

Out of the Fringe: Desire and Homosexuality in the '90s Latino Theatre

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The title of this essay refers to a collection of theatre and performance pieces written and performed between 1995 and 1998 by some of the most prolific Latino artists working in the late 20th century.¹ One of the characteristics that marks them is the lack of overall homogeneity found among the pieces. Some, like Svich's *Alchemy of Desire/Dead-Man's Blues* (1997) and *Fur* (1995) by Migdalia Cruz, function within an internal terrain that the play itself constructs, making no allusions to identifiable, specific, geographic locations (be they Hispanic or Anglo). Theirs is a self-contained world set within what could be termed the deliberations of language, the psychological and the theatrical. Others, like Alfaro's *Cuerpo politizado*, (1997), *Greetings from a Queer Señorita* (1995) by Monica Palacios, *Trash* (1995) by Pedro Monge-Rafuls, *Stuff!* (1997) by Nao Bustamante and Coco Fusco, and *Mexican Medea* (1997) by Cherríe Moraga, clearly take a stance at the junction between the sexual, sexual preference, AIDS, postcolonial discourse and identity politics. While the collection of plays and performances also includes fine work by Oliver Mayer, Nilo Cruz and Naomi Iizuka, for the purpose of this essay I shall concentrate on the above mentioned pieces.

The heterogeneous and transitory space of these texts is marked by a number of characteristics, the most prominent and innovative of which is the foregrounding of sexual identities that defy both Latino and Anglo cultural stereotypes. By contemplating the central role of the physical body and its multiplicity of desires/states, I posit this conjunction as the temporary space for the performance of theatrical, cultural, and gender expressions. Some of the works are contestatory in nature, in what I see as a conscious move away from the here-to-fore types represented, and in a real sense "allowed," by Latino and non-Latino producing organizations. The representation of gay Latino characters has suffered a long-standing taboo. Some documented examples include the exclusion in the 1981 TENAZ festival of *Reunión* by

Edgar Poma because of its overt homosexual theme (Román 1998:181), or the indirect “suggestion” made to Eddie Sánchez during South Coast Repertory Theatre’s Hispanic Playwrights Project in 1989 to tone down the homosexual themes after he submitted *Trafficking in Broken Hearts* (Marrero 1990:147-153).² The subject of AIDS and AIDS-related homophobia in Latino theatre has also been relatively closeted until the 1990s (see Alberto Sandoval 1994:54-72).

In the works under consideration here, notions of love, beauty, the beastly, death, the economy of desire among unequal “trade partners” and the unabashedly homoerotic often engage in the tension that Homi Bhabha in his essay “The Other Questions” describes as the ambivalence of the stereotype in the discourse of colonialism (Bhabha 1994). It is as if the generation of authors here represented has already digested/processed/expiated itself of the repetitions of stereotypical “Latinidad” historically imposed upon its predecessors. These authors seek the ambiguity of the gaps, of the poetic, of the theatrical. It is a space hard won by fifteen years of their individual productions.

Therefore, I propose the concept of re-formation as a sort of re-grouping which has taken place in Latino theatre in the late 1990s in which performance artists and playwrights have assumed a mature, self-confident position within U.S. artistic communities. This is not to suggest that Latino plays circulate widely; they may be produced with some regularity if not certainty. However, Cherríe Moraga has a substantial reputation and following; Luis Alfaro is enjoying a MacArthur Foundation “genius” award and works at the Mark Taper Forum; Caridad Svich has an NEA grant and is also associated with the Mark Taper; Pedro Monge-Rafuls works in New York and publishes *Ollantay Theatre Magazine*; Nao Bustamante continues her solo performances in San Francisco; Coco Fusco’s cultural critiques are widely read and her *Couple in the Cage* with Guillermo Gómez-Peña traveled around the world. Fusco’s current collaboration with Nao Bustamante has also traveled to Europe, Oceania, New Zealand, and Australia. Naomi Iizuka’s *Skin* has been produced in Los Angeles. Migdalia Cruz is the author of over 27 plays, musicals and operas, produced in the U.S., Mexico, and England.

Because a number of the works to be analyzed deal with Latina/Latino gay and lesbian sensibilities, and because the open display of this orientation indeed represents a breakthrough in Latino/a performing identities, I will begin by considering them. In Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López’s anthology, *The Ethnic Eye, Latino Media Arts* (1996), Frances Negrón-

Muntaner, using Raymond Williams' (1977:132) concept of structure of feeling, offers six basic elements as characteristics of the gay and lesbian films she considers in her article "Drama Queens: Gay and Lesbian Independent Film/Video." These characteristics are: formal hybridity (mixing of diverse genres and modes of address), reflexivity, the construction of an artist persona often involved in a journey of self-discovery and confrontation, the representation of geographical dislocation, the contextualization of the subject's drama within the immediate and/or symbolic family, and the self-conscious use of media to construct an alternative reality for the speaking subject/subject of representation (63-64). While not all of the performances or plays display all of the characteristics, they provide a useful initial framework.

Although Negrón-Muntaner's research focuses upon film and video, I find these constructs useful in discussing the work of Latino gay and Lesbian performance. However, within the specificity of the work about to be considered, I feel the need to expand the categories to include: the notion of constructing a performance persona through the incorporation of playful, consciously irreverent humor, a humor which does not self-deprecate in any way; an inclination towards demonstrating a subtle, inferred awareness of gender stereotyping paralleled by the refusal to yield to dominant sexual and cultural taboos (particularly those raised by Latino Catholicism and the "sanctity" of the family); and lastly, the performance of sexual and cultural identities as a form of pleasure clearly coded within the female physical body. This playfulness in performing identities certainly plays a key role in some of the works; it is often the construction of a multiplicity of identities that stridently keeps taking the place of any "fixed" notion of either gender (homo or heterosexual), ethnic, cultural, political, or artistic boundaries.

Thus a one-woman performance like *Greetings from a Queer Señorita* by Monica Palacios, initially carved in the battleground of stand-up comedy, simply picks up at that space already gained by Palacios and other (such as television's Ellen De Generes) lesbian stand-up comedians – beyond the struggle and homophobia of the night club scene. *Greetings* takes on the direct pleasure felt by the lesbian character upon fantasizing on such refreshingly new images as that of the Surfer Chola and Miss Sabrosita at the *taquería* (taco stand):

Yes, I watched her eat her carne asada tacos from afar... She was Chicana, Brown woman, dark eyes, dark thick Mexican girl hair... athletic and she was HUNGRY. Didn't just wolf down her 2 tacos

and Corona with 2 limes. She consumed her meal creatively, slowly, tenderly – con pasión... she closed her eyes after every bite... as if becoming one with the carne asada. OOOOOOMMMMME!
Peaceful and beautiful she looked as her full lips produced KISSES as she mas-ti-ca-ted!! (17)

Not only does Palacios tell us earlier in the text that she is a “lezbo-dyke-queer-homo-muff diver!” (8), but she lets us in on a secret: while all 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 her Self. Gender and cultural identities blend in a seamless way. By signifying lesbian Chicana desire within the ambience of a self-confidence about being “out” and by describing the pleasure she emotionally and physically experiences from her sexuality, Palacios precludes the possibility of suggesting any anomaly.

Palacios includes a family scene in which she describes what happens when she brings her “wife” home to a Mexican family dinner. She announces: “My family – mi familia, THIS IS MY WIFE” (12). The polyphony of her family’s reaction, after the initial “thick, intense silence” (12) starts off with her mother’s response, “Come on, everybody, let’s eat. Food is getting cold...” (13). To which Palacios retorts, addressing the audience: “You see they know, but they don’t want to talk about it. What for? Why ruin a good meal?” As a one woman act, Palacios plays all of the roles, multiplying herself into her family’s characters, each distinguished by a blackout and then a spot around the head and shoulders:

DAD: She’s not married. She brings a woman to family functions.
(sings) Qué será, será,
whatever will be.

OLDER SISTER: Well, I don’t approve of it. But she is my baby sister. Her girlfriend is pretty – THANK GOD!

OLDER BROTHER: I guess she knows what she’s doing. We don’t talk about it. She better not try to hit on my wife!

OTHER OLDER SISTER: I’m not sure I understand it. Her girlfriend is nice – I guess

that’s what she calls her! Her woman? Her lover-person?

LITTLE BROTHER: Hey, man, she can do what she wants. It’s her business. She seems

happy. Oh my god! My wife is flirting with her girlfriend!

PRECOCIOUS NIECE: LEZBO!!!!!!!! (14)

Her family's reaction to her open lesbianism gives voice to a wide range of heterosexual as well as cultural biases. The mother wants to ignore it; the father demonstrates an unsterotypical (un-macho) helplessness, the older sister's comments about the girlfriend's "prettiness" makes allusions to the unacceptability of a *marimacha*³ female (implying relief that the "wife" is not a butch-type); her two brothers are mainly concerned with protecting their macho privileges from the "corruption" (subversion) introduced by the acceptance of female/female desire; the young niece displays a brutal, child-like honesty by giving voice to the unspeakable "L-word." The Latino notion of close family ties, which is echoed in Alfaro's "Blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends..." (9), requires that her family accept her, in spite of their homophobia.

As in a final coup de grace, however, Palacios trumps them all. Assuming a film announcer's voice she heralds: "Just when the Mexican Catholic family thought they had one lesbian daughter, they actually have two. Experience their confusion in: Double Dyke Familia!" (15) Avenged pleasure: one of her older sisters is also lesbian!

In *Cuerpo politizado* (Politicized Body) Luis 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 notions of the junction of the Chicano/gay communities. Through eleven vignettes and one taped-recorded segment entitled "Chicanismo," Alfaro takes us from a concrete locus (Alfaro's own downtown Los Angeles neighborhood of Pico and Union streets) to the personal landscapes of the Mexican family, Catholicism, and gender socialization to a clear queer positionality.

Alfaro clearly positions himself first as a gay rights activist; his theatre and performance work arose from his earlier political activism (written communication, Alfaro, March 1998 and Román 1994). *Cuerpo politizado* formally reflects this positionality: it begins with a segment called "On a Street Corner," a type of "scene of origins." These origins do not constitute an idealized⁴ notion of ethnic identity in Aztlán or any other marker within Chicano political history. Alfaro's cultural context is urban and very raw, a place where daily violence is the norm: "a man gets slapped on a bus, a woman is slugged by her husband, a clown throws toys menacingly, a glue sniffer watches the world in slow motion, helicopters circle overhead and the sensation of a first kiss becomes coupled with the pleasure of a slap in the face" (8).

From this public, exterior space, we are then invited into the inner spaces of the family as filtered through the Latino Catholic experience. In the second vignette, the “Virgin Mary” is a plug-in Virgin Mary doll who, when turned on, turns 360 degrees to bless all sides of the room. While to Anglo culture she might be a kitsch object (Román 1994:190) from a Tijuana flea market, here she claims the cultural cohesion that women provide within Latino families. “La abuela” personifies the repeated mantra of Latino culture: “Blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends, and the Virgin Mary watches over us all” (9).

Superseding the closed and closeted existence within the homophobic family structure, Alfaro recasts the rotating Virgin Mary within the transgressive link of the narrator’s emergent sensuality. At age eighteen he met a guy who also owned a rotating Virgin Mary doll. He 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” (12). Not only does he recast the Virgin Mary, but Alfaro also recasts the grapes, sign of his family’s heritage as migrant California farm workers. As a cultural sign of unequivocal Chicano nationalistic value, the crate of grapes Alfaro receives from his grandmother and subsequently uses in his erotic, homosexual play, sends a direct message subverting standard notions of the machista tendencies within the 1960’s nationalistic Chicano movement.⁵ Through the ownership and recasting of the grapes as an obvious cultural sign, Alfaro seems to suggest an analogy: the legitimacy of César Chavez’s United Farm Workers’ political activism could be understood as analogous to Alfaro’s and other Chicano gay activists’ own socio-political activism related to AIDS and gay awareness within the Latino community of Los Angeles. In this way, a clear lineage of Chicano political resistance opens up a cultural space to include Chicano gay rights.

Moving still further towards the male centered body, Pedro Monge’s monologue, *Trash* posits a painful look at the male body as locus of a U.S. stereotypical social construct of the Cuban Marielito immigrant as human “trash.” 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, leaves Cuba and ends up in New York. The monologue exposes negative, circulating concepts of Marielitos as homosexuals, thieves and social deviants. Simultaneously Monge strips the Cuban immigrant’s illusion of the U.S. as an imagined safe-haven.

Although we do not know it until the end, Jesús is speaking from inside a jail cell. Jesús is a victim of appearances and circumstance. In need of money, he agrees to allow a stranger to give him fellatio. Although Jesús finds pleasure in the exchange, same-sex relations is not his primary preference. A struggle ensues after the sex, when the man wants more than agreed; a gun Jesús is carrying accidentally goes off; the man is killed. The stranger happens to be a Catholic priest, according to newspaper accounts, a “pillar of the community.” Jesús is incarcerated. By the end of the monologue, the audience feels his entrapment by circumstance; his subordinate and expendable position in U.S. society. He is presumed to be a gay “deviant” from Cuba. The cards of fate are stacked against him, regardless of his innocence or his true sexual orientation. What began in the monologue as a simple economic exchange ends as an inferred allusion of homophobia and xenophobia within U.S. society.

Stuff! is a comedic piece by Chicana performance artist Nao Bustamante and Cuban American Coco Fusco which expands the imaginary to discuss Latin women within the context of world-wide postcolonialist, neoliberal economies. Using the trope of a global tourist service, E.E. Jones, the only male in the performance piece, speaks to the audience from a TV monitor:

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. (4)

Tapping upon key elements of the so-called first world hunger for touristy 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 market place. Through the trope of a futuristic travel service, members of the audience are invited on-stage to participate as Travel Tasters. One segment that illustrates the benefits of the Hot International guide comes with translations for love and sex in seven different languages. Blanca (Fusco) engages a male Travel Taster in a “how to” lesson in seduction in Spanish with the mediation of Rosa (Bustamante):

BLANCA: ¡Me estás usando!

ROSA: She thinks you're using her. Say it isn't true. That you're looking for love. No es cierto, ¡busco amor!

TRAVEL TASTER: No es cierto, ¡busco amor! (Not true, I am looking for love!).

BLANCA: Pero yo estoy buscando apoyo financiero (But I am looking for financial support). (36)

Disproportionate relations of economic power strip the amorous context of its possible seductive allure, grounding it within the realm of economic disparity. This is brilliantly illustrated by the character of Judy (Coco Fusco), the Cuban transvestite who works within the Havana tourist economy commonly known as *jineterismo*.⁶

JUDY: When I tell the guys that I'm doing this to buy a pound of ground beef, they feel better about giving me money, and they leave me more. (20)

Ever aware of the manipulations of sentiment, Judy will use her choice of prostitution to her advantage, without the usual connotations of sexual servitude associated in Latin American sexual politics of aggressive and receptive sexual exchanges (Foster: 1994, Manzor-Coats 1994: xv-xxxvi and Klein 1998: 27-32).

JUDY: Depressed? Sure I get depressed. But it's a job, honey. What can I do? Nobody chooses to be born in the middle of a mess like this one. (20)

While she may not have chosen to be born during particularly difficult economic times, how she views what she does with her body IS her own construction. A "mess like this one" evidently refers to Cuba's current economic situation, the 1990's "special" period of adjustment after the disintegration of the Soviet block as Cuba's primary trade partner. The exchange of sex for U.S. dollars is presented as an economic necessity of the times, stripped of moral judgments. Her identity construction as a transvestite is framed just as matter-of-factly.

In *Stuff!* the truly erotic is coded within the aesthetic of same-sex relations among women and it is enacted by Bustamante while she sits at a dining room table and picks her teeth with gusto, suggesting an after dinner discussion. An overtly pro-woman voice-over about the taste of women 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. (21)

The overt sexual-genital reference refers not only to the allusion of "forbidden fruit," but the description functions matter-of-factly, in lieu of a culinary description one might read in a tourist restaurant guide. The conjugation of sex, women and food described with gusto, brings the audience to the "obvious" and even "logical" conclusion: women's genitalia makes for a more delectable taste experience. The male body, its relative delicacy in the market-place of desire, is relegated to a secondary status. There is no male desire expressed in *Stuff!*; the only male presence is encased (contained?) within the TV/video monitor: the virtual image of the post-industrial marketer, the flat image whose function is to sell a product, who sells pleasure of the virtual, antiseptic variety.

Migdalia Cruz's play, *Fur*, on the other hand, also raises questions about the nature of desire within the tropes of a dramatic structure. Citrona, Nena, and Michael make up a trilogy of displaced desire where what is questioned is the heterosexual as the standard or norm. Citrona is a "hirsute woman who has been sexually mutilated by her mother and sold [to Michael] like a dog" (questionnaire response by the author). Michael's desire is provoked by the anomaly, by "her otherness, her exoticness, her Latina-ness" (questionnaire) of a 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" (27). The male fixation upon the different can be read as a move towards the exotic, which in this case is tied to the freakish, reminiscent of Coco Fusco's research⁷ of the European colonial power's spectacles by introducing the colonized as "freaks." The first documented example, according to Fusco, was in 1493 when Columbus brought an Arawak to Spain from the Caribbean, who was "left on display for two years in the Spanish Court until he died of sadness" (Fusco 1995: 41). *Fur* identifies power with the masculine (as coded in gender) and with the masculine power to purchase and cage (as coded in economic terms). Benevolent though this junction may want to initially pose itself (Michael buys the biggest cage possible as "proof" of his love for Citrona), the unfolding of the dramatic action takes care of *naming* and *disarming* this double edged power play. 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's role is limited to that 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. Thus the notion of what women "do," what we contemplate beyond the gaze of men's desire, is deconstructed and reconstructed in self-referential, homoerotic terms: Citrona wants Nena.

Nena, on the other hand, wants Michael. Her desire, however, is self-generated, since Michael does not respond to her sexually. Therefore Nena's self-construction of her desire is seen in the play in a masturbatory monologue where she fondles herself as she speaks about the object of her desire. Therefore, while her preference is heterosexual, the play seems to suggest that even in this move the female desiring subject can do without the physical presence of a man to satisfy her. Prioritizing the female desiring subject, SHE takes precedence over HIM.

Interestingly, as in *Stuff!*, the heterosexual male desire is never experienced in *Fur*. Michael's realm is that of unfulfilled longing: he speaks of love, describes it, circumvents it, but it is never represented on stage, nor are there any textual hints which might inspire the reader of the play text to infer Michael's erotic nature, *in itself*. In terms of gender relations, *Fur* posits female desire as primary, palpable and complex (in Citrona the beast is both desiring and desirable, she is both beauty and ugliness); Nena's desire, while it is not fulfilled, is represented as self-generated and physical. On the other hand, Michael's desire is simply discursive, words stripped of a deeply-felt eroticism. Eroticism, then, is constructed within the realm of the homoerotic between the women and not within the societal "standard" of heterosexuality.

The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea by Chicana lesbian playwright Cherrie Moraga constructs a complex set of sexual and political relations among the predominantly lesbian cast of characters. Moraga sets *The Hungry Woman* in a post-apocalyptic, "blade runner-esque" 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 "balcanized" the United States. Medea, her lover Luna, and 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 (4).

This liminal space outside of both white and Chicano “straight” culture is where lesbians (there is no reference to gay men) are allowed to reside. This trans-cultural space is the topography of non-heterosexual desire, set within three generations of Mexicana/Chicana women: Medea’s elderly mother, Medea (middle aged) and Luna (younger). It is also a stigmatized place where neither psychological nor physical mobility from one space to the other is possible. 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. Within this complexity, one’s age and how late in life one arrives at one’s lesbianism creates a point of contention between the older Medea and her younger lover, Luna. In “Working around the L-word,” Yvonne Rainer, an Anglo artist who came to her lesbianism later in life, discusses this aspect of lesbian identity internal politics:

I was amazed to learn that some lesbian quarters would, like my family members but for different reasons, be reluctant to accord me **lesbian** status. You may be sleeping with a woman, but you are not a lesbian. Hey! What is this? A club or something? I eat pussy just like you do. Just ’cause you’ve been doing it longer does that make you more of a lezzy than me? Well, evidently . . . a woman doesn’t necessarily become a lesbian by changing the gender of her sleeping companion. In those quarters you have to earn your stripes, have been on the barricades, taken shit, and certainly you must have foresworn men as sexual partners. (Rainer 14)

This attitude is echoed by Medea’s ex-husband:

JASON: You’re not a lesbian, Medea, for chrissake. This is a masquerade.

MEDEA: A seven-year-old one?

JASON: . . . you are not a Luna.

MEDEA: (*sadly*) No, I’m not. (51-52)

Medea’s response acknowledges that she is not like Luna, a lesbian younger woman who has never had sex with men, who is a stone mason and clay sculptor – someone who has and is capable of constructing her own identity entirely outside of the male hegemony. Medea, in her mid-forties, had a life of privilege as a heterosexual woman and mother, something she “lost” upon transgressing the Chicano social order of Aztlán.

In another 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” (60). A concept Medea

rejects by “kiss[ing] her . . . first on the mouth, then grabs LUNA by the hips, and goes down on her” (60). This erotic scene is quickly interrupted by the entrance of the Border Guard who demands that Luna confess to being a lesbian. This complex scene moves from the evident longing for a self-centered identity, Luna’s desire of herself/ for herself as seen through Medea’s mirror, to a mutual woman-centered desire focused on each other (through each other?) to the disruption of this desire by the phallic male figure of the Law, the border patrol agent. The economy of desire here moves from the deeply intimate (Luna is contemplating her own genitalia), to the reflection of that desire through Medea, to its disruption by the symbolic phallic Law (the Border Guard).

The bad dreams begin for Medea with the impending threat of losing her son. Moraga’s Medea comes to her lesbianism after having had a child with her Chicano former husband. Trespassing the symbolic, also phallic Law of Aztlán, Medea is exiled for loving Luna and rejecting her heterosexuality. Years later, the father returns to claim their son, Chac-Mool, who is approaching the age of initiation into maleness. Medea, in her longing not to lose her son, crosses the border to Aztlán and attempts to seduce the ex-husband, who is about to marry a younger woman. Prioritizing her son over her female lover places Medea on the edge of madness; the play predominately takes place in the insane asylum/ prison/ border area, where she is being held for the poisoning of her son. Rather than losing him to the symbolic patriarchal Father, she takes back the life she gave him and, in a sense, kills at least two parts of herself: the mother and the lesbian. The play seems to suggest, however, that her Mexicana/Chicana self is indelible and therefore not subject to erasures. *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* suggests the problematic junction of the lesbian motherhood of a male son, lesbian desire, and cultural exile. It creates an overwhelming sense of the inescapability of the symbolic order of the Father within Chicano culture.

And, lastly, I would like to consider Caridad Svich’s full-length play *Alchemy of Desire, Dead-Man’s Blues*, which posits a different vision from that analyzed thus far. It is a further illustration of the diversity within current Latino dramatic arts. *Alchemy* has no reference to anything Latino/a; it is not overtly political. It is not representational, but as Svich herself says, “it is presentational” (Interview 1998). The author considers herself a “true” hybrid culturally as well as aesthetically. She likes to push notions of creative identity beyond gender and culturally-bound codes, and appeals to a sense of beauty and creativity as justifiable in themselves. Her work is often elusive, poetic

and musical.⁸ She writes the accompanying scores. The play was originally conceived for radio; its strong sense of rhythm and musicality punctuate the women's speeches, whose function is analogous to that of a Greek chorea.

Alchemy of Desire starts with Simone lamenting the death of her husband Jamie in a war in "some little country somewhere [she] couldn't even find on a map" (2). Again, the male is constructed as missing (here he is literally "missing in action"). They had been married less than a month. The setting is a non-specific, Southern U.S. town, reminiscent of Louisiana's Bayou. The characters speak with a Southern accent, and, although it is full-length, the play is deceptively simple: it revolves around Simone's desire which plays itself out in the liminal emotional space where sorrow meets longing. As a counterpart, Jamie, now dead, is glimpsed in the play as a lost soul, wondering about looking for the limbs that were severed from his body in the war. In a ritualistic rite of passage, four women neighbors function as the chorus and help Simone exorcise the house and herself.

The women in *Alchemy* show their desire in a physical way just as much as 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 the alchemists, the knowers of rituals and of the invisible. Food does not feed these characters: ritual, music, fire and water do. Svich works on the lyrical qualities of the words, sonoric and beautiful, much as a lyricist does,:

SIMONE: I am gonna find the breath.
 I'm gonna trespass
 on the night.
 Gonna swallow the stars
 until I find you.
 Cause I am comin to you – yeh –
 don't know where I'll find you
 but I can feel you
 in my skin – oh – like tinder. (36)

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 . . . my 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 "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, caress, brush against . . . extend myself to make the commentary to which I submit. . . (Barthes 73).

Desire, as a quality of spirit projected onto the flesh through language, is transformed into an act of possession of self and an internalization of the other. Desire, loss and longing push Simone past her own pain towards the freedom she may have not known before, the option to carve herself a pair of shoes, a path, towards herself. Beyond marriage and its promise of fulfillment, the ritual accomplishes its goal – to lead her back into the well from which all desire springs: the depth of her own being.

All of the plays here discussed have all been produced throughout the United States and some abroad. According to playwright Caridad Svich: these young dramatists have discovered new ways of shaping text, addressing the audience, working with language, and of exploring and decoding the encoded taboos of Latina/o culture. Feminist, proto-feminist, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgressive, pagan, spiritual, and reinvented Americans, these dramatists have slowly taken their work beyond the expected and established tropes made available to them by “official” culture and in so doing have moved out of the fringe and into the virtual center of contemporary American performance. (Svich, “Out of the Fringe: In Defense of Beauty, unpublished essay)

In the 1990s a significant number of Latina and Latino playwrights and performers have chosen the arena of sexual/cultural identity as a (momentary) expression of their creativity. Transgression, as Coco Fusco has written, is not only the act of crossing, it is the what and the how, the historical specificity of a particular crossing that embeds it with particular significance (1997). In the past two decades a significant amount of ground has been gained by Latina and Latino performers and playwrights: a ground they have fought for in the political and cultural arts arenas. I see the works here discussed as energetically moving beyond what Homi Bhabha describes as the colonizing constructs of a stereotypical identity, whose excess is never objectively verifiable, but which paradoxically generates an ambiguity that emerges between the fixed image and its repetition (1994). Rather, these texts offer an interruption of the stereotype, they disrupt implicit sexual and cultural identities to re-form as fluidly as their art: temporary yet aspiring towards longevity, intense and passionate. Urgent. Visible. Out of the closet.⁹

Notes

1. *Out of the Fringe, Contemporary Latina/o Theater and Performance* is the title of a forthcoming anthology co-edited by Los Angeles playwright Caridad Svich and María Teresa Marrero.

2. For a documented example of market place production politics, see Marrero's "Chicano/Latino Self-Representation in Theater and Performance Art," particularly the case of Eddie Sanchez's "Trafficking in Broken Hearts" second stage reading during South Coast Repertory Hispanics Playwrights Project (1990).

3. *Marimacha* is a vulgar expression used to describe "butch" in Spanish.

4. By "idealized notion of ethnic identity" I am referring to some of the more outstanding markers of identity within Chicano theatre and cultural histories, such as the construct of the geographically indeterminant "Aztlán." Rather, Alfaro situates his "scene of origin" within the concrete, geophysical location of his Los Angeles barrio.

5. For an excellent, concise analysis of Chicano nationalism and subversive performance strategies by various performance artists see Prieto-Stambaugh, "Performance art transfronterizo: hacia la desconstrucción de las identidades."

6. *Jineterismo* comes from the word *jinetera/o*, a jockey, one who mounts; it is used to describe men and women who offer their services, sexual or otherwise, to dollar-spending European, Canadian and Mexican tourists in what is commonly known as the phenomenon of Cuban sex tourism in the post Soviet 1990s.

7. The research on freak shows as a demonstration of colonial power is part of Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance "Couple in the Cage," in which they exhibited themselves in a parodic (yet often misunderstood) move as "authentic" undiscovered Indians in a cage throughout museums and universities world-wide. For Fusco's comments of this experience see "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" in *English is Broken Here*.

8. For a look at a lesser known, but most interesting play of Svich's see Marrero "Historical and Literary Santería: Unveiling Gender and Identity in U.S. Cuban Literature" in *Tropicalizations*.

9. A version of this paper was presented April 23-24, 1998 at the State of U.S. Latino Theater and Other Hispanic Voices of the Diaspora, at the University of Minnesota. Thanks go to Dr. Luis A. Ramos-García and the Department of Spanish, who organized and sponsored the by-invitation event.

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