to highlight a little-noted fact: Socorro Valdez "was also a director in the company and directed versions of *La Virgen de Tepeyac* and the show we toured in Europe in 1978. She was a major player. Not a victim" (1998).

Alluding to Broyles-González's point that the women of ETC were allowed to play only certain roles, it is worthwhile to include an extensive testimonial from former ETC ensemble member Diane Rodriguez (now codirector, with Luis Alfaro, of the Mark Taper Forum's Latino Initiative):

In retrospect, I am not interested in blaming Luis Valdez for the lack of strong female roles in El Teatro Campesino. What for? To do that would



1. *Raymond Cruz as Vinal in Blade to the Heat by Oliver Mayer. West coast production by the Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, March 1996. (Photo by Jay Thompson)*

be to say that we were victims of Luis's vision. Hardly. Anyone who knew me or Olivia Chumacero or Socorro Valdez knew us as strong, aggressive, and outspoken women. Yes, of course, none of us were "allowed" to play *La Virgen* in *La Virgen de Tepeyac*. I make light of it now, but it was a sore spot that we never resolved. But in the end, it as an asexual and iconistic role that suffered from an "I'm too divine to be human" complex. The role of *La Virgen* wasn't as fun as the roles we did play. Onstage, I frolicked for years, as did Socorro Valdez, playing *La Muerte* in *La Capa de los Rasquachis*. We both relished playing *Satanás* in *La Pastorela*. I've never played a role since that gave me the opportunity to play for so many laughs night after night. The traditional roles were tiresome. The girlfriend. *La Virgen*. The loose women. So we played the androgynous roles and basked in them. All of us complained, but in the end we accepted the more traditional roles too. And we should take full responsibility for that action. We could have walked away, but we stayed because we believed we were moving a community to self-empowerment through art. No excuse. I'm proud of that work. That's where we all were in our development. (1998)

Androgyny, not as an encompassment of all genders but as an erasure of visible gender or sexual markers, was the significant representational possibility for the women of *El Teatro Campesino*. Genderlessness offered freedom from the patriarchal order, freedom to employ the unmarked body. "Woman" was determined within the narrowly defined Latino version of patriarchy, *machismo*, and the familiar (if not *familial*) framework. Men also remained trapped within this narrow framework. Both male and female sexualities were constricted: not victimized by the patriarchy, but willingly sacrificed for the sake of the *corpus communitas*. This idealized community body acquired form through political activism and through its inscription in academic discourse (see Fernández 1994). In time, political activism gave way to circumspect discourses *about* the political activism. In Foucault's terms regarding the proliferation of discourse about sex, which replaced the simplicity of the act itself (1980), discourse replaced action. Examples of this can be seen in Culture Clash's comic *A Bowl of Beings* (1992) and in Luis Alfaro's video performance *Chicanismo* (1996), where the questioning surfaces as nostalgia peppered with familiar *Zoot Suit* (1978) linguistic posturing: "What ever happened to the Chicano movement, *raza*?"²

Chicanas Take Action

In a 1984 survey of the Chicano theatre, Margarita Melville searched for images depicting family relations. She used three anthologies of the time: *Contemporary Chicano Theatre* edited by Roberto J. Garza (1976), *Nuevos Pasos: Chicano and Puerto Rican Drama* edited by Nicolás Kanellos and Jorge Huerta (1979), and *The Many Deaths of Danny Rosales*, plays by Carlos Morton (1983). She came up with three types of male-female relationships: (1) partnership, (2) adversary with the male dominant, and (3) adversary with the female dominant (1984:72). She comes to the conclusion that: "It is interesting to note

that in order to illustrate the process of how a ‘Chicano identity’ is acquired, the female–male relationship assumes a male–dominant adversary relationship” (1984:74). Melville cites *teatropoesía*, a linguistic combination of theatre and poetry, as an alternative that Chicana women begin to take as an “answer to the unsatisfactory portrayal of female–male relationships in most Chicano theatre thus far” (1984:78).

Rather than see themselves as victims, Chicanas sought ways to expand notions of their own and their communities’ identities through individual performance work. In the San Francisco Bay area, this led to the development of the *teatropoesía* aesthetic. In 1974 Dorinda Moreno and Las Cucarachas performed a multidisciplinary blend of dance, music, poetry, and prose. In 1979 Olivia Chumacero and Rogelio “Smiley” Rojas (both members of El Teatro Campesino) presented a *teatropoesía* piece called *Cabulenado in Motion* in a number of northern California community centers. By 1981 many groups emerged doing *teatropoesía*, including Valentina Productions (San José, California) whose members were Irene Burgos, Rosie Campos-Pantoja, Clara Hill de Casta òn, Liz Robinson, and Juanita Vargas. They created a piece entitled *Voz de la mujer* (The Voice of Woman). Like countless teatro groups, they subsequently disbanded, but not without helping develop this particular genre—a precursor of solo women’s performance art.

According to Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, another major event of *teatropoesía* held in San Francisco was *Tongues of Fire* in 1973 (1983:78–94). There are several important aspects of *Tongues of Fire* that reverberated through the 1980s and 1990s work of Chicana playwrights and performance artists: writing as an activity of self-creation; as a way out of a psychological underclass; and the willingness of Latina performers to experiment with their own bodies as artistic and sociocultural metaphors outside the limitations set by a proscenium stage. It is a strategy that leads me to think of this type of activity as a sort of *Bildungstheater*, which may parallel the concept of the *Bildungsroman*, a self-creation through writing. But there were also economic reasons—as well as reasons of self-expression—for the development of one-person shows. For example, consider the work of veteran actors Sylviana Wood (Tucson, San Francisco) and Ruby Nelda Pérez (San Antonio).

Taking Up the Past

Gays in Early Chicano/Latino Theatre

One of the first documented representations of a Chicana lesbian character occurs in *The Day of the Swallows* (1971) by heterosexual Chicana playwright Estella Portillo-Trambley. A problematic play often compared by critics to Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour*, Sue-Ellen Case notes that in *The Day of the Swallows*, the lesbian is portrayed negatively; her suicide is a sacrifice to the homophobic impulse of the heterosexual community (1994:93). In “Seduced and Abandoned: Chicanas and Lesbians in Representation” Case comments on Cherríe Moraga’s early predicament:

When she [Moraga] was criticized by her ethnic community for achieving her initial national visibility through Anglo feminist organizations and publications, her answers indicated that her lesbian perspective distanced her from the heterosexist organization of alliance: “I did not move away from other Chicanos because I did not love my people. I gradually became Anglicized because I thought it was the only option available to me toward gaining autonomy as a person without being sexually stigmatized.” (1994:98)

I will subsequently take up Moraga's position and most recent work below. It is important to note, however, that strategies an artist may adopt in the beginning of her/his career are not static or constant. They respond to sociopolitical forces in effect at the time. For instance, in the 1981 landmark book coedited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Anzaldúa puts it clearly: "Invisible both in the white male mainstream world and in the white women's feminist world [...t]he lesbian of color is not invisible, she doesn't even exist" ([1981] 1983:165). In scholarship, this is no longer true.

If Chicana lesbians endured representational invisibility, Chicano gay men have not fared much better. In *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture and AIDS* David Román refers to Edgar Poma's play, *Reunion*, produced in 1981 in San Francisco's Mission district. He quotes Yarboro-Bejarano's comments regarding its exclusion:

[The 1981 TENAZ Eleventh Festival] revealed the depth of resistance to considering the Chicano theater movement an appropriate vehicle for the exploration of questions of sexuality. This attitude was further demonstrated during the Festival by the virtual boycott of a workshop on *Reunion*. There were heated arguments by Latin-Americans and Chicanos alike against a resolution condemning sexism and homophobia during the general assembly. (in Román 1998:181)

Nine years later, in a different context and in a subtler manner, the homophobic scene repeated itself. During the 1990 Hispanic Playwrights Project at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Orange County, California, Nuyorican gay playwright Edwin Sánchez presented *Trafficking in Broken Hearts*. The theme of Sánchez's text is the relationship between Papo, a poor Nuyorican mulatto male prostitute and hustler who works Manhattan's 42nd Street, and two white males, Baby and Brian. Baby is a white male runaway and Brian an upscale Wall Street professional. Ethnicity is not as important here as are issues of class and race. I was present at the closed staged reading and was impressed by the relationship dynamics. The play dealt openly with the figure of a Latino gay man. Because I liked the play, I wanted to know what happened to it and asked Sánchez: "Everybody thinks I'm a terrific writer, but [...] no gay topics, please!" (Sánchez 1990). Perhaps it is significant that the following year Sánchez returned to the Hispanics Playwrights project with *Do a Flor and Her Trained Dog*, a dark psychodrama that does not mention the gay issue (see Marrero 1991). Sánchez's work continues to thrive today. He has been a member of New Dramatists (NYC) since 1996. *Trafficking* has been produced at the Atlantic Theater Company in NYC (1994), and *Floorshow* was produced at Latino Chicago (1991).

What was necessary, then, to move beyond suicided or erased Chicana lesbians, excluded gay Chicanos, and repressed gay Nuyoricans? Nothing short of an epidemic.

HIV and AIDS in Gay Latino Representation

While Chicano theatre proved to be a closed, homophobic environment, in the late 1980s and '90s a Latino gay tour de force began to emerge out of the suppression. Despite, or perhaps because of politically conservative times (the Reagan/Bush years, Senator Jesse Helm's attacks on the NEA), there was a remarkable explosion of Latina/o gay and lesbian performers and writers—even if they are still underrepresented. In "Staging AIDS: What's Latinos Got to Do With It?" Alberto Sandoval Sánchez comments that "AIDS is not only a medical crisis but a crisis of representation" (1994a:49). Sandoval Sánchez argues



2. Monica Palacios in a promotional photo for her piece *Greetings from a Queer Se orita*. (Photo by Becky Villase or)

that the crisis of representation is one of under- and misrepresentation by “those with access to power (Broadway and Off-Broadway) [who] have taken the lead and outlined the paradigms of staging AIDS. [...] The representation of AIDS has been centered on white gay and often Jewish males” (1994a:50).

However in “So Far from National Stages, So Close to Home: An Inventory of Latino Theatre on AIDS” (1994b) Sandoval Sánchez names numerous plays devoted to Latinos with AIDS and produced in local theatres, community centers, clinics, and schools. They include Louis Delgado’s *A Better Life* (1993), José Rivera’s *A Tiger in Central Park* (1992), Edwin Sánchez’s *The Road* (1991), Alberto Sandoval Sánchez’s *Side Effects* (1993), and Héctor Santiago’s *Camino de Angeles* (1992) (1994b:63–67). *Ollantay Theater Magazine’s* special issue (Summer/Fall 1994) devoted to AIDS in Latino theatre is a landmark. Sandoval Sánchez points out some of the characteristics of Latino AIDS theatre, which are highly reminiscent of the type of early (1960s) teatro productions: works with a sense of urgency and a didactic purpose, directed at target audiences, with an emphasis more on the message and audience participation than on aesthetics. Not pulling any punches, Sandoval Sánchez also makes the following observation:

It is interesting to note that Cuban exiles are out of the closet more often than other Latinos/as. In their plays the criticism of compulsory heterosexuality is overt and direct. [...] The goal of Cuban exiles is to dismantle homophobia as inherited in the U.S.-Cuban communities and practiced in Cuba (before and after Castro). [...] The audience is invited to laugh at old ways of seeing and doing by portraying how racist, homophobic, classist, and sexist Hispanic culture can be and *is*. (1994b:71, original emphasis)

While, as Sandoval Sánchez observes in his title, Latino gay performance may have been and still is “far from national stages” the fact of the matter is

that now we are beginning to allow ourselves *to be*, not as imagined homogenous, heterosexual communities, but as multiple: deceased and healthy, homophobic, gay, lesbian, queer, hetero-, bi-, and even asexual. For those of us within our own communities who *allow ourselves* this visibility, it indeed expands our cultural repertoires.

Multiplying Sexualities in the Late 1990s

Samples of Produced Work

ALINA TROYANO

Perhaps echoing Sandoval Sánchez's observation regarding the penchant for "Cubano coming out" is Alina Troyano—aka Carmelita Tropicana. A Cuban-born New York lesbian performance artist and writer, Troyano began her now well known performance work at New York's WOW Cafe in the early 1980s, where she used to go "looking for girls and found something more long-lasting: theatre" (1995:85).

In *Milk of Amnesia Leche de Amnesia* (1994, published in 1995), through the personas of Carmelita Tropicana and Pingalito Betancourt (a prototypical Cuban male), Troyano explores the emotional landscape of beyond-exile identity and reconstructed memory by going to Cuba. Carmelita's work has been documented in this journal and elsewhere (see Troyano 1995; Román 1995; Muñoz 1995; Muñoz 1999a), therefore I see no need to elaborate here. However, one observation made by Román does bear repeating because it alludes to the notion of "allowing one's self":

Ten years ago, before the rage for the new queer politics and theory, C. Carr placed Carmelita Tropicana on "the queer frontier." Tropicana's work, along with the work of her friend, the performer and playwright Holly Hughes, began to carve out for Carr what was in 1985 a new "territory—rude, wacky, politically incorrect, sleazy, and overly sexual—a place where lesbians, suddenly confident in their inappropriateness, are *allowing themselves* to roam for the first time." (in Román 1995:83; emphasis mine)

MARGA GOMEZ

Solo lesbian performer Marga Gomez's outstanding comic work is known both on the west and east coasts. The daughter of a Cuban comedian father and a Puerto Rican dancer, Marga grew up in Harlem. She moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1980s and worked at the Valencia Rose Cabaret, a space committed to nurturing the work of gay comedians. By 1988 she had earned the honor of being voted Entertainer of the Year by the San Francisco Council on Entertainment. She is an original member of the Latino comedy troupe Culture Clash.

Gomez uses her life experience as the raw material of her satire. However, she's known to spare no one, regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, or "hairstyle" (Gomez 2000). Her performances include *Memory Tricks* (1991), a piece based on her flamboyant mother, performed in 1992 at the New York Shakespeare Festival's "Festival of New Voices." *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty & Gay* (1991) opened at Josie's Cabaret in San Francisco and has traveled throughout the U.S. It is arguably her best known work. Her latest, *A Line Around the Block* (1994–1996), commissioned by the Mark Taper Forum and the New World Theatre in Amherst, Massachusetts, honors her father and is a

companion piece to *Memory Tricks*. It premiered in 1996 at the New York Shakespeare Festival. Gomez is anthologized in numerous books, the latest of which is *Extreme Expose: Solo Performances of the Twentieth Century* (Theatre Communications Group, 2000).

PEDRO MONGE-RAFULS

Moving towards the male body, Pedro Monge-Rafuls's 1989 monologue, *Trash* ([1995] 2000) posits a painful look at the male body as locus of the U.S. stereotypical social construct of the Cuban Marielito immigrant (Cubans who left the Island in 1980 through the port of Mariel) as human "trash." Monge-Rafuls, founding editor of *Ollantay Theater Magazine*, usually writes in Spanish. *Trash* marks his successful crossover into the English language. *Trash* premiered Off-Broadway, presented by Do'Gooder Productions at the Theatre on Three (10 W. 18 St.), November 1995. It was directed by Mark Robert Gordon, with Sam Valle as Jesús.

Trash is the story of Jesús, a young, athletic mulatto who took advantage of the massive exodus allowed through the Peruvian embassy and the Havana port of Mariel in 1980, and ends up in New York. The monologue exposes negative concepts of Marielitos as homosexuals, thieves, and social deviants. Simultaneously Monge-Rafuls destroys the Cuban immigrant's illusion of the U.S. as an imagined safe haven.

Although we don't know it until the end, Jesús is speaking from inside a jail cell, a victim of appearance and circumstance. In need of money, he agrees to allow a stranger to give him fellatio. By the end of the monologue, the audience understands Jesús's feeling of entrapment, his subordinate and expendable position in U.S. society. He is presumed to be a gay "deviant" from Cuba. The cards are stacked against him, regardless of his innocence or his "true" sexual orientation. What begins as an economic/sexual exchange ends tragically. The Cuban exile's dream of an idealized United States is shattered by the harsh realities of U.S. homo- and xenophobia.

OLIVER MAYER

Oliver Mayer's *Blade to the Heat*'s 1994 highly successful world premier at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre in New York City, and its equally exciting production in 1996 at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, is an example of success in commercial as well as aesthetic terms. The play is set in 1959 at a title bout between the hypermacho Afro-Cuban titleholder Mantequilla Décima and the challenger, the gay Mexican American character Pedro Quinn. *Blade to the Heat* has a double dimension: the implicit eroticism of the two men in close physical contact in the ring is choreographed as a theatrical and dramatic spectacle. A former amateur boxer, Mayer's intimate look at the dynamics of male relationships within the ring is:

very much about love, I'm not talking about prurient stuff. I mean it's about intimate connections, an intimate connection that is physical as well as emotional [...] focused on destruction [...] the perfect victory is a knockout. Not death, but maybe a little death. (in Nericcio 1996:5-8)

The spectacle of a thoroughly male-coded, muscled macho body that also represents the desires of gay men shatters an important macho stereotype within Latin American and Anglo cultures. Sociological research in the area of gender studies in Latin America points to the differentiation of roles awarded to the passive (the penetrated, feminine status) and the active (the penetrator, mascu-

line status) in same-sex male relations. Lillian Manzor-Coats has highlighted this peculiar differentiation in her introduction to *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (1994). The construction of the “masculine” remains coded within the *role* played; the notion that a “masculine” male may be penetrated defies Latino cultural definitions of “heterosexuality,” where a man who penetrates another man can still maintain the privilege of heterosexuality. The penetrator is not defined as gay or homosexual (see also Foster 1994).

The core image of prototypical masculinity is subverted, not at the level of irony (the linguistic), but at the level of the threshold of possibility (the imaginary). In my opinion, *Blade to the Heat* poses a representational challenge to most audiences regardless of ethnicity. It makes as big a splash in the cultural landscape as the great Olympic diver Greg Louganis did when he came out. Indeed, Louganis is not alone. Dave Pallone, who’s been a professional baseball umpire for the National League for 10 years, came out in his bestseller, *Behind the Mask: My Double Life in Baseball* (1990). Mr. Universe bodybuilder Bob Jackson-Paris, San Francisco 49ers runningback Dave Kopay, and others join Louganis and Pallone. Judging from the success of Pallone’s book, U.S. readers seem to be willing to pay money to read a tale of transgression (in the privacy of their homes) about gay athletes’ infiltration into sacrosanct male institutions. My question is this: Is *middle* America willing to spend money to be “confronted” with the dismantling of consecrated iconic male images onstage, particularly by a *Latino*? While New York and California might be ready, Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, the Dakotas, Ohio, Mississippi, Alabama, the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Florida north of Orlando, I wager, are not.

I put forth Texas in particular as an example of a state with a significant Latino (they say “Hispanic” here) population. It is also a Bible-belt state. This means that religion (which holds a tight reign on race and gender issues) parades in sheep’s clothing that cloaks a biting political animal: the far Right. *Blade to the Heat* in the heartland? I hope so!

COCO FUSCO, NAO BUSTAMANTE

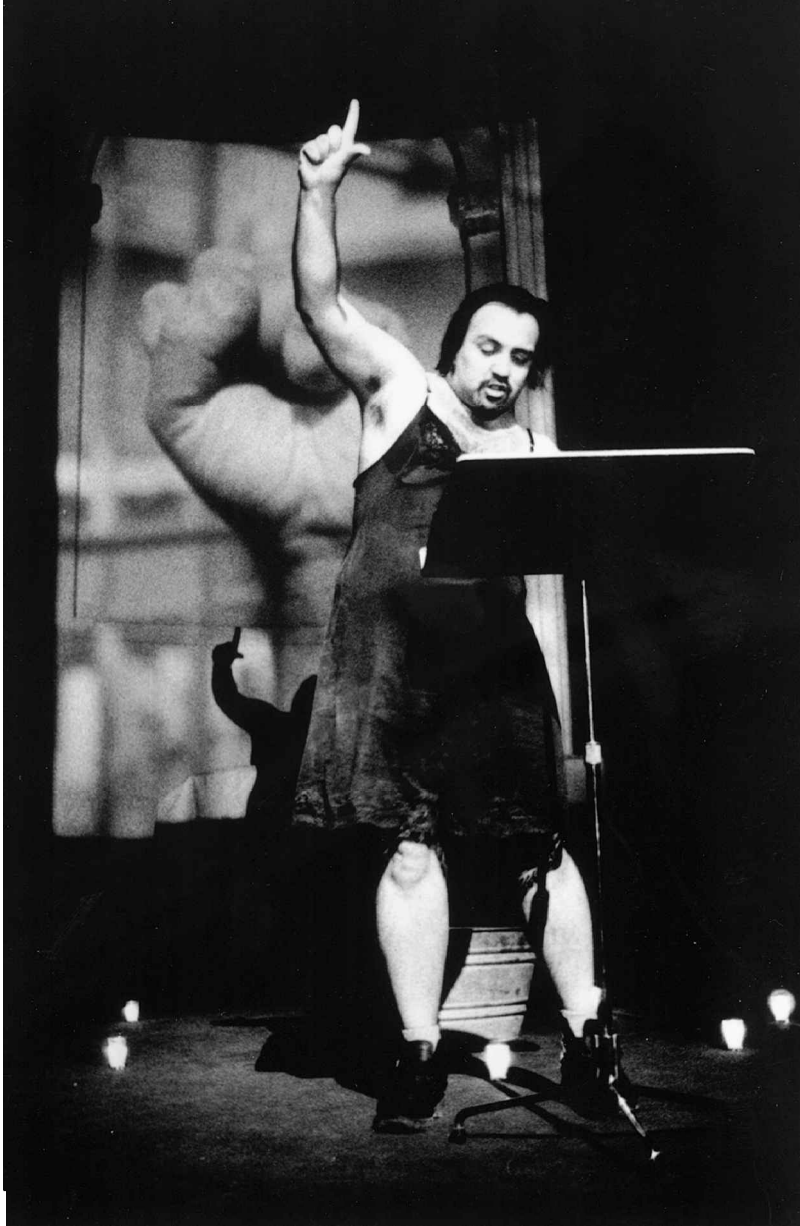
Coco Fusco made her entry into the world of performance through collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Their *Couple in the Cage* (1992; see Fusco 1994, Taylor 1998) posed a strong critique of the quincennial celebrations of the “discovery” of the Americas, as well as a critique of “intercultural” performances (or spectacles in the Debordian sense), which have marked colonialist contact between Europeans and the Americas (Fusco 1995:41). These performances, as interpreted by Fusco et al., not only call into question the ethnographic privilege of Western interpretation, but they inadvertently have created a tension between the performance as a physical event and the reception of that event by another physical presence, that of the public (Fusco 1995; Taylor 1998).

Continuing to blur the (traditionally) passive line of distinction between the observer and the observed, Fusco subsequently collaborated with San Francisco-based Chicana artist Nao Bustamante in yet another world-touring interactive performance event entitled *STUFF* (1996). The piece expands the imaginary horizon to discuss Latin women within the context of worldwide postcolonialist, neoliberal economies. The performance employs the trope of a global tourist service to ask:

Have you ever thought about what you are going to do on your next vacation? Would you like to try something new? Most of my clients [...]

long to bask in the sensual beauty and ancient wonders that my part of the world offers so willingly. Then they come back irritated by all of the tropical storms, masked bandits, parasites and poverty. [...] I have devised a service that will bring you heat without sweat, ritual without revolution, and delicious without dysentery. (Fusco and Bustamante [1997] 2000:49)

Tapping upon key elements of the so-called first-world hunger for tourist tropicalizations of the “primitive” third world, yet unable to move beyond its own fixation upon the clinical, the antiseptic, the virtual aspect of reality, *STUFF* places its fictional reality within the sexual and economic structures of the global, neoliberal marketplace, paralleling the body of women with so-called



3. *Luis Alfaro in Cuerpo Politizado performed at the X-Teresa in Mexico City, January 1995. (Photo by Monica Naranjo)*

third-world Latin American economies (especially Chiapas, Mexico, and Cuba during the 1990s Special Period). In Chiapas, Mayan women commercialize ideology by selling handmade Zapatista dolls to Western European tourists hungry for a noble cause like the Indian uprising. In Cuba *jineteras* and *jineteros* (a neologism of the word *jinete*, which means an equestrian jockey, someone who rides on the back of what is usually an animal) sell their time, charm, and bodies to Canadian, Italian, and Spanish tourists for U.S. dollars (see Fusco 1998).

In terms of sexual representation, *STUFF* codes the erotic within the aesthetic of same-sex relations among women. It's enacted by Bustamante while sitting at a dining table vigorously picking her teeth, suggesting an after-dinner discussion. An overtly pro-woman voice-over about how women taste accompanies her actions: "Those who enjoy eating women must enjoy the flavor and scent and juice of seriously potent fruit. I've eaten both and it takes more raw talent [...] to eat a woman" (Fusco and Bustamante [1997] 2000:21).

The overt sexual-genital reference refers not only to "women," but to the biblical "forbidden fruit"—presented matter-of-factly, as one might read in a tourist restaurant guide. The conjunction of sex, women, and food draws the audience to the "obvious" and even "logical" conclusion: women's genitalia make for a very delectable taste experience. The heterosexual male body is relegated to a secondary status in the marketplace of desire.

CHERRIE MORAGA

In a recent essay written as an introduction to her newest and most overtly lesbian play, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (1997) Cherríe Moraga states that she sees her work in dialogue with Chicano theatre. Her "works emerge from a critical conversation with Chicano Nationalism (*The Hungry Woman* is a case in point)" (Moraga 2000:290). In her early works Moraga was a daughter engaged in a conversation "with the fathers. [...] Whereas I began as a disobedient daughter, I soon grew veterana enough for an unacknowledged sisterhood, until age and war wounds changed the shape of my writings to (not-always-benevolent) mother" (291). Contrary to the observation made by Sue-Ellen Case quoted earlier, Moraga sees herself in a constant dialogue with Chicano theatre. She is interested "in that continuing conversation with her own kind," in spite of her initial strategies of publishing and producing her work outside of our insistently homophobic Latino communities.

In *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* Moraga constructs her play around the complex set of sexual and political relations among the cast of mostly lesbian characters. The Berkeley Repertory Theatre commissioned the play and it has received several staged readings.³ According to the author's preface, the published version is based upon the Brava Theatre Center's staged readings. Moraga sets *The Hungry Woman* in a postapocalyptic, "*Blade Runner*" world in which gender identity and irreconcilable cultural differences are radicalized on different sides of "the border." Set in:

The near future of a fictional past, one only dreamed in the Chicana/o imagination. An ethnic civil war has "balkanized" the United States. Medea, her lover Luna, and Medea's child Chac-Mool have been exiled to what remains of Phoenix, Arizona. Located in the border region between Gringolandia (white Amerika) and Aztlán (Chicano country), Phoenix is now a city-in-ruin, the dumping site of every kind of poison and person unwanted by its neighbors. (Moraga 2000:294)

In this liminal space outside of both white and Chicano "straight" culture, lesbians (there is no reference to gay men) reside. This transcultural space is

the topography of nonheterosexual desire, set within three generations of Mexicana/Chicana women: Medea's elderly mother, middle-aged Medea, and young Luna. This is a stigmatized place permitting neither psychological nor physical mobility. By radically separating cultural locations from gender identities, and by creating a geographic locus for lesbian identity, Moraga shifts the focus towards the complexity of woman-on-woman same-sex relations. In a pivotal scene, Medea surprises Luna using a mirror to gaze at her own genitalia, which Luna perceives not as an object of beauty but as "a battleground. I see struggle there before I see beauty" (2000:334). A concept Medea rejects by "kiss[ing] her [...] first on the mouth, then grabs Luna by the hips, and goes down on her" (334). The erotic scene is broken when the Border Guard enters, demanding that Luna confess to being a lesbian. This scene moves from longing for individuation, to Luna's desire *of herself/for herself* as seen through Medea's mirror, to a mutual female-centered desire focused on each other (through each other?). This process/desire is disrupted by the male figure who represents the phallic Law.

The play takes place mostly in the insane asylum/border area, where Medea is held captive. Rather than losing her son to the symbolic Chicano patriarchal Order, Medea takes drastic action—symbolically killing two parts of herself: that of mother and of lesbian lover. The play suggests, however, that her Mexicana/Chicana self is indelible and therefore not subject to erasures. *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* enacts the problematic juncture of lesbian motherhood (of a son), lesbian desire, and cultural exile imposed by an overriding machista order. It creates an overwhelming sense of the inescapability of the symbolic order of the Father within Chicano culture. However this does not happen until *after* Medea and Luna's lesbian desires are brought into the open, overtly performed.

MONICA PALACIOS

One of the most recent talents to arrive to the Los Angeles area from San Francisco is Chicana lesbian comedian, performance artist, and playwright Monica Palacios. She has also collaborated with Luis Alfaro and Albert Antonio Araiza in *Deep in the Crotch of My Latino Psyche*, first performed at Highways Performance Space in 1992. Her one-woman performance, *Greetings from a Queer Se orita* (1995), "is a combination of two highly acclaimed autobiographical pieces: *Latin Lesbo Comic* and *Confessions...A Sexplosion of Tantalizing Tales*" (2000:368). *Greetings* was first produced in 1995 in Tucson, Arizona, at the One In Ten Theatre Company. It has since toured to numerous universities, colleges, and cultural centers.

Palacios works the battleground of stand-up comedy already pioneered by herself and other lesbian stand-up comedians, such as television's Ellen DeGeneres. This work flies against the mainstream homophobia of the straight nightclub scene. According to Palacios, the majority of productions of her work have been cosponsored by gay and lesbian organizations inside and outside of the Latino communities (1998).

Greetings enacts the pleasure felt by the lesbian character upon fantasizing on such refreshing images as that of the Surfer Chola and Miss Sabrosita at the *taquería* (taco stand). Not only does Palacios tell us early in the text that she, herself, is a "lezbo-dyke-queer-homo-muff diver!" (2000:374), but she lets us in on a secret: while lesbian sex is good, Chicana lesbian "brown" sex is better. By inferring a Chicana/lesbian sexual nationalism, Palacios suggests the positive values of loving an Other who is like one's Self. Gender and cultural identities blend in a seamless way. By self-confidently signifying lesbian Chicana desire and by describing the pleasures she emotionally and physically

experiences from her sexuality, Palacios precludes being attacked for any anomaly: her sexuality and ethnicity are right up front (and definitely in your face!). Her promotional photograph appropriates the prototypical Marilyn Monroe-type calendar pose. My reading on it is this: *Lesbianas* can be hot Latin *se oritas* too, and vice versa. In Spanish there's a street word for lesbian that can be both derogatory and descriptive: *tortillera*. Like the *tortilla*, the heat can be applied to both sides. The "vice versa" is significant.

LUIS ALFARO

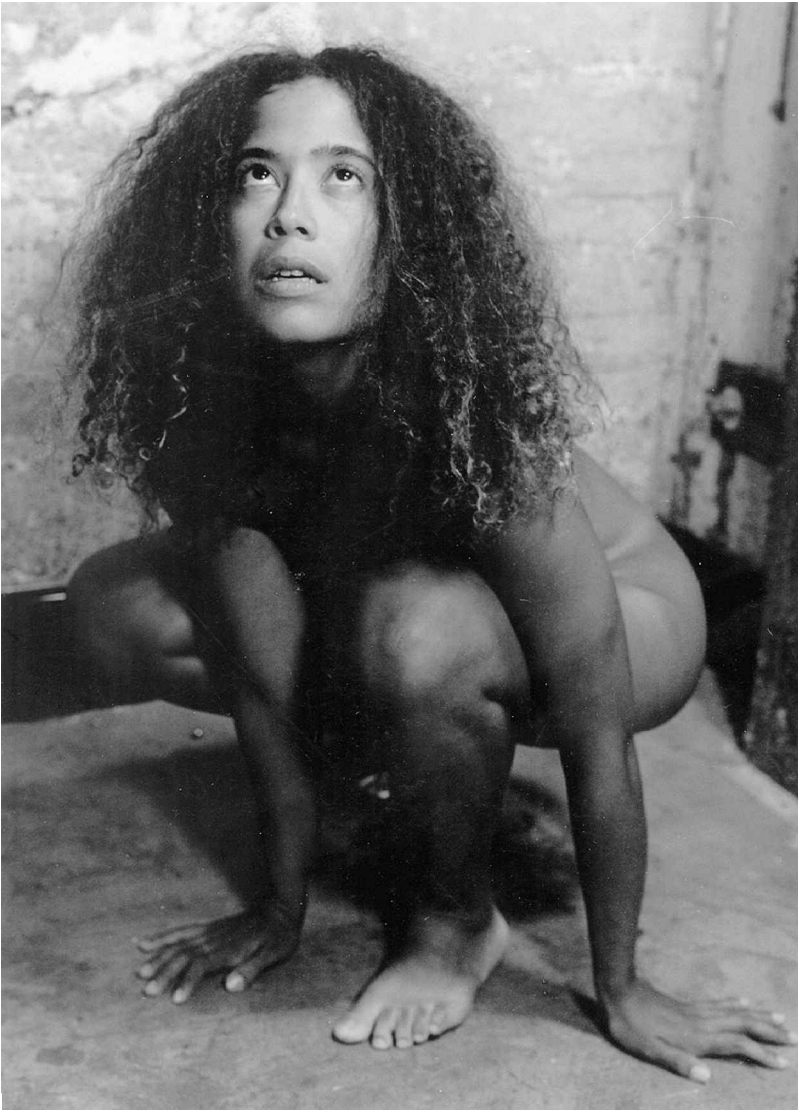
Perhaps one of the most powerful voices in gay Chicano/Latino performance is the multifaceted (short story writer, poet, performance artist, playwright, and journalist) Luis Alfaro (see Muñoz 1999b). Winner of a 1998 MacArthur Foundation Award, Alfaro defines himself both as an artist and a social activist, particularly in the area of AIDS awareness—he has collaborated with ACT-UP in Los Angeles. Alfaro also produced both a compact disc, *down town* (1994) and a video, *Chicanismo* (1996), which aired on KCET-TV, Los Angeles.

In *Cuerpo Politizado* (1996) Alfaro offers a glimpse of the Chicano gay male identity through a unique blend of desire and the political—encased within the activist project to expand and explore the juncture of the Chicano/gay communities. Through 11 vignettes and one tape-recorded segment entitled *Chicanismo*, Alfaro takes us from his own downtown Los Angeles neighborhood of Pico and Union streets, to the experiences of Mexican families, Catholicism, and the social construction of gender, to a queer positionality.

Alfaro positions himself as a gay rights activist first. His performance work arose from his political activism (Alfaro 1998; Román 1998). *Cuerpo Politizado* expresses this positionality by altering a number of cultural signifiers. Superseding the closeted existence within the homophobic family, Alfaro recasts a seemingly insignificant crate of grapes (an overt sign of the early Chicano activism of the United Farm Workers) as the transgressive sign connecting the narrator's emergent sexuality with his politics. At age 18 he met a guy who was very white, very sensual—the teacher of erotic secrets: "Like how to kiss like the French [...] dance in the dark [...] and [smash] grapes all over our bodies and [lick] them off each other" (1996). The grapes are a sign of his family's heritage as migrant California farm workers—but they are also a cultural sign of unequivocal Chicano nationalist politics. The crate of grapes Alfaro receives from his grandmother and subsequently uses in his erotic, homosexual play subverts standard notions of the machista tendencies within the 1960s nationalistic Chicano movement (see Prieto-Stambaugh 1996, 1998). Through the ownership and recasting of the grapes Alfaro suggests the connection linking César Chavez's United Farm Workers' political activism to Alfaro's and other Chicano gay activists' sociopolitical activism. In making this connection, Alfaro opens up a traditional Chicano political space to include Chicano gay rights.

MIGDALIA CRUZ

Migdalia Cruz's play, *Fur*, written in 1995, was first coproduced by the Steppenwolf Studio and the Chicago Latino Theatre Company in January 1997. Also in 1997, the play opened in San Francisco at the Campo Santo at Intersection for the Arts. It was also performed at the Kitchen Dog Theatre in Dallas in 1999. *Fur* raises questions about the nature of desire. The characters of Citrona, Nena, and Michael comprise a trilogy of displaced desire questioning the heterosexual norm. Citrona is a "hirsute woman who has been sexually mutilated by her mother and sold [to Michael] like a dog" (Cruz 2000:73). Michael's desire is aroused by "her otherness, her exoticness, her Latina-ness" (Cruz 2000:73)—a



4. Greta Sánchez Ramírez as Citrona in *Fur* by Migdalia Cruz. Produced by the Campo Santo with Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco, October 1997. (Photo by Steve Mitchell)

woman whose entire face and body are covered with hair. For Michael: “The more different it is, the more beautiful it can be. The potential for beauty increases proportionate to the oddity of the substance” (2000:97). The male fixation on difference is reminiscent of Coco Fusco’s assertion that the European colonial powers staged spectacles in which the colonized were displayed as “freaks” (1995:41). *Fur* identifies power with the masculine power to purchase and cage/contain/restrain. Economic privilege is coded as gender privilege. Benevolent though this conjunction of gender and money may at first position itself (Michael buys the biggest cage possible as “proof” of his love for Citrona), the dramatic action makes the actual power play very clear. This is accomplished through the sheer strength of Citrona’s will and desire.

Citrona rejects Michael’s notions of heterosexual romantic love. Instead, she is aroused by Nena, the girl-woman whom Michael hires to catch the live rabbits that Citrona eats. Michael is sidelined into playing the role of the voyeur who watches the two women. He is deeply disappointed when he discovers that

the two women do not talk about him while he is invisible to them. They are dealing with their own desires. Citrona wants Nena, while Nena wants Michael.

Nena's desire is not fulfilled because Michael does not respond to her sexually. Nena's desire is performed in the play as a masturbatory monologue where she fondles herself as she speaks about Michael. Paradoxically, while her preference is heterosexual, the masturbation suggests that the female desiring subject can do without the physical presence of a man.

As in *STUFF*, heterosexual male desire is never fulfilled in *Fur*. Michael lives in a world of unfulfilled longing: he speaks of love, describes it, but never gets it. *Fur* posits female desire as primary, palpable, and complex (in Citrona the beast is both desiring and desirable, she is both beauty and the beast). Nena's desire, while it is not fulfilled, is represented as self-generated and physical. Michael's desire is simply discursive—words without any deeply experienced eroticism. Eroticism in *Fur* is constructed as homoerotic desire between women and about women—even when one of the women desires a man.

CARIDAD SVICH

Caridad Svich's *Alchemy of Desire/Dead-Man's Blues* (1997) is an elusive play about women experiencing the lingering effects of memory upon desire and death. The play has been widely produced—premiering at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park in 1994, it was also done in 1996 at both the Bridge Theatre in Miami, Florida, and the Lincoln Center Theatre Director's Lab in New York. In 1997 it was performed at the Northern Light Theatre Fest in Canada.

The dead male lover is a ghost who's not comfortable with his state of being. His wife finds a way through her loss back towards herself with the help of friends. *Alchemy* makes no reference to anything Latina/o, nor is it overtly political. Svich considers herself a hybrid culturally (Cuban, Argentinean, Croatian), as well as aesthetically. She likes to push notions of creative identity beyond culturally determined gender codes. Her work is often elusive, poetic, and musical—she writes the musical scores for her plays. *Alchemy* was originally conceived for radio and is driven by a strong sense of rhythm and musicality. This is especially so of the women's speech, whose function is analogous to that of a Greek chorus (see Marrero 1997 for more on Svich's work).

Alchemy of Desire starts with Simone lamenting the death of her husband Jamie—who was killed in a war in “some little country somewhere [she] couldn't even find on a map” (Svich 2000:400). The male is missing, the setting is a nonspecific, southern U.S. town. The action revolves around Simone's desire, which is enacted in a liminal emotional space where sorrow meets longing. Jamie's ghost is glimpsed in the play as a lost soul, wandering about looking for the limbs that were severed from his body in the war. Man, then, is literally and metaphorically dismembered, powerless, and impotent. Only Simone's desire for him keeps the ghost returning. In a ritualistic rite of passage, four women neighbors help Simone exorcise the house and herself.

The women in *Alchemy* are as physical in their expressions as are the women in *STUFF* and *Fur*, although they navigate through the consequences of a larger, external world of which they seem to know little. They are alchemists, knowers of rituals and masters of the invisible. These characters feed on ritual, music, fire, and water. The dialogue is often extremely lyrical:

SIMONE: I am gonna find the breath.
I'm gonna trespass
on the night.
Gonna swallow the stars
until I find you. (2000:425)

In *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* Roland Barthes makes the following observation, which aptly describes the function of language and desire in *Alchemy of Desire*:

Language is skin: I rub my language against the other [..., m]y language trembles with desire. The emotion derives from a double contact: on the one hand, a whole activity of discourse discreetly, indirectly focuses upon a single signified, which is "I desire you," and releases, nourishes, ramifies it to the point of explosion (language experiences orgasm upon touching itself): on the other hand, I enwrap the other in my words, I caress, brush against [...,] extend myself to make the commentary to which I submit [...]. (1978:73)

Desire, as a quality of spirit projected onto the flesh through language, is transformed into an act of possessing oneself and internalizing the Other. Desire, loss, and longing push Simone past her own pain towards the freedom she may have not known before: a path towards herself. The ritual of her alchemist neighbors accomplishes its goal: to lead her back into the well from which all desire springs, the depth of her own being, not as objectified desire but as self-generating desire. The desiring subject takes precedence over the object.

NAOMI IIZUKA

Naomi Iizuka's one-act play *Skin* is an adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck*. Here physical desire resides in Mary who is as hard-edged as the testosterone-driven Navy Men, while "love" is (mis)placed as discursive longing (through her one-time lover, Jones). *Skin* was first produced in 1995 at the University of California, San Diego, with later productions at the SoHo Rep in New York and the Dallas Theatre Center.

The play is set in a postapocalyptic world, a time both now and a long time ago, before memory: "that happened a thousand years ago, before I was born, before I remember," says Mary in her opening monologue (Iizuka 2000:163). Mary's drive for physical pleasure is strong enough for her to confidently play a dangerous game with nightclub pickups. By contrast, Jones, the father of Mary's child, longs for a virginal Mary—a person who does not exist. In an attempt to penetrate beyond the boundaries of her being, her skin, he consummates his desire in an ultimate act of possession: Thanatos subsumes Eros. Iizuka herself is very aware of the ambiguities of her work:

I'm suspicious of the tendency to pin down a writer's demographic or aesthetic identity. I dislike the way a piece of writing can get classified, the labels that are used to say this person is "this kind of writer," and they're writing "this kind of play" which will speak to "this kind of audience." I think that the expectation is that you will depict yourself and your writing in recognizable, and essentially stable ways. [...] It's an expectation I resist. It's an expectation that is, I think, at odds with reality. (Iizuka 2000:160)

NILO CRUZ

Nilo Cruz's *Night Train to Bolina* is one of the few plays commented upon here that is set in Latin America. It was produced at Brown University in 1993 and at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco in 1994. The action of the two-act play revolves around two young characters, Clara, a girl of 11, and Mateo, a boy of 10. Mateo's body is a ledger of bruises inflicted upon him by his mother,

who is tormented by their lack of food. In an absurdist vein, she coerces everyone in the family to contribute something to each meal, be it a shoe, a finger, or any other body part. The cannibalism alludes to the terrible poverty in many Latin American countries. Cruz rejects the label of “magical realism” applied to his work because he says he always works “from a raw, tangible reality. The children in my play *Night Train to Bolina* use the power of their imagination to transcend the poverty of their existence” (Cruz 2000:117).

The play’s protagonist, Mateo, rebels in the only way available to him: by running away. Clara, Mateo’s only friend, cares for him by tending his bruises and feeding him. Eventually, they run away together. Their love is prepubescent and innocent; nevertheless it encompasses the urgency of any adult passion. By running away from their families, Clara and Mateo encounter an institutionalized world (a hospital for runaway children) that is even less hospitable than their homes. The hospital introduces into their lives a sense of Catholic guilt which calls into question the purity and innocence of their attachment.

5. *Alchemy of Desire/Deadman’s Blues* by Caridad Svich was produced at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, 1994. Clockwise from bottom left are Patricia Mattick as Mirasol, Susan Barnes as Selah, Camille D’Ambrose as Carolina, and Kate Malin as Miranda. (Photo by Sandy Linderwood)

Concluding Thoughts

The works discussed in this essay do not make a coherent single unit. But they do share some qualities, the most prominent and innovative of which is the foregrounding of identities that defy both Latino and Anglo cultural stereotypes. In some of these works, notions of love, beauty, the beastly, death, the economy of desire among unequal “trading partners,” and the unabashedly homoerotic often engage to create a tension against what Homi Bhabha describes as the ambivalence of the stereotype (1997). It is as if this, the most productive generation yet of North American Latina/o authors, have already digested/pro-





cessed/expiated repetitions of stereotypical narratives and techniques of “Latinidad” imposed upon their predecessors. They not only reject alluding to these stereotypes, they seek the ambiguity of the gaps, the poetic, the theatrical, and sometimes the shocking. This new Latina/o space has been hard-won after 15 years of productions. Some of the works are confrontational in nature, in what I see as a conscious move away from the former, more predictable works “allowed” by Latino and non-Latino producing organizations (Marrero 1991).

However, we are not home free. In a 1999 issue of *Parabasis: The Journal of the A.S.K. Theatre Projects* focusing on “Beyond Politically Correct,” Mead Hunter discusses some disturbing trends. In response to the question, “Have you, or has your work, ever been criticized for being ‘politically incorrect?’” the playwrights’ replies indicated a strong intolerance. Playwrights (who range the spectrum in ethnic, racial, and sexual preference) complain of being criticized by audiences and producing organizations for not meeting *ideological* expectations with regard to questions of gender, race, and ethnicity. Straight, white, middle-class male playwright Farrell Hirsch complains that his “gay” play cannot find a venue. Svich comments that her play *Braço Gitano* was perceived both as not Latino enough by some and too Latino by others. Shelly Kramer was shocked by the response of a local Washington, DC, gay paper’s response to her lesbian characters (who did not “live happily ever after”). But perhaps most disturbing of all were the numbers in bold red compiled by Iliev and Hammerbeck during the 1998/99 season: 82 percent of all plays produced were of male authorship. That leaves 12 percent of female authorship, regardless of ethnicity. A paltry, appallingly minuscule 1.8 percent were written by playwrights with Hispanic surnames, 2.4 percent by writers of Asian surnames (sample taken from a subset of producing theatres listed in TCG’s directory—the regional houses operating under LORT contracts [1999:11]). Perhaps the clearest cry to create beyond the labels comes from Svich, when she states that: “I feel my responsibility lies with the truth of a text and the vision that accompanies it, not necessarily with writ-

6. *Coco Fusco and Nao Bustamante in STUFF.*
(Photo by Hugo Glendinning; courtesy of Coco Fusco)

ing ethnically specific subject matter, although it is somehow expected of me, whereas it is not expected of say, a David Mamet or Jon Robin Baitz, who belong to the ‘world’” (in Hunter 1999:5). Maybe it’s true that a significant number of Latina/o playwrights and performers are now choosing to break cultural taboos related to ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. However, it is also apparent that producing organizations and the theatre-going public in the U.S. may not be ready to break away from their own dearly held stereotypes of who “we” are and what (and whom) we “should” be representing.

The foregrounding of women’s desires holds special significance within the context of these new works. Whether represented as lesbian, heterosexual, or ambivalently bisexual, women’s physical as well as spiritual longings overwhelmingly shape representation, perhaps at the expense of heterosexual male desire, which is portrayed as peripheral, discursive, and often blatantly absent. While this move may not be *the* universal truth of contemporary Latina/o theatre and performance, it is nevertheless a significant expansion of Latina/o representational possibilities and a substantial change from past available cultural repertoires.

Notes

1. Privileging heterosexuality, however, is not a uniqueness we can call our own in Latino communities. Broadly based on Foucault’s groundbreaking work (primarily from *A History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, 1980), contemporary feminist, gay, lesbian, and queer readings of gender construction have identified the sociocultural privilege assigned to heterosexuality in recent Western histories.
2. *La raza* is a term coined in the 1960s to refer to Chicanas/os. It’s an insider term that connotes brother/sisterhood.
3. The Berkeley Repertory Theatre did a staged reading on 10 April 1995. On 2 December 1995 the play was presented in a staged reading in Mark Taper Forum’s New Works Festival in Los Angeles as part of Theatre Communications Group’s National Theatre Artist Residency Program, it was further developed at the Brava Theater Center in San Francisco on 10 June 1997. On 21 May 1999 *The Hungry Woman* was staged as a reading at A Contemporary Theater/Hedgebrook Writers’ Retreat Women’s Playwright Festival in Seattle.

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