Language and Identity in Three Plays by Dolores Prida

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Born in Cuba and raised in the United States, playwright Dolores Prida dramatizes the cultural and linguistic ambiguity of the Latino community in New York City. Like Oscar Hijuelos, Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez in the narrative, and her fellow playwrights, María Irene Fornes and Milcha Sánchez-Scott, Prida bridges the border between two worlds. While these Latinos write exclusively in English and Prida writes in English and Spanish, they share a common sensibility. Her creative tension, like theirs, derives from feeling suspended between conflicting values, divided by the dualities of biculturalism. Unlike those Latino writers who have crossed over into English to appeal to wider audiences, Prida's last two plays are in Spanish.[1] This transition *toward* Spanish contradicts the language shift of most Hispanics and suggests that Prida, like many other Latinos, wants to promote the maintainance of Spanish.[2]

Prida's characters, even those born here, suffer the multiple conflicts of the immigrant. Uprooted from their native lands, they search their cultural history to define themselves as individuals and as Latinos. All her characters are bilingual, but instead of linguistic reconciliation, their *Spanglish* reveals physical and psychological displacement. They are neither from here nor there, and the pressure to assimilate collides with their self-image and ethnic loyalty. As a result, they feel estranged from their native culture and rejected by American society. Slowly they begin to adapt to their new homeland only to face displacement again by the increasing gentrification of *el Barrio*.

This paper examines how Prida's female characters struggle to accommodate American individualism within the communal mores of Latino culture. That opposition, however simplistic, conditions the world views of Americans and Hispanics, respectively. The former believe that personal experience shapes the psyche: the ego as center of the universe. Latinos place family, community and mutual responsibilities at the center. Given that theatre mirrors a society's impulses, *Time* magazine's assessment of Hispanic theatre concurs with Latino ethics: "the overwhelming concern is the family; the perpetual battleground is the hearth" (Henry 83).

Prida begins with the most basic form of self-definition: gender. Latin women suffer more psychic stress because they must balance traditional role models with an inchoate urge for personal freedom. *Beautiful Señoritas* (1977) challenges the images of womanhood imposed by machismo. Emboldened by the consciousness raising of early feminism, the señoritas demand their freedom with satire and song. The bilingualism and symmetrical imagery in *Coser y cantar* (1981) externalize the psychic duality of a Latin woman and her American alter ego, a woman alienated from both her inner self and the outside world. In the third play, *Botánica* (1990), Millie/Milagros incarnates the ambivalence and generational conflicts of living in multiple worlds simultaneously. As the "token spik" at an elite college, she learned to survive by denying her ethnicity. Embarrassed by her family's Puerto Rican customs, she jettisoned her personal and cultural history. Back home now after graduation, the young Latina must reconcile upward mobility and family loyalty. A capable arranger, Millie synchronizes the dissonances of past and present by a harmonic convergence of two voices: computers and salsa. The mixture of song, incantation and computer-speak is hilarious as she applies modern business practices to manage her grandmother's medicinal herb shop.

Beautiful Señoritas, a musical satire, parodies the war between the sexes. The play's structure, a beauty contest, reminds the audience that society relies on external markers to evaluate the worth of women. The pressure to look more feminine than female, more idealized than real cuts across cultures and history. As a result women derive their self-esteem from body image, a superficial criteria.

The playing area, an open space with a series of platforms and ramps, allows the scenes to flow smoothly from one to another. Moreover, the empty set suggests the *tabula rasa* openness of the new-born Girl's personality. The episodic plot derives its cohesion from the pageant structure and from the reactions of the impressionable Girl who observes the action from the sidelines. As she moves from scene to scene, the Girl internalizes the behavior of the women she watches. Silent until the finale, she rejects those models to assert her own individuality.

The characters represent overt stereotypes identified by generic titles and numbers: Girl, Señorita 1, Woman 2, *etc.* In addition to the predictable Latin seductress, the *dramatis personae* includes a jilted lover, the radiant bride, selfless mother, inculpating nun, teenage single mother and battered wife. Their distortion would detract from the play's aesthetic merit were it not for the comic effect of the exaggeration, and the music and dance that enhance its theatrical impact. For example, Prida subverts the surface gaiety of Miss Little Havana, Miss Chile Tamale, Miss Conchita Banana and Miss Commonwealth with classic

dramatic irony; the audience knows these doll-like contestants with fixed smiles are not carefree ingenues, but workers who must earn extra money to support their fatherless children.

Theatrically the Girl's acculturation is represented by having her pick up and put on the symbols of womanhood: facial make-up, a tinsel crown dropped by a contestant, flowers and other training props. The roses—often associated with the Virgin Mary in Christian iconography—symbolize the pleasure and pain of sex. The Nun forces the Girl to kneel on them and pray for imitating the sexy moves of the Catch Women, raptorial con artists who teach her how to snare a man. Her blood on the thorny stems has multiple connotations. It alludes to menstruation and childbirth; at the same time, it recalls the blood Christ shed to rid humanity of original sin: sex. Beyond that it belies the expectation that women, like Christ, must sacrifice themselves for others. In a subsequent scene Prida mocks *la madre martirizada*, the supreme virtue of Latin womanhood.

The paradoxical sexual mores of Latin people become manifest in the GIRL's confusion when the señoritas reappear donned in mantillas and fans, red carnations between their teeth. The mantilla and fan, symbols of modesty and seduction, trace Latino religious and cultural traditions back to medieval Spain; moreover, they recall Arabic influence on Spanish culture. Even today, many Arab women must veil their faces using only their eyes to attract attention. Instead of female arms in the battle of the sexes, then, the mantilla and fan represent forms of oppression. The red carnation, a volcanic allusion, contradicts feminine decorum by revealing the passion smoldering inside the señoritas. Its fiery redness anticipates the finale, an eruption of musical satire.

Before women can release the "fire inside," they must cast off the superficial values and behaviors they learn. The climax represents a literal unmasking of the accoutrements of female socialization. Confronted by their mistake, the Women surround the Girl and take off, one by one, all the various items. As they clean her face, they realize others have characterized womanhood for them as a series of body functions: first blood, first sex, first child. "I look for myself and I can't find me" laments Woman 3. "I only find some else's idea of me" (43). Speaking for the first time, the Girl considers other choices, and ends the play in a song of liberation. Her song, "Don't Deny us the Music," renders the familiar proverb, "parece mansita, pero tiene la música por dentro" to assert a woman's right to define herself:

> WOMAN IS A FOUNTAIN OF FIRE
> WOMAN IS A RIVER OF LOVE
> A LATIN WOMAN IS JUST A WOMAN
> WITH THE MUSIC INSIDE. (44)

Señoritas not only ridicules gender-stereotyping, it also parodies other social issues with quick wit. As Martyr #3 remarks: "The Virgin Mary never worried about forced sterilization or torture in Argentina or minimum wages. True, she had housing problems, but there was never a quarrel as to who washed the dishes or fed the burro" (35). This wry musical comedy parades distorted images of women in a farcical wonderland where the cosmetic and the artificial substitute for self-realization. The impressionable protagonist represents the filter through whom we see these absurdities decried.

Prida revisits the theme of self-definition in *Coser y cantar*; this time, the satire is grimmer, the language more caustic, the denouement wholly ambiguous. Here the split stage, linguistic code-switching and symmetrical images represent the fractured personality of She/Ella, a woman at war with herself. Prida underscores the psychic fragmentation of the protagonist in her "Important Note from the Author":

> This piece is really one long monologue. The two women are one and are playing a verbal, emotional game of ping-pong. Throughout the action, except in the final confrontation, ELLA and SHE never look at each other, acting independently, pretending the other does not really exist, although each continuously trespasses on each other's thoughts, feelings and behavior. (49)

Prida's admonition, "This play must NEVER be performed in just one language" (49), suggests that it is an intensely personal play, intended for bilingual-bicultural audiences.[3] Equally significant, it suggests that the woman's schizophrenia starts with language. Balanced bilingualism, an asset in a healthy personality, here is symptomatic of She/Ella's fractured character and world view. She's first words reveal the link between language-identity-fear: "No one is safe out there. No one. Not even those who speak good English. Not even those who know who they are . . ." (51). Verbal games, namelessness and diglossia accentuate her struggle for self- definition. The contrastive bilingualism of *Coser* suggests that language choice informs not only culture, but personality too.

As with the characters in *Señoritas*, each half of the woman represents an ethnic stereotype. SHE speaks English, eats yogurt, exercises regularly, and reads *Psychology Today*; her icons relate to physical and intellectual pursuits (vitamins, sports equipment, reading and writing material). Ella prefers cholesterol-laden foods, lies in bed listening to sentimental ballads, and reads *Vanidades*; her icons are personal and cultural (cosmetics, a Virgin with candle, a conch shell and maracas). She strives for "emotional sophistication" but sits around contemplating her navel; Ella wants to be "la Mujer Maravilla" but wallows in

resentment over her repressed childhood. Their dress, discourse and demeanor, as well as the props on each side of the stage, manifest a personality that oscillates between an American pragmatism fixed on the here and now, and a Latino nostalgia rooted in idealized memories of her place of origins.

The attitude of each one toward the body reveals how each woman is typecast. She believes the body must be disciplined with proper foods and exercise. Identifying her with the Protestant work-ethic, critic Alberto Sandoval notes that the character of She emerges as "clean, self-controlled, self-reliant, efficient, fast, aggressive, assertive, industrious, dedicated, goal-oriented, motivated, status-seeking and social climbing" (204). In contrast, Ella is disorganized, distracted, and unfettered by clocks; but also to her credit, "spontaneous, passionate, intemperate and natural" (209). Overtly feminine, Ella regales in the pleasures of food, clothes, romantic novels and an exuberant, tropical sensuality that links her to Nature, particularly that of Cuba.

Lonely and aroused by recurrent sexual fantasies, they wrangle about morality. She derides Ella as a romantic who masturbates while listening to *boleros*, but censures explicit talk of sex. Ella accuses She of indulging in vulgar fantasies and promiscuous self-abasement: "Te acuestas con demasiada gente que ni siquiera te cae bien" (59). Both hunger for sex as a biological need, and seek "aprobación/approval" from their respective culture-specific deities. Ella calls out to the Catholic Virgen del Cobre; in Protestant fashion, She appeals to God (Sandoval 212). They share a bilingual lover, and when he abandons them, She implores him to stay: "Oh, please, let's try again! . . . Look . . . I'll . . . I'll . . ." (65). Grabbing the phone, Ella starts to insult him but resorts to the groveling lyrics of a *bolero*: "¡Miénteme, pégame, traicióname, patéame, arrástrame por el fango, pero no me dejes" (65).

Both languages express the willingness of a lonely woman to humiliate herself for love. On the surface, the intensity of Ella's appeal plays up to the belief among Latinos that Spanish manifests emotions more fervently. Her masochistic plea, however, negates her previous bravado. With characteristic wit, Prida tips the words into hyperbole with broad irony and a beat from the popular ballad, "Miénteme más (que me hace tu maldad feliz)."

The dialogue of *Coser* moves at a quick pace; the code switching between languages is agile; the intra-personal reversals facile because both aspects of the woman are equally bilingual.[4] Even though each half refuses to address each other directly, their discourse alternates between spit-fire diatribes, reminiscences charged with nostalgia or bitterness, and meaningless patter studded with puns, proverbs and non-sequiturs:

ELLA: I remember when I first met you . . . there was a shimmer in your eyes . . .

. . . . . .

SHE: . . . pensábamos que íbamos a conquistar el mundo . . .

ELLA: . . . But . . .

SHE: . . . I don't know . . . (SHE *goes to her table and picks up a bottle of vitamins.)* Did I take my pills today?

ELLA: Sí.

SHE: Vitamin C?

ELLA: Sí.

SHE: Iron?

ELLA: Sí.

SHE: Painkiller?

ELLA: Of course . . . because camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente.

SHE: A shrimp that falls asleep is carried away by the current?

ELLA: No . . . that doesn't make any sense. (60)

In effect, this exchange voices the cultural complexities embedded in language; making sense of a culture requires more than merely translating words (Helsper 3). Even when one understands the words, their meaning may remain obscure: "¿Por qué sería que Songo le dio a Borondongo? . . . ¡Ay, nunca lo he entendido . . . el gran misterio de nuestra cultura" (56). The word-play in *Coser* not only articulates the clash of values, it is often humorous:

ELLA: Ay chica, no hablaba de fantasías eróticas sino de fantasías heróicas . . . a lo Juana de Arco . . .

SHE: I don't care for Joan of Arc—too hot to handle! . . . ha, ha, ha. (*Both laugh at the bad joke.*)

Other sounds, however, periodically undercut the comic effect of the dialogue. The sirens, screams and screeches coming from the outside portend a hostile world. Frequent pauses, half-formed statements that trail off, unanswered questions and the tendency of each character to change the subject when the topic becomes threatening all heighten the play's dramatic tension.

Alberto Sandoval deconstructs the woman's discourse to demonstrate how the playwright articulates cultural differences with ethnic foods (206-09). Sandoval notes that She uses the goal-oriented future tense to select an artificial

drink: "I'll have a Diet Pepsi." Ella's choice, sugar-cane tea, must be expressed as a condition contrary-to-fact because that natural beverage is not available: "Yo me tomaría un guarapo de caña" (56). The *guarapo*, then, activates her cultural memory to recall the "Songo/ Borondongo" song, a big hit by Celia Cruz, the "Queen of Salsa." In a subsequent food conflict after singing a few bars of "Nostalgia habanera" with Cuban balladeer Olga Guillot, She ends up eating the emotionally rich Cuban food proposed by Ella (63). Food and song, nourishment for body and soul, are recurrent metaphors in *Coser* and, as we will discuss later, in *Botánica*.

Another critic, Norma Helsper, marks the "fish tank/*pecera*" dialectic as one of several linguistic zones in which translation fails to convey vast conceptual differences (3-4). Contrary to the soothing effect associated with water imagery (in this case, watching fish swim), *la pecera* continues to haunt Ella's memory as the frightful glass enclosure for emigrants departing from the Havana airport. What should have been an ascent to freedom becomes a fearful image of the isolation of urban life: "Una pecera llena de peces asustados, que no sabían nadar, que no sabían de las aguas heladas . . . donde los tiburones andan con pistola . . ." (53). Later the closed world of the Cuban community in Miami became another *pecera* overshadowed by "nubes negras" (60). Now imprisoned in a New York City apartment, the water turns to blood: "Outside it's raining blood and you have been to all the places you can possibly ever go to! Now, you have nowhere to go! Nowhere!" (61).

Displacement in time, space and culture, the central metaphor of the play, is summarized by the misplaced map. Sandoval calls the map a "metonymic symbol" of the protagonist's nomadic existence (215). She/Ella feel uprooted and yearn to find a secure haven. Their failure to locate the map results in lack of direction and paralysis of action. Theatrically, the constant search for the map and frightening noises induce an expectation of calamity. Only the common threat from the outside world forces them to confront each other. But instead of climax and resolution, their confrontation leads to an anti-climax. In the end, they remain sequestered, picking at their wounds, bickering over whether to go or to stay.

Like the image of the sewing circle inherent in its title, *Coser y cantar* begins and ends in a circle of fear. The woman's psychological imprisonment in both the *pecera* and the apartment represents a life circumscribed by fear. Society allows men to break the circle and express their will in dance and destruction (the broken dishes and broken hearts), but women are trapped by walls and mores that suffocate their singularity.

As with *Señoritas*, *Coser* represents the search for selfhood, a re-placement of the individual personality within a self-defined bicultural center. Unlike the

Girl, this woman never achieves a sense of identity. Instead of reveling in her biculturalism and choosing values from both modalities, each half battles to erase the other. She rejects the "obsolete memories" of the past; Ella cannot adapt to the here and now. The play implies that both psychic and social well-being start from within, from a personal reconcilation of opposites. To confront communal problems like crime and pollution, the woman must first resolve her spacial-temporal conflicts. Once her personality achieves wholeness, She/Ella can become reincarnated within the "body" of her culture; she can relate to her community. Culture is part of identity, too.

Prida's latest play, *Botánica*, premiered in New York in March 1991, and will continue on the program of *El Repertorio Español* indefinitely.[5] Subtitled "una comedia de milagros," *Botánica* takes place in an herb shop where the venerable Doña Geno concocts love potions, divines the future and dispenses spiritual cures. Initially, the set seems like any small shop in New York, but the candles, incense and religious icons gradually reveal an alternate faith and lifestyle. A huge painting of a ceiba tree, a type of cedar common to the Caribbean, defines the shop: Botánica La Ceiba. The symbol of an embracing mother nature and of Doña Geno, the tree towers over the scene just as the old woman dominates the action.

The ceiba and the spiritual healer epitomize strength, wisdom, and longevity. The dramatist dictates that Doña Geno's chair be placed just under the tree. The chair represents her throne, the tree her source of power. To a North American audience, this shop's religious imagery may seem bizarre, exotic; not so to a Latino audience familiar with *santería*, the syncretism of Spanish Catholicism and West African beliefs. Caribbean *santería* has resolved the conflicts between the two religions. Similarily, the play attempts to reconcile two languages, two cultures and two visions of the world into a cohesive whole.

The action begins when Millie/Milagros returns to the *Barrio* from an elite college in New England determined to become a new person. Ready to retire, Doña Geno expects to teach her granddaughter the rituals, remedies and chants, "los espíritus y las potencias," of spiritual healing (162). Humiliated by her four years as "la 'spic' de turno para llevarme la beca" (162), Millie has other plans: "Ya yo tengo un trabajo en un banco, que es donde está el único 'espíritu' que cuenta en este mundo: ¡el dinero!" (162). Overcome by Millie's blasphemy, Doña Geno clutches her chest and collapses. Guilt-ridden yet defiant, Millie turns to *santería*, but only partially. She refuses to make a "promesa," and instead strikes a "deal" with Saint Lazarus to heal the old lady. In exchange, she offers to organize the shop more efficiently. Doña Geno voices the crux of the conflict: "Mi niña, la vida no se puede vivir como un 'business plan.'" But Millie retorts: "Abuela, tampoco se puede vivir de 'milagros'" (171), a double

entendre that asserts both her religious skepticism and desire for independence from her family. Prida's high-tech solution combines ancient beliefs with modern business practices. The comedy closes with Millie feeding the information on herbs, recipes and prayers into a computer as the others prompt her by singing "El yerbero moderno" by Cuban singing legend, Celia Cruz.

The principal characters in *Botánica* represent single women who work out their human and emotional needs without the support of men. Unlike the stereotypes of the previous plays, these are real women with defined human traits and personal idiosyncracies. Doña Geno heads this matrilineal group. Associated with tradition, Mother Nature, and spiritualism, she is a strong woman "astute about life in the way only a great survivor can be" (Bruckner). Her daughter Anamú embodies the complacency of passive women. Anamú gave up her dream of becoming a singer to remain in her mother's protective shadow. Ironically, *anamú* is also the name of a medicinal plant similar to aloe. A purgative and tonic, Doña Geno used it to create "Anamú Despojo Bath" to help her daughter heal after a painful divorce, but to no avail.

The protagonist Milagros Castillo personifies the friction and fusion of life between contiguous cultures. Her double name avers to her conflicted identity; Milagros began calling herself Millie at college because, she observed, Miracles Castle isn't a great name in English. Her career choice, business administration, stands in direct contrast to her grandmother's belief in myth and magic. Born in the United States, Millie disowns the African cultural traditions inherited from her ancestors. She rationalizes her behavior to Rubén her suitor who, like Anamú to Doña Geno, functions as her dramatic foil:

> Yo no soy parte de esto. Estas imágenes, estas creencias, han sido parte del equipaje de otras generaciones . . . de Africa al Caribe, del Caribe a Nueva York . . . pero yo soy de aquí, yo nací aquí, Esto no es parte de mi equipaje . . . you know what I mean. Tú naciste aquí también. ¿Tú entiendes lo que yo digo? (164)

Like Doña Geno, Rubén represents a strong, self-assured character; he challenges Millie's logic and, in contrast, defines himself biculturally:

> ¿Qué quiere decir "ser de aquí?" . . . Pues . . . pa' mí "ser de aquí" es . . . pues es mango y strawberries . . . alcapurrias y pretzels . . . Yemayá y los Yankees . . . Yo no veo la diferencia. What's the big deal? Eso es lo que somos: brunch y burundanga, quiche y arroz con habichuelas, Chase Manhattan y la bolita . . . Todo depende de cómo empaques tu equipaje. . . . You see, I decide what

> it means to be from here, porque allá afuera hay muchos que piensan que aunque hayas nacido aquí y te cambies el nombre a Joe o Millie, they think you're not from here anyway. De aquí, de allá . . . que sé yo . . . No hay por qué dejarlo todo atrás . . . no hay qué dejar que nos maten los búfalos. (164)

Aside from the humor, his easy code-switching voices cultural accommodation to his two worlds. Millie's words, on the other hand, reveal an urge to assimilate; they also manifest deeper penetration of English structure and American jargon. Spanish does not express subject pronouns except for emphasis or clarification; English requires them. Her repeated use of "yo" and "tú" betrays the incursion of English grammar into her speech. Also, she translates the American concept of "baggage" as personal history literally into Spanish, "equipaje." A monolingual Spanish-speaker would not understand this use of "equipaje," but Rubén picks it up easily.

Prida's dialogue sparkles with humor and cracks with surprising linguistic twists that resonate with latent meanings, especially with regard to food. Millie, for instance, refuses to eat *pasteles* because she says: "(El cerdo) es un veneno para el cuerpo" (150). Rubén rejects that logic with a quick comeback: "Si eso fuera verdad ya no quedaría un puertorriqueño vivo." Doña Geno complains about Millie's "embelecos vegetarianos," then adds: "Como si los plátanos no fueran vegetales" (147). Millie's rejection of *pasteles* and *tostones*, Puerto Rican foods, implies disavowal of her ethnicity. Aside from the humor of recasting the *botánica* into a boutique for candles and herbs, the change implies an affinity with Anglo Yuppiedom. Beyond that, it aludes to the gentrification of East Harlem, the theme of *Savings*, another play by Prida.

Millie's distaste for *pasteles* duplicates her mockery of the "mumbo jumbo" of her grandmother's spiritual cures. Doña Geno senses that both indicate disaffection with her family and culture. Pepe, the Indian articulates the innate relation between physical, cultural and spiritual nourishment. When the whites killed his buffalos, Pepe says: "me quedé sin nada en que creer" (163). Losing the buffalo meant losing his food, land, culture and identity; now he is merely a homeless drunk. Prida raises the food metaphor to high comedy at the denouement. As Millie is feeding the herbal recipes into the computer, symbolic of the symbiosis between old beliefs and new technology, the real estate developer calls with another offer to buy her grandmother's building. Her reply reveals that the young Latina has resolved her identity conflicts: "My buffalos are not for sale" (180).

Botánica represents a maturation of Prida's creative process. It combines the gender issues of *Señoritas* with the psychic and cultural fragmentation of

Coser and dramatizes those themes with consummate stagecraft and laugh-a-line dialogue. The plot tells a real story with real people. The female characters develop; they become infinitely more complex, more multi-dimensional and more interesting than the archetypal women of *Señoritas* or the schizoid She/Ella. The protagonist can be Millie at work and Milagritos at home because she succeeds in achieving a balanced perspective that encompasses both polarities. With *Botánica* Prida goes beyond personal and generational conflicts specific to Latinos to address the newest threat to ethnic communities: gentrification.

Prida has described *Beautiful Señoritas* as "una búsqueda, a search" (in Umpierre 82), but the three plays analyzed in this paper are all *búsquedas*. Gender, language, and ethnicity form the conflicts and conjunctions in the thematic search for personhood and cultural affiliation. Likewise, a continual quest for the appropriate idiom and dramatic structure also characterizes Prida's work (Weiss 13). The beauty contest in *Beautiful Señoritas* denounces social values that measure women's body parts more than their characters. Beneath the comic bickering in *Coser y Cantar* we experience the psychic struggles of a Latina with an ambivalent personal and cultural identity. *Botánica*'s verbal facility, computer imagery and farcical *santería* project the cultural confrontation between modernity and tradition, individualism and collectivity with theatricality and wit. In 1989 Mount Holyoke College recognized Dolores Prida's artistic achievements by granting her an honorary doctorate; the citation lauded the playwright for succeeding "in a field that requires a discerning eye on human behavior and uncommon skill in finding the proper words and actions to express a point of view."

Prida forms part of the bilingual-bicultural generation of Latino artists who remain closely identified with their ancestral roots. Her plays suggest that she has endured identity conflicts caused by language, displacement and ethnic ambiguity. Nevertheless, she strives for aesthetic distance by standing outside the group to examine it as an insider. Her plays are satirical in tone but not accusatory in nature. The conflicts are tempered with humor, warm familial relationships and expectations of future progress, above all in *Botánica*. Familiar with the folk traditions of daily life in New York's *El Barrio*, Prida uses popular culture to contextualize her characters. The combination Spanish proverb-Miss America finale of *Señoritas*, the bilingualism of *Coser* and the spiritualism of the botánica-boutique confirm a bicultural Latino domain of hybrid values. Equally important, the beauty contest, *telenovela*, songs, music, proverbs, *santería*, and most of all ethnic foods and *Spanglish*, provide the means for both nourishment and introspection. Finally, unlike many professional Latinos, Dolores Prida still lives in the *Barrio*. This adherence to a Spanish-speaking enclave and her movement toward Spanish in her last two plays suggest that the author fears

linguistic displacement may lead to cultural atrophy. Prida's drama affirms the quest for personal and cultural definition by asserting the strength derived by individuals from the community.

SUNY College at New Paltz

Notes

1. Prida has produced nine plays: four in English, three bilingual, and two in Spanish; see appendix for titles and production information.

2. In an article assessing attitudes toward bilingual education in New York City, the *New York Times* reports that Chinese and Russian parents prefer regular classes or a brief sojourn in English as a second language for their children. By contrast, many Hispanics argue that schools should help children maintain their Spanish language and heritage (Jan. 4, 1993: A1, B4).

3. *Coser* is set in New York, probably in East Harlem (*El barrio*), home of the largest concentration of *Nuyoricans*, orginally New Yorkers of Puerto Rican birth or ancestry, now a term applied in general to Latinos in the City. Two facts support a *Barrio* setting: *Botánica* takes place on "Lexington y 113, El Barrio, Nueva York" (154). Also, Prida still lives in the area, on East 116th Street (address by personal correspondence).

4. While researchers report a steady shift from Spanish usage to English among native-born and immigrant Latinos, the continuous flow of Spanish-speaking immigrants has maintained bilingualism longer among Hispanics that among other immigrant groups (Calvin Veltman, *The Future of the Spanish Language in the United States*. Washington DC: Hispanic Policy Development Project, 1988: 1-4). Also, in "Social Dimensions of Language Use in East Harlem," a three-year study conducted by the Center for Puerto Rican Studies of the City University of New York in 1980, researchers found that "bilingualism is widespread, and the mixing of the two languages is not negatively evaluated" within the community (ERIC ED212751).

5. Personal comunication with Prida; *Botánica* is currently touring theatres and university campuses in Texas and California (4/24/93).

Appendix: Plays and Production Information

Based on information supplied by Mount Holyoke College on awarding degree of *honoris causa* to Dolores Prida, November 5, 1989.

Beautiful Señoritas (1977), Prida's first play, a musical comedy in English with music by Tania León and Victoria Ruiz. Opened at the DUO Theatre in New York City on November 25, 1977; performed subsequently, at the Inner City Cultural Center in Los Angeles (1979), in San Jose (1980), at the National Organization for Women (NOW) National Convention in San Antonio (1980), at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts (1981), and at Teatro Latino de Minnesota in Minneapolis (1984).

The Beggar's Soup Opera (1979), a musical comedy based on Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* with music by Paul Radelat; produced by DUO Theatre at INTAR on 42nd Street Theatre Row; *New York Times* review: July 24, 1979, C7: 1.

La Era Latina (1980), a bilingual musical co-written with Victor Fragoso with music by Paul Radelat; produced by the Puerto Rican Traveling Theatre in the summer of 1980 and toured over 30 city neighborhoods. Received a Special Award at the International Third World Theatre Competition in Caracas, Venezuela in 1981; also produced by Teatro Latino de Minnesota.

Coser y Cantar (1981), subtitled "a bilingual fantasy for two women"; first performed by New York's DUO Theatre on June 25, 1981, and again in May 1982 and April 1985; also at the Women of One World Festival in New York City in Fall 1981, at the Festival Calderón in San Antonio in 1983, at the Bellas Artes Theatre in San Juan, Puerto Rico in February 1985, and in Chicago in November 1985. Presented in over 16 colleges, and broadcast by local National Public Radio stations in the U. S.

Crisp! (1981), a musical comedy based on Jacinto Benavente's *Los intereses creados* with music by Galt MacDermot; produced by INTAR on 42nd Street Theatre Row in the Spring of 1981.

Juan Bobo (1981), a bilingual children's play based on the Puerto Rican folk character with music by Eddie Ruperto; toured New York City public schools as part of the Arts Connection Program during May-June 1962 and produced by DUO Theatre.

Savings (1985), "a musical fable" with music by Leon Odenz that examines the gentrification of multi-ethnic neighborhoods; first performed by at INTAR on May 15, 1985; *New York Times* review: May 24, 1985, C3: 5.

Pantallas (1986), a "black" comedy in Spanish on the subject of TV soap operas and nuclear disasters; first performed by DUO Theater in New York City

on April 17, 1986; included in *Cuban Theater in the United States: A Critical Anthology*, edited and translated by Luis González Cruz and Francesca Colecchia, published by Bilingual Review Press.

Botánica (1990), three generations of Puerto Rican women grapple with changing times, and generation and culture gaps while managing a *botánica*, a medicinal herbs shop in a New York City Hispanic neighborhood; in Spanish. Commissioned by Repertorio Español, New York City; *New York Times* review: March 5, 1991: C16.

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