

## Race, Gender, and Disability: Cherríe Moraga's Bodiless Head

Telory W. Davies

In 2004, I met with a fellow scholar to discuss the intersection of race and disability for a conference panel on mixed identity. My colleague is an African American man with visual impairments who holds a job as a disability resolution officer for equity standards and compliance. This position is new for him, and on its most difficult days, it poses social encounters that question the place of race within disability studies. As a black man in his thirties set on a path to eventual blindness, he jokes sarcastically about initial assumptions that his identity as an African American would guarantee acceptance and collegiality among disabled scholars and activists. Counter to his expectations, he felt marginalized, ignored, and not welcome at a Disability Studies conference. This disconnect intensified when he began his current job and faced faculty members who entered his office surprised to find a black man arbitrating disability issues. His cane they might have expected, but a black man threw them off balance. Two minority identities rather than one confront these visitors. They pause, fumble, do a double take upon entering his space. Do they address the blind man or the black man first? Which identity takes precedence in that moment of indecision?

In Cherríe Moraga's 1992 play *Heroes and Saints*, race takes precedence. Recognizing Latina identity in this text means making disability more a metaphor than a reality. The larger question for both my black colleague and for Moraga—who is the product of white and Chicana parents—involves tracking disability and race as simultaneous and interstitial identities: can we process both race and disability as equal and interactive components of a complex identity, or does one always tend to trump the other? What makes Moraga's play so rich in relation to this question is that, in print, as words on the page, it invokes disability-as-metaphor; on the stage, the contingencies of production refuse to let disability be just metaphor. These contingencies—namely the necessary accommodations for maneuvering an electric wheelchair on a set, with fellow actors, and in spatial relation to the stage picture—are what constitute the disabled actuality in this article. I credit Moraga for her metaphorical gesture toward disability in the lead character, Cerezita. Perhaps having tackled the theme of homosexuality in Latina/o culture and written about

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her experience with this identity intersection in both prose and dramatic forms, Moraga was prepared to take another social risk: merging disability and Chicana/o voices was dangerous, and may explain in part why this playwright advocates for a *Mestiza* actress in the lead role but not a performer with disabilities. In this article, I explore Moraga's disability-as-metaphor before I clarify why this text in production limits and challenges this metaphor. The explicitness of impairment on stage does not allow for simple metaphor. In essence, disability refuses to move out of the way for Moraga's metaphor. Physical impairment resists the playwright's literary attempts to trump disability with race and gender in Cerezita's intersection of these three identities.

The last few decades of the twentieth century opened the stage for performers with disabilities. Playwrights began to join their choreographic counterparts in a search for new representations of alternative experience, although their use of disability tended more toward metaphor than actual stage presence. Moraga presents a realistically impossible possible: a living head with no standard body. Her protagonist is a young woman with a head that is her body, much like Luis Valdez's character Belarmino in his 1968 play, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa*.<sup>1</sup> These two physically truncated characters make use of disability as a metaphor for the lack of physical agency in Chicana/o culture. Whereas Belarmino's truncated corpus represents a need for unity and activism within a phallogocentric Chicana/o community, Moraga's Cerezita expands this fight. Cerezita is a disabled Chicana whose mobility depends on tongue and chin manipulation of her *raite*, or ride. Through this cyborgian character, Moraga charts what José Esteban Muñoz considers "the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates."<sup>2</sup> Although the specific struggles of Chicanas and people with disabilities are fairly different, the (im)possibility of claiming a culturally legitimate body is a common factor, and the two groups benefit from intersection rather than division. Just as my colleague experiences blackness and blindness in simultaneity difficult for those outside this intersection to fathom, Moraga's play hints at a similar potential in mixed identity but does not go far enough to flesh out these imbrications.

Moraga uses disability-as-metaphor in service of race and gender issues, and yet productions of her work require literal disability accommodation for the wheelchair that is Cerezita's *raite*. The practicalities of staging this play call Moraga's bluff. In her article "Black Man, Blind Man: Disability Identity Politics and Performance," Carrie Sandahl recognizes a history of "nondisabled artists in all media and genres [who] have appropriated the disability experience to serve as a metaphor expressing their own outsider status, alienation, and alterity, not necessarily the social, economic, and political concerns of actual disabled people."<sup>3</sup> Whereas Moraga falls into this category of nondisabled artists who appropriate disability to comment on racial discrimination, her play's stage directions require

conscious decisions about disability accommodation. My focus is primarily on these acting and directing decisions in two Bay Area productions of *Heroes and Saints*. Production accommodations for impairment in this play demonstrate its potential to promote simultaneous self-determination for Chicanas and individuals living with disabilities. The concrete literality of theater making and the actuality of disability come together on stage for these productions. Moraga's metaphorical intersection of race, gender, and disability generates new border realities that redefine activist agency and conceptions of the human body with significant ramifications for the fight against environmental racism and cross-racial ableism. Her play is a social process with radical embodied encounters.

### DISABILITY AND/AS CHICANA ACTIVISM

In *Heroes and Saints*, Moraga uses disability as a metaphorical and phenomenological frame for racial, gender, and economic oppression. Although her character, Cerezita, is primarily a non-realist character, her factual ties to the real community of California's San Joaquin Valley give both this character and the play itself a documentary quality. In this valley, the town of McFarland reported thirteen childhood leukemia cases in the late 1980s. By the 1990s, the cancer death toll had risen to twenty. The 1986 United Farm Workers of America documentary, *The Wrath of Grapes*, documents McFarland families whose children were either stricken with leukemia or born with various physical deformities. One child in particular, Felipe Franco, stood out for Moraga in this film. Felipe's mother worked in pesticide-poisoned fields while she was pregnant; as a result, her son was born with a head, a torso, but no limbs. Moraga created Cerezita from a combination of real and surreal images. The real image is this limbless child, Felipe Franco; Moraga borrows the surreal image from Luis Valdez's play. Disability thus functions simultaneously as a lived reality and a metaphor for oppression, and provides a repetition and revision of Valdez's work.

Cerezita's lack of a standard body speaks to the reality of what Moraga calls environmental racism<sup>4</sup> and also serves as a spatial metaphor for land rights lost by Mexican communities to colonization in the Southwestern United States. Americans in the 1846 U.S./Mexican war took land that once belonged to Mexico such that the states currently known as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California became United States territory. The populations of these states have high percentages of Latina/o communities, and yet land ownership and political representation do not reflect this. Moraga's fictive town of McLaughlin, where Chicana/o farm workers lose children to cancerous pesticide poisoning, accurately portrays living conditions for *campesino*<sup>5</sup> families. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano explains that

The environmental justice movement has identified race as the most powerful factor in the public's exposure to toxicity. Magdalena Avila pointed out in her keynote address to the 1993 National Association for Chicano Studies convention that, as of 1987, three out of five commercial hazardous waste landfills in the U.S. were located in black or Latino communities. Perhaps because pesticides target the female reproductive system so devastatingly, women have assumed vocal leadership in the fight against these practices.<sup>6</sup>

Doña Amparo, who maps the illnesses created by pesticide poisoning in her community, represents women's leadership in Moraga's play. Cerezita's birth deformities occupy one spot on the map Amparo draws to mark the various health problems of the town's children. Red dots on her map signify homes with cancer, the green ones are used for homes with birth defects, and the orange ones mark families with digestive difficulties. When Cerezita identifies herself as one of the green dots, her sister Yolanda says, "You put us on the map, Cere." Dolores is angered by this joke and responds by saying, "I don't need a chart to tell me que tengo problemas."<sup>7</sup>

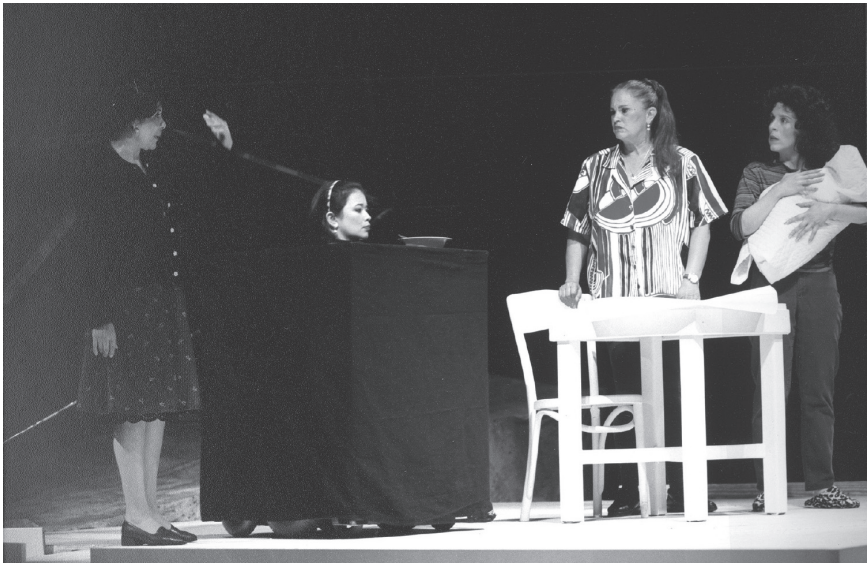


Fig. 1. Dolores refuses Doña Amparo's map. Actors (l to r): VIVIS, Selena Sue Navarro, Rosa Maria Escalante, Carmen Elena Sosa. Photo: Dave Lepori.

But Doña Amparo's whole point is that visibility is a large part of social activism in a fight against the oppression that causes these *problemas*. Cerezita's disability is proof of environmental racism that targets minority populations as victims of toxic environments. Marta Cotera asserts that within these communities "Chicanas have

realized that in terms of socio-economic status and prospects for improvement, they are at the bottom of the social heap in this country.”<sup>8</sup> For Chicanas, particularly *campesinas*, self-determination is the key to survival.

### PRODUCTION ACCOMMODATION

New definitions of subjectivity demand social and physical adjustments. Audiences for productions of *Heroes and Saints* mentally accommodate a character whose head and face (hair, eyes, mouth) constitute her full body. Actors and directors need to make more spatial physical accommodations. The first of these usually centers on the wheelchair used to designate Cerezita’s *raite*. If the production’s set does not anticipate the need for wheelchair access, this creates obvious problems for both the actress playing Cerezita and the director of the show. In an October 2001 San Jose, California, production by Teatro Visión, director Alma Martinez complained that the company

didn’t hire a chair designer, and we needed a chair designer. Why is this important? Space. To block her was like blocking four people in space. Plus she wasn’t very high. [The set designer] didn’t make the [set’s] edges thick enough. [The actress playing Cerezita] almost went over. She stopped it fortunately. We gave the set designer the chair and told him how dangerous it was. We said, “try it with the rake.” And he didn’t. It was built wrong. The designer made the set too small. She couldn’t turn. The box was originally too wide. So the chair and the set had to change, and the blocking had to change.<sup>9</sup>

On a very practical level, Martinez needed a set designer for this production who knew enough about disability access to design and construct a set that would make room for an actor in a wheelchair. Although this director needed a set designer more capable of imagining and constructing a wheelchair-friendly space, she was equally invested in making this space realistic in terms of accommodation:

A person with deformities is always negotiating “abled” spaces. And Cerezita doesn’t control an abled space: she is moving in an abled space as a disabled person, so I didn’t want to give the character help. I wanted us to see her negotiating space rather than having her in her own space.<sup>10</sup>

For Martinez, there was a clear difference between a stage accommodation that aided the actor's movement and a directorial choice that might risk going too far in aiding the character's spatial negotiation.

Martinez also grappled with actor versus character adjustment in relation to the *raite* and representation of Cerezita's body. Her initial impulse was to avoid using a "box" to hide the actor's body:

We knew there was an actress playing this part, so why pretend and hide her body? We thought of putting her in all black, or we thought of tying her up like a mummy, but she still looked like a full-bodied person. This body would have made the character real, and she's not real: she's a head. I know in the original BRAVA! production they did it half and half. The actress had a turtle-neck, and she had a regular wheelchair, and the box was from her shoulders down but not all the way, and it was a little cardboard box. They didn't hide the fact that there was a full-bodied actress, and I didn't want to do this.<sup>11</sup>

Martinez worked hard to make sure that her Cerezita actress, Selena Sue Navarro, was visible only from the top of her head to the beginning of her neck, covering her with a black box in which the actress's most difficult task was to remain completely still. The curtain call for this production maintained this physical cover while Navarro stepped out of the box behind the rest of the cast, but then betrayed the play's suspension of disbelief by revealing her full body for her curtain call. The plumpness of Navarro's figure was no doubt what gave this actress the rounded cherubic face of Cerezita that Moraga describes in her character descriptions, but her standing form thoroughly contradicted the previous image of disability.

In director Albert Takazauckas's BRAVA! production, even though actress Jaime Lujan stepped out of her *raite* for her curtain call, audience members remembered her as bodiless: "Even now, two-and-a-half years later, people still recognize me—'Oh yes, you played that *head woman*, very nice work.' Or, 'I knew you looked familiar, it's wild to see you with a body.'"<sup>12</sup> This sentiment—"it's wild to see you with a body"—has profound ramifications for the Chicana/o community. Moraga's play raises these concerns but stops short of exploring in full detail the connection between disability and the Mexican American fight for agency. Lujan remains somewhat bodiless even after the show when audience members see her in the street. For these viewers, she is both with body and bodiless, simultaneously recognized as non-disabled and disabled in audience members' visual memories of her performance. This distinction of being "with" a body as opposed to "in" a body also raises questions about the perceptions any individual has of their own body. For example, Father Juan's statement "my body's not my own" might potentially

apply to either a disabled or non-disabled experience. The visible evidence of physical form does not guarantee agency in Juan's case; and as Cerezita indicates in her response to Juan, all she wants is to feel as if she has a body, "full of fine flesh filled to the bones" within her imagination.<sup>13</sup>

Although not using a box to hide the actor's body would have made the role easier for the actress in these productions, the play calls for a *raite* and a character who is just a head. Directors make accommodations in service of the text, no matter how difficult. Martinez admits that, when she spoke with Moraga about her plans for the production, the playwright's main question was about how Martinez would deal with the box:

When I talked with Cherríe [Moraga] on the phone she said, "How are you going to do the box?" Not like she was worried and wanted me to run it by her, but like "I don't have a clue, I don't know how anyone does it; how are *you* going to do the box?" The subtext of it was "It's a bitch to do, how are you going to do it?" Not "*This* is how it's done, make sure you do it *this* way," but rather "How the hell are you going to pull this off?"<sup>14</sup>

Moraga's subtextual amazement that any director would attempt to stage the *raite* in actual, practical terms indicates an incredulity that all fiction writers experience to some degree. Moraga's stage directions are specific enough to imagine the possibilities, but bringing these to life can often cause unimaginable difficulties.

Both directors and actors in this production need to learn new ways of negotiating space and working with mobility restrictions. The lead actress in the original 1992 BRAVA! For Women production in San Francisco developed a necessary adaptability to the loss of limb movement. Unlike the Teatro Visión production, BRAVA! director Albert Takazauckas exposed the actress playing Cerezita from the shoulders up. Although this may have given the audience a stronger sense of embodiment, this actress was still physically trapped within her *raite*. This restriction prompted ingenuity and innovation on the part of the actress that helped redefine physical ability in relation to restriction. Jaime Lujan, who played this role in the 1992 BRAVA! production, acknowledges that "as an actor, the raite totally limited my use of my own extremities and amplified the *magic if*, (what *if* I were born with no arms or legs . . .)." <sup>15</sup> For Stanislavski-trained actors, the 'magic if' exercise is about empathic imagination. Lujan's 'magic if' for this character was primarily physical; she had to imagine a state of physical disability that would redefine her concept of her own body. In this process, she needed to use her face and head as her sole means of communication, expression, and action. In some situations, redefining her head as the locus of activity required a corresponding reconceptualization of body part functions:

In the play, there are several scenes where I have to use a tape recorder, turning it on and off. I was supplied with a basic rectangular tape recorder with six buttons for operation. The buttons were too small for me to operate with my chin. I tried to push them down with my tongue, but it wasn't strong enough, so I modified the tape recorder. I removed the rubber erasers from wood pencils and superglued them to the buttons. This gave me better leverage and a softer surface when operating the buttons with my tongue.<sup>16</sup>

Lujan's new dependence on her tongue as a source of digital manipulation necessitated changes in her prop construction. She made simple modifications for the tape recorder so that her tongue-as-digit would be fully functional. In doing so, she created an environment for her character that gave her more independence as both an actress and the character.

Lujan's accommodation of difference for this production also prompted an ingenuity that went beyond basic functionality. She was determined to fill her non-conversational stage time with activity, and her limited mobility made these character choices more complicated. Lujan decided Cerezita should draw as a means of self-expression, so she engineered accommodations that would allow for this activity:

I knew that in order to make this [drawing] work, it was something that did not require the other actors' help. I also couldn't just have a pencil on the top of my raite, because there was the possibility of it rolling off whenever I moved. I constructed the *perfect pencil*—it had to be just the right length, not too short and not too long, or I wouldn't be able to use it. Then I wrapped part of it in Velcro. I sewed a Velcro Patch to my bodysuit (on the shoulder that was protruding out of the box), so that I could easily remove and replace the pencil with my mouth.<sup>17</sup>

Although her constructive approach to disability problem-solving in this scenario involved the use of arms and hands Lujan's character does not have (i.e., Lujan presumably sewed the Velcro patch with her fingers, not her tongue), this actress demonstrated an active search for accommodations that presumed her character's need for independence. Cerezita's ability to be self-sufficient required special accommodations for the actress playing this part.



Lujan's ingenuity is matched, and perhaps inspired, by her character. As with Lujan, Cerezita reconceptualizes the body parts that she does have in order to be more functional. In a conversation with Father Juan, Cerezita says:

CEREZITA: Think about it, Padre. Imagine if your tongue and teeth and chin had to do the job of your hands . . . you know, (*She demonstrates.*) turning pages, picking up stuff, scratching an itch, pointing. I mean your tongue alone would have to have some very serious definition. For me . . . well, it's my most faithful organ.<sup>18</sup>

This conversation between Cerezita and the priest grows increasingly erotic as the two characters read various definitions of "tongue" from a dictionary. Moraga explains that in this scene, "Cerezita lusts for Juan, and it doesn't really matter if she is heterosexual or lesbian, but of course the subtext of that scene is absolutely lesbian."<sup>19</sup> Redefinition of the tongue as an organ that stands in for others is both a functional reality of Cerezita's disability and an important erotic component of lesbian sexuality. Cerezita's truncated body thwarts her desire for actual sexual experience and knowledge, but her mind is quite active in this respect. Since her tongue is her primary organ of manipulation and sensation, it becomes the locus of her desire in this scene. Disability and lesbian sensibility intersect in this exchange between a young woman with a head for a body and a priest who has chosen celibacy. This combination of alternative sexual identities and embodiments opens a discursive space for the reinvention of Chicana desire.

### REVISING THE DISABLED CHICANA BODY

Moraga has stated in several interviews that Cerezita represents the Mexicana/Chicana condition.<sup>20</sup> She feels that, throughout their history, Mexican women have been denied the right to fully express their sexuality with a sense of embodied ownership and agency. Cerezita's bodilessness is a physical reminder that *Mechicanas*<sup>21</sup> need to fight for a legitimate body on both individual and community levels: a personal body and a body politic where the personal should be political. According to Yarbro-Bejarano, Moraga's portraiture of Cerezita as nothing but a head "makes it impossible for spectators to read this woman onstage as the 'thing itself,' as the female body whose sexuality is both 'natural' and transparent. Instead, Cere stages her own body, reclaiming subjectivity, sexuality, and political agency in the process."<sup>22</sup> Cerezita's atypical body therefore creates both a need and an opportunity to generate a new concept of Chicana physical identity. In this respect, the character's specific disabilities stand in for the general Chicana condition. However, the tangible eroticism between Cerezita and Juan competes with the

metaphor of Moraga's lead character. Disability and sexual desire share the literal space in this metaphorical moment, complicating the exchange in ways that are productive for all three parts of Moraga's race/gender/disability triad. Desire is after all a place where actual need meets virtual fantasy.

Cerezita's physical dependence on wheelchair mobility represents certain fundamental realities of the *campesina* condition. Moraga makes it clear that for this character

someone could put the brakes on her wheels on or off, and she doesn't have any control over that. All of those things are very real in terms of disabled people but are also what happens to Mexican girls. There's always a metaphor. So the mother putting on the brakes [is a reality], and that happens. And she's really unable to go outdoors, and that's not really that far-fetched for lots of Mexican women. Campesino women's children; [mothers] trying to protect the bodies from violation, when their bodies have already been so violated. [Cerezita] is a victim of pesticide poisoning, but she also represents the Mexican woman's condition. We are not allowed to have agency with our own bodies.<sup>23</sup>

Cerezita's mother constantly hides her, looking into the house from outside to see if men can tell that her daughter has no body. Dolores virtually locks Cerezita away.

Cerezita's disability is a visible sign of white farm owners' abuse of Chicana/o workers. Political change will happen only if Dolores releases Cerezita and lets her disabled daughter speak to the community as an icon. As a visual image of the workers' worst fears, Cerezita embodies the need for resistance. Dolores worries about Cerezita's innocence and assumes that public exposure will prove psychologically damaging. She sees her daughter as the potential victim of social abuse and fails to see how ludicrous her fear is, given that the damage has already been done.

Dolores is most concerned about Cerezita's visibility within the house from outside viewpoints. She sneaks around the house's exterior, peering into windows in order to gauge her daughter's visibility and apparent illness. Juan, the priest, finds her doing this:

DOLORES. . . . anybody que pasa por aquí can see we don't got no men in the house. Mire, Father. (*Indicates the window.* JUAN crouches down next to her.) Can you tell Cere is sick from here?

JUAN. What do you mean?

DOLORES. ¡Que no tiene cuerpo!<sup>24</sup>

Ironically, mothers usually worry about the bodies of their daughters being violated, and yet Cerezita has no apparent body. Her truncated body has the paradoxical effect of strengthening Dolores's protective urge. She makes Cerezita's impairment invisible at all costs.

Another irony in this community's response to Cerezita's unusual appearance is their refusal to acknowledge her potential power as a freak when fighting landowners' oppression. Rosemarie Garland Thomson establishes the freak as a threat to social order: individuation that leads in excess to complete chaos. In the history of U. S. freak shows, the "freak's body mocked the boundaries and similarities that a well-ordered democratic society required to avoid anarchy and create national unity."<sup>25</sup> This reference to breaking boundaries reinforces the freak's borderland status. It is possible that the anarchy and rebellion that freakish existence implies frightens Dolores, and perhaps her fear of Cerezita's individual agency is another component in her efforts to physically contain her daughter.

Dolores's behavior reflects a *campesina* internalization of a police mentality. The farm owners police the border between workers' homes and the fields, securing a forced division in order to prohibit any sense of ownership on the part of the workers. Dolores mimics this patrol by securing Cerezita's confinement inside her house. Cerezita's escape from this domestic imprisonment depends entirely on her powers of impersonation and her role as a spiritual guide. As the news reporter in McLaughlin, Ana Perez, explains:

Just before nine this morning, it was reported that Dolores Valle, the mother of Cerezita Valle, found a wooden cross in the disabled girl's sleeping chamber. The cross was illuminated in a wondrous glow and from that moment the young virgin has ceased to speak and has assumed an appearance and affect strikingly similar to the Virgin of Guadalupe.<sup>26</sup>

Cerezita does regain her voice to speak at the end of the play to the townspeople, but she first cultivates this similarity to *La Virgen* in order to fabricate a miracle. She impersonates this saint in hopes of convincing her mother to let her out in public so that she can encourage *El Pueblo* to take action. Dolores will not let Cerezita leave the house as her daughter, but allows Cerezita-as-*La Virgen* to cross this domestic border. Cerezita-as-*La Virgen* then persuades the *campesinas/os* to cross the patrolled border of the fields. As with Dolores's change of heart, the community must overcome their fear of landowners' police brutality before they can cross the border into political activism in the fields. Dolores keeps Cerezita

enclosed in her house—away from the media and the public. Doña Amparo is one of a few characters who want to speak to the press and fight environmental racism, but she alone cannot rouse the people to take action. With the help of the town's children, Cerezita's emblematic presence as the disabled *Virgen de Guadalupe* offers the only means of liberation. When she speaks to the farm workers as *La Virgen*, her words carry the weight of religious prophecy. The combined reality of Cerezita's impairment and her staged appearance as *La Virgen* incite the community to action.

Disability, comically paired with religious idolatry, is a catalyst for social protest and change. Cerezita enacts both a send-up of the Virgin and a serious mystical apparition. This intersection of humor and gravity, disabled and religious imagery, radically transforms *La Virgen* such that, according to Alicia Arrizón, Cerezita's active stance "manipulates the passivity of the traditional iconographic body"<sup>27</sup> of a revered religious figure. Cerezita is ultimately *La Virgen* with a political agenda. In this impersonation, Cerezita embraces Thomson's call for "corporeal difference as exceptionality rather than inferiority."<sup>28</sup> She adopts the Virgin to accentuate her physical difference as celestial and corporeal exception. Both disability and Chicana feminist movements are served by this redefinition of corporeal difference. It is Cerezita's exceptionality that makes her the ideal activist leader at the end of Moraga's play: her physical difference gives her a supernatural power in *El Pueblo's* belief that she is a visitation of *La Virgen*.

In "Performing Aztlán: The Female Body as Cultural Critique in the *Teatro* of Cherríe Moraga," Tiffany Ana López argues that "Aztlán was originally conceptualized around the exclusion of female agency. . . ."<sup>29</sup> If Chicanas were denied agency in the initial Chicana/o movement to reclaim racial heritage through the development of Aztlán—literally the Southwestern United States, metaphorically a lost Chicana/o homeland—they need to redefine this space. Moraga's "queer Aztlán"<sup>30</sup> is one example of this redefinition that opens the original concept to include sexual difference and, in so doing, promotes personal agency for lesbian and gay members of Chicana/o communities. *Heroes and Saints* expands Aztlán to include the disabled members of Southwestern United States Chicana/o families. The final scene of the play demonstrates how Cerezita's intersection of disability and race-specific religious idolatry initiates political action that validates a new concept of Aztlán in which disability and female agency is necessary to the survival of the community as a whole.

Impersonating *La Virgen* raises issues about authenticity that are also reflected in casting choices for this show. Who can play *La Virgen* authentically? Who can play Cerezita authentically? Does authenticity matter in a race-specific, culture-specific production? Moraga is adamant that directors cast *Mestiza* women for her work, but she does not extend her playwright's privileges to the demand that Cerezita be cast with a disabled actress.<sup>31</sup> Moraga's choice in this matter illustrates

that Cerezita is more a metaphor than a reality for her. The *Mestiza* identity needs to be real on her stage; the disabled identity can be faked. Written metaphor resists staged embodiment in the production of this play. The “materiality of metaphor” that David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder find so powerful in *Narrative Prosthesis* falls flat in productions of *Heroes and Saints*. These scholars promise a “corporeal metaphor” that gives literary narrative an “anchor in materiality” with an “embodied account of physical, sensory life.”<sup>32</sup> While a portrayal of material existence might aid representations of disability in literature, the materiality of metaphor evaporates in literal stage realizations. This may account in part for the scarcity of this play’s professional productions. In practical terms, Cerezita requires the use of an electronic wheelchair that is high-tech enough to be manipulated by hand under the cover of her *raite*. Moraga’s metaphor stumbles in these practical stage applications. Moraga’s realistic approach to Cerezita’s persona clouds the issue of corporeality in favor of political metaphors about physical agency; in production, this choice restricts the physical agency of the actress. Disability serves as a metaphorical vehicle for Moraga’s statements about race and gender oppression, but this vehicle is thwarted by the realities of the stage.

### STAGING DISABILITY

Within Moraga’s stage reality, disability has the strongest voice; yet her co-optation of disability without disabled actor representation suggests a new set of oppressions. Disabled characters have traditionally been played by non-disabled actors who receive accolades for the authenticity of their performances. Although the transformational acting ability required for disability roles in film or live theater is at a premium no matter what the evaluative criteria, this paradox of heightened ability to play disabled characters begs troubling.

Why not find and cast disabled actors to play these roles? Postmodern theory’s refusal to recognize fixed identity as legitimate problematizes the concept of authenticity in performance.<sup>33</sup> And yet, minority actors continue to accept jobs that call for performers from specific racial or ethnic backgrounds. Theater and film companies have been slow to follow this trend with disabled actors, however, and for this reason if no other, authenticity is still a concern for actors with disabilities.<sup>34</sup> Non-traditional casting would no doubt be useful for all minority actors, but for physically disabled actors, the first step toward mainstreaming is visibility. Disabled playwright John Belluso feels there is a huge difference between productions about disability that cast disabled actors and those that do not:

Having had both disabled actors and non-disabled actors interpreting roles in a play that I’ve written, I’ve found that the experience is like night and day. When you have a non-disabled

actor playing the role, the curtain goes up at the end, the lights come up, it's time for the curtain call. And the actor will stand up out of the wheelchair and take a bow, and suddenly everything that has come before has just been erased. The audience is let off the hook. Suddenly this isn't social history; this is just artifice. Whereas when the lights come up and there is someone who is still sitting, and they take their bow in the wheelchair, it helps the audience understand this is bigger than the topic of a play. This is part of a movement. This is part of social history.<sup>35</sup>

Belluso makes a distinction in this roundtable discussion entitled "We are not a Metaphor" (in a special issue of *American Theatre* on disability theater practitioners) between theater that makes history in its playing and theater that artificially recreates a historical moment. While his argument dismisses somewhat cursorily the potential for social change through artificial representation, Belluso's point about social efficacy is sound. In the initial phase of self-determined representation, visibility is empowering. Authenticity on stage validates historical moments and audience reactions to these events. For disabled actors, appearing on stage as self-determined performers playing disabled roles is one way to acknowledge the lives of people with disabilities without pigeonholing them as objects of pity or scorn. Disabled actors who play non-disabled characters also reflect this agency.

Visibility is crucial to any social protest and has particular relevance for the Disability Rights Movement. Despite Moraga's reticence about casting a disabled actress for the Cerezita role, her play promotes disability concerns through this lead character. When Dolores tries so hard to make her daughter invisible and hides her indoors, Cerezita finally says,

CEREZITA: Give me a chance 'amà. If nobody ever sees me, how will I know how I look? How will I know if I scare them or make them mad or . . . move them? If people could see me, 'amà, things would change.<sup>36</sup>

Surely we can apply this same prediction to disabled actors. If audiences could see them, things might change.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of *Heroes and Saints*, visibility becomes the major issue both in terms of Cerezita's public image and the actress playing this role. Whereas Cerezita crosses the border of her mother's house to speak in public and thus motivates *El Pueblo* to cross the border between their homes and the fields in protest, the actress

playing this role might cross the boundary that separates no-body from embodiment. Directors working with this lead actress have the option of either staging a curtain call that resists embodiment or one that institutes a body where before there was none. What is more, if this actress takes a curtain call seated in her wheelchair, the audience will not know if she is physically impaired or not. Although some physical disability may be hidden and thus invisible, this image of a complete and standing body re-establishes normalcy in the curtain call and prevents the production from suggesting a disabled actuality that exists beyond the script.

If Cerezita's head functions as a full body, her accommodation constitutes a political act. Not only does she challenge social codes about what serves as a whole body; she also questions non-disabled assumptions about the capability of individuals with disabilities. Political agency does not necessarily require four full limbs. Moraga's fictional Chicana/o community moves beyond the desire for independence to a new level of interdependent functionality. Rather than waiting in vain for white landowners to accommodate their needs, this community fights actively against environmental racism. They make accommodation a fundamental human right, and redefine Cerezita's head as a legitimate human body rather than a discarded byproduct of pesticide poisoning.

Cerezita's disability and concomitant revised functionality are the political spine of this play. If directors were equally concerned with casting a *Mestiza* and a physically disabled actress for this part, the performer's exit from her *raite* for the curtain call would enable a double representational legitimacy for disabled and racial minorities.

## Notes

1. Luis Valdez, *The Shrunken Head of Pancho Villa, Necessary Theater: Six Plays About the Chicano Experience*, ed. Jorge Huerta (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1989) 153–207.
2. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999) 6.
3. Carrie Sandahl, "Black Man, Blind Man: Disability Identity Politics and Performance," *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 583.
4. Personal interview, Cherrie Moraga, 11 Apr. 2001.
5. A *campesino* is a male farm worker.
6. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherrie Moraga* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001) 64.
7. Cherrie Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* (Albuquerque, N. M.: West End Press, 1994) 2.1.129.
8. Marta Cotera, "Our Feminist Heritage," *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. Garcia (New York: Routledge, 1997) 43.
9. Personal interview, Alma Martinez, 9 Oct. 2001.
10. Personal interview, Martinez.
11. Personal interview, Martinez.
12. Jaime Lujan, "Heroes and Saints: Cerezita Valle—A Master's Thesis" (American Conservatory Theatre, 1994) 160.
13. Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* 2.9.144.
14. Personal interview, Martinez.
15. Lujan 34.

16. 46.
17. 47.
18. Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* 1.8.108.
19. Personal interview, Moraga.
20. Moraga expressed this idea in an interview with Jorge Huerta that he cites on page 69 of *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society and Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), in an interview for the televised program *Inside City Lights* that did a special on the BRAVA! production of *Heroes and Saints* in 1992, and in my personal interview, 11 Apr. 2001.
21. *Mechicanas* connotes a conflation of Mexicanas and Chicanas.
22. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano 74.
23. Personal interview, Moraga.
24. Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* 2.1.127–28.
25. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), 66.
26. Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* 2.11.146.
27. Alicia Arrizón, "Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions," *Theatre Journal* 52 (March 2000): 40.
28. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, eds., quoting Rosemarie Garland Thomson in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1997) 22.
29. Tiffany Ana López, "Performing Aztlán: The Female Body as Cultural Critique in the *Teatro* of Cherrie Moraga," *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater*, ed. Jeffrey D. Mason and J. Ellen Gainor (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999) 175.
30. See Cherrie Moraga's chapter, "Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe," in her book, *The Last Generation* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).
31. When I asked Moraga if she had ever considered encouraging casting agents for her play to look for disabled actresses for Cerezita's role, she said that this had never been an issue for her. She was more concerned about finding actresses who were (and looked) truly *Mestiza*.
32. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 63.
33. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984); Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988); or Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) for discussions on the erosion of the line separating the real from the representational in contemporary first-world culture.
34. The largest groupings of disabled actors at this point in American theater occur in companies such as That Uppity Theatre Company or The National Theater of the Deaf, which are specifically designed to deal with disability issues. It is the mainstream theater community that I refer to when I say that theater and film have been slow to incorporate disabled actors.
35. John Belluso, "We are not a Metaphor: a Conversation about Representation," *American Theatre* 18.4 (April 2001): 21.
36. Moraga, *Heroes and Saints* 1.9.113.