(un)Learning Curves: Stripping the Myth of the "Real" Woman

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In the computer laboratory, a collection of Latina students voluntarily summons digital avatars to communicate their online presence for a course in Latina drama. "I'm not Latina enough, so I'm going to choose an image of Frida Kahlo to represent *me* in this class. Okay?" Just like that, a Latina college student can erase/copy/paste/replace her body with what was not Kahlo, actually, but actress Salma Hayek *as* Kahlo—a doubly imagined icon emphasizing curves and darker, hirsute skin. It took only a few clicks, thanks to the illusion-producing anonymity associated with formulating digital identities. This was my first time teaching Latina drama as a *hybrid* course—that is, a blended mode in which class meetings alternate between online and face-to-face sessions—and the class was already pointing to a perpetual vacillation between real and imagined territories. This unintended exercise, this deliberate choice that some students made to supplement what they perceived as a lack of *latinidad* via carefully selected stand-ins—a portrait of a beflowered Sandra Cisneros, or even, in one case, a red-carpet shot of Sofia Vergara, who had no explicit relationship with the course content—evinced the cultural starting point from which we must emerge on our exploration of Latinas in performance. After all, if Latinas reference a common cultural consciousness to gauge, deny, validate, reimagine, or re-perform their own bodies in "real" life, why wouldn't that practice migrate into the digital real(m)?

On another college campus, posters for the student club Nosotras featured tropicalized images of female bodies characterized by excess: "red-colored lips, bright seductive clothing, curvaceous hips and breasts, long brunette hair, and extravagant jewelry" (de Hinojosa). A Latina student journalist questioned why pan-Latina groups would project such images while also offering her honest answer: "Though these images upset many Latinas because they tell us

how we are supposed to look, we also find an odd sense of comfort in images […] because these attributes are what western society tells Latina women 'makes' us women of color […] these qualities are what make Latinas *visible*" (de Hinojosa). Can we trace this curious learning curve and locate exactly when it became part of the college curriculum for Latinas to embrace the idea that curves and other physical excess ensure that their cultural identity gets acknowledged? What is behind the curves that we have learned "real women" are supposed to have? Who really possesses these "curves"? The viewer or the viewed? What lurks behind this practice of (mis)locating what constitutes a "real" Latina?

Ethnographer Lucila Vargas observes that such stereotypical images creep into young women's subjectivity and form huge obstacles (171). We must remove the roadblocks for college-age Latinas who consume formulas fed through mainstream media and use them to interpret Latina bodies in both theatrical performances and everyday life. Indeed, a distinct challenge in teaching playscripts that exploit, perpetuate, or interrogate representations of the Latina body is that students often accept a pseudo-progressive notion that it is compulsory for Latina bodies to have curves that color outside the lines of conventional norms. Among other signifiers, the shape and quantity of flesh is represented as making one appear "more" or "less" Latina; it is "the body, particularly the curves" by which "Latinas are constituted as racialized subjects" (Negrón-Muntaner 232). Curves are requisite in a set of characteristics attributed to the "Latin Woman," a culturally imagined identity whose power, according to Myra Mendible, will only be stripped away through "the collective efforts of Latino/a scholars, independent filmmakers, feminist writers, activists, and embodied others" (16). And so it is part of our mission, as educators, to unmask the false liberation of a repressed, underrepresented body simultaneously characterized as hyper-present excess. Feeding the curvaceous Latina myth promotes the designation of an intermediate body that becomes easily marked between two binaries; the Latina body becomes situated and simplified, (mis)perceived as not black or white but brown, not fat or thin but CURVY.

Our reconsideration of curves involves an obligatory focus on what fuels the figure of excess: FOOD. Esther Álvarez López argues that a shared focus on food, cooking, and the body in Latina plays spotlights "the corpo/reality of Latina women, a metaphor for the em*bodi*ment of difference, femaleness and Latinidad" ("Food" 215). On stage and in life, the stereotypical idea of the Latina body stands in stark contrast to the U.S. mainstream,

magazine-model-thin "ideal." Dramatizing characters in relationship to these extremes can leave us vacillating between an endless *panzona* vs. *flaquita* binary with no continuum in between. Josefina López's *Real Women Have Curves*, Virginia Grise and Irma Mayorga's *The Panza Monologues*, Diane Rodríguez's *The Path to Divadom, or How to Make Fat-free Tamales in G Minor,* Elaine Romero's *The Fat-Free Latina and the Snow Cap Queen*, and *Transplantations* and *Fuchsia* by Janis Astor del Valle all serve as examples of how food figures into the development of character, plot, and, ultimately, the un/popular reception of the Latina as Other.

Packaging curves as "real"—as accomplished by López's title-cum-popular anthem—interprets excess as visibility, costuming the female in easily marked, consumable flesh. This way of marking the female cultural Other ensures that she is recognizable and at the same time deceives her into feeling recognized, acknowledged, and validated. But at what price? López's *Real Women Have Curves* is celebrated with critical declarations like the one from the *Ann Arbor Current* that proclaims that "[t]his ambitious play thumbs up its nose at societal presumptions that women are supposed to be tall, model-esque, and painfully nipped at the waist" (qtd. in Telgen). Such statements position the "reality" of curves as the alternative to the emaciated, unhealthy *flaca*. Romero's and Rodríguez's plays perpetuate the idea that a healthy, thin Latina is impossible: Thin just means anorexic or otherwise sick or crazy. In *The Panza Monologues*, thin Latinas are briefly referenced as cultural anomalies. One *flaca* is given a voice, though originally through the body of a solo-performing *panzon*a, in a monologue defined by the requisite excess that she lacks. She admits, "It's true, I don't have a panza," and then goes on to attempt to justify that lack (81).

There is a deceptive relationship between visibility and power. Considering visibility a primary condition for commodification, what appears to be a cultural exchange turns one way, reflecting the gaze back upon us. Young women fall in the trap of performing themselves how they are seen. In trying to render ourselves valuable enough to gain currency, to be visible/recognized/validated/present and American, we self-define through the restrictive view of the consumer. Learned impulses to become visible and to classify the Other introduce strong anxieties of leaving the Latina body unmarked. Thinner, less curvaceous Latina bodies tend to be denounced, disregarded or "disembodied." There is potential power in this, however. Consider Alicia Arrizón's claim that "Chicana performativity must be located in the realm of negotiations which transforms invisibility into

presence […] [and] this transformation must begin with the female body" (74). Her sentiments ignore the possibility of power offered by invisibility. Following the Lacanian notion that everything associated with the matter of visibility is a trap, Peggy Phelan has noted that the real power lies in remaining "unmarked" (96). By failing to perform as expected, the Other resists reductive categorization. Visible "presence" promises false liberation from mainstream confines, producing a simplified, stigmatized, commodified, and fetishized female frame.

If Latinas don't consume "real food"—food linked to both cultural identity and to the excess that ensures visibility—they compromise their status as "real women." For second- and third-generation Latina students, food can function as a surrogate for an unknown homeland. For immigrant or international students, a nostalgic hunger for the home country might be sated through cuisine. Conversely, we might resist/compromise identity by avoiding or refusing foods associated with home. It is easy to buy into the idea that identity can be cultivated through cuisine: You are what you eat. In searching to recover roots, however, it is rare to reach for root vegetables, native fruits, and other plants. In dramatic representations, Latinas lust for tacos and tamales. The "fat-free" in both Rodríguez's and Romero's titles emphasize something missing, as vegetarianism and thinness are associated with what is not there; a smaller body isn't substantive. Substitutes underscore the selling-out associated with assimilation; identity is falsified through synthetic stand-ins. In *Fat-Free Latina*, Romero's Silvia vacillates from anorexia to binge eating while Amy's diet of processed, fat-free substitutes for meat and dairy—not "real" food like grease and lard—supplement her large lettuce intake. The alternative to excess fat is represented as sickness, from anorexia to cursed and poisoned customers.

In *The Path to Divadom, or How to Make Fat-Free Tamales in G Minor*, Chicana protagonist Rachel demonstrates the dangers associated with consuming fat-free substitutes: "Ay […] look what I found for me and the kids […] fat-free cookies, fat-free cakes, fat-free cokes, fat-free chips, fat-free cheese. Fat-free cookies, cakes, cokes, chips, cheese. Fat-free. And I'm just getting fatter" (98). One male student performed this monologue costumed in a *bata de casa*, under which he slid discarded packaging from popular products sold in the US. As the monologue progressed, the character's figure became more distorted and enormous: "Can't you see I'm getting fatter by the minute. I have to do something" (99). By consuming endless processed substitutes, her original curves have become lost in the fat of excess associated with the Standard

American Diet. Her Aunt Liz offers her a high-fat tortilla guaranteed to make her feel her Latino roots: "[I]t will not kill you, but make you feel whole […] mija, mija. Eat. Taste our hands, our love, our history and that which comes from the earth, from the pig. Feel it in your thighs, tus piernas, your nalgas, your tetas. Let our history live" (101). Ingesting a fat-filled tamal, Rachel proclaims: "I'm a sexy, bossy, nalgona, mandona, big ole hips and thunder thighs…" (101). A direct address punctuates this already presentational monologue, as she implores the audience: "Women, why do we shrink ourselves, make ourselves small [when] we are the keepers of tradition. La cultura. La Culture is an ever-growing big ole woman" (101-2). While curious comparisons and combinations of both Mexican and US dietary excesses are suggested here in the body of this cross-cultural character, the conflict quickly resolves in a vivid promotion and consumption of the myth of compulsory curves. The stereotypical Chicana body that Rachel represents is potently defamiliarized in the case of the male student performer, exposing curves as a kind of drag. That student, who insisted on selecting *Divadom* because he felt that the indicated size of the character was something that he could convincingly portray, joined female students in hamming up *Divadom*'s comically dramatic declarations, content to celebrate "growing" over "shrinking," associating hypervisibility with increased cultural currency and power.

The emblematic curvy solo Latina performers in *Panza* and *Divadom* multiply in *Real Women Have Curves* into an ensemble of five female characters who are described as "a bit plump," "plump and pretty," "plump and plain-looking," "large," and "huge" (7). Smaller bodies are not only in the minority here—they are NOT REAL. The only characters flaunting a size 7 or smaller figure are the mannequins in the dress factory. The idea of a living size-7 Latina is presented only as problematic, embodied by the anorexic virgin Rosalí, who starves herself to the point where she thinks she might be considered desirable. Rosalí defends herself to her curvy counterparts, asking, "What's wrong with wanting to be thin and sexy?" to which the factory's proprietor, Estela, responds, "Because I want to be taken seriously, to be considered a person" (59). Following suit, Rosalí's young sister Ana repeatedly indicates her own feminist choice to value her mind over her body, as if a choice must be made between the two. Ana concentrates on creative development—writing and a college education—while letting the body go. Though she scoffs at her mother's orders that she must not consume excess food until she has been safely consumed (by a husband), Ana also admits that "I do want to lose weight. But part of me doesn't because my weight says to

everyone 'Fuck you! […] How dare you try to define me and tell me what I have to be and look like!' So I keep it on" (58). Ana's intellectual pursuits are so fervid that Teresa Marrero reads the young protagonist as "humorless," while at the same time concluding that at least "her body is her own" (65-66). Ana's body, however, by her own admission is not her own; instead she has transformed it into a tool for subverting popular perception. Her body has become a reductive response to cultural consumption. Students are often quick, however, to interpret Ana's defiant refusal to lose weight (even though Ana admits that she wants to) as a positive feminist message delivered by a relatable, college-age peer.

Another college-age Latina, Amy, must also defend her body against her mother's admonitions in the comedic *Fat-Free Latina and the Snow Cap Queen*. When she changes her major from Chicano history to nutrition and dietetics, she also exchanges her *mami*'s traditional Mexican cooking for a vegetarian diet, effectively replacing her biological *amá* (Mexican mother) with a new AMA (the American Medical Association). Amy's *mami*—proprietor of the popular Mexican Café Lindo—is a character who communicates a sense of the "everywoman" and "true Mexican mother" (Álvarez López, "Culinary" 41). Diagnosing her daughter's thin waist as a symptom of illness, Amá proposes a solution of *pozole* and *albóndigas*, followed by three offers for lunch, as well as snacks, topped with provocations of guilt ("[W]hat, you don't like my manteca?") and accusations ("[A]ll you eat is lettuce"), garnished with dismay and shock that her daughter has not eaten a tortilla in a year (95). Two different Latina students identified so strongly with the mother-daughter conflicts represented in both *Real Women Have Curves* and *Fat-Free Latina and the Snow Cap* Queen that they involved their own mothers in their project of analyzing and performing online projects for the hybrid Latina drama class. Safely veiled behind representative voices, students used the characters' words to articulate in ways they dared not otherwise—especially Ana's strong use of profanity—, boldly confronting how they believed their bodies were perceived in their own households.

While Amy's dietary plight in *Fat-Free Latina* is nearly an inversion of Ana's in *Curves*, both investigate impressions of what is "real" by associating "real" curves with "real" food and "real" cultural origin. Amy's ancestral mother, the titular Snow Cap Queen (materializing from the mountain range featured on the iconic tub of Morrell Snow Cap Lard), declares that "those little fat cells pulsating through our veins […] that is our history. That is our destino […] that is the real dieta de la raza" (113). Though warned by the

queen to avoid lettuce, for the lard gives food "real" flavor by ensuring its authenticity, Amy dares to revise the family restaurant's *recetas* by replacing full-fat *queso*, cream, and eggs with fat-free varieties and egg substitute. In defense of *la cultura* and *la raza*, the queen institutes a curse that makes all the customers who eat low-fat food sick. Throughout the play, Amy´s younger sister, Silvia, embodies two corporeal extremes; she first suffers from anorexia in Act I and then binge-eating in Act II. While *Fat-Free Latina*'s comedic conflict is resolved by the family's decision to offer customers both traditional and fat-free tamales, there appears to be no viable in-between; an exaggerated contrast is sustained between *gorda* and *flaca*, lard and lettuce.

While polarized either/or identities serve to heighten comedy or accentuate dramatic confrontation, dramatizing a moderate spectrum of possibilities may be crucial for students who feel subject to extremes themselves. In this single class section, there was one student claiming candidacy for gastric bypass surgery and another who was actively "waist training" (cinching a flexible, corset-like belt around the torso for hours at a time). Most arrived with the belief that the phrase "real women have curves" transmitted a positive, feminist message that liberated Latinas. In terms of their own individual power to define food and food choices, several students insisted they felt culturally bound to the way that their families ate, resisting ethical or nutritional convictions (i.e. vegetarianism) that might counter the family diet.

Efforts to disrupt binaries, complicate curves, and strip the "real" myth for impressionable, college-age students in the Latina drama class proved fruitful through the work of under-celebrated playwright/performer Janis Astor del Valle. Confronting common conceptions that she has been "miscast in [her own] autobiography" (*Transplantations* 31), del Valle describes the fatigue brought about by the constant need to satisfy popular perceptions of her (apparent lack of) *latinidad*:

> I'm so tired…I'm so tired…I am so tired…
> of having
> To defend
> My light skin
> My Anglo-looking face
> My New England education
> My accent-less accent
> My Spanglish-laden Spanish
> My long straight hair
> And my flat, flat ass. (*Transplantations* 14)

Given the absence of commonly recognizable cultural cues, del Valle's multiple, unmarkable "other-ness-es" confuses/refuses embodiment and consumption. The playwright/performer simultaneously asserts and questions: "I am a Puerto Rican Lesbian, I think" (14).

Students reacting to del Valle's work either feel liberated by their own "failure" to embody easily read, "mythunderstood" stereotypes, or they, too, become frustrated by a lack of recognizable signifiers. Both reactions serve as productive conversational starting points for stripping the curvy myth. Without the compulsory curves, color, and heteronormativity to satisfy the sexualized Latina ideal, food remains the only serviceable "leftover" for signifying del Valle's identity. Learning to make *pernil* and *coquito* was cultural currency, as it made the *teatrista*'s "invisible" identity tangible and, literally, consumable by others: "It meant that I was really Puerto Rican" (del Valle interview). And so her characters cook and eat *puertorriqueñidad*. If it might be reasoned that Puerto Ricans prepare and pork out on *pernil*, such a practice might appear/serve to authenticate *puertorriqueñidad*. And so it is that in del Valle's plays, dinner tables, and kitchen counters offer symbolic sites for negotiation of lesbian *latinidad* within homes and homelands, with food behaving as a traditional marker of cultural identity and familial harmony.

This nostalgic approach to consuming and performing culture requires crucial props, or what Sara Komarnisky calls "travelling foods" in the practice of "eating transnationally" (51). Meals connect people across space. Such travel begins as the curtain rises in del Valle's *Fuchsia*; the protagonist, Nina, is preparing her very first *arroz con pollo* and basting a *pernil* in the first of four settings that combine to structure the play around food. Scene One takes place in the kitchen of a studio apartment whose only ingress and egress is through the kitchen. The settings establish a traveling culinary structure; though we may leave the kitchen, the food/identity cultivated there travels with us. *Pernil* provides the transition into the second setting, a van that the characters take for a late-night drive. A latecomer guest who hasn't yet finished his pork carries his portion with him, while Nina covers the remainder of the *pernil* and brings the entire roast along for the ride. The van remains in motion except when it stops at Sucelt coffee shop for *café con leche*, *maduros*, and the garlic bread needed to make sandwiches from the *pernil*. In the context of this cast of her gay friends and family, Nina's homosexuality is a stable, accepted identity, but her *puertorriquenidad* is called into question by her own uncle:

> Dime, did you eat? Tell the truth. You gotta make the time, otherwise you'll end up bulimic like Jane…Fonda. That's right, girlfriend, how else you think she look so good in the videos? After every sit-up, she do a throw-up. Ay, please, if you lose any more of your culo, you ain't gonna have anything left—and you didn't have much to begin with, mi'ja. (*Fuchsia* 206)

The *pernil*—the food that fuels and confirms her Latina identity—is out waiting for her in the van. Nina and friends drive to where Goya beans and Café Bustelo are prominently displayed, an East New York bodega where they search for candy while arguing about paella—a particular paella whose preparation, storage between mangoes and guava, freezing, and eventual expiration and incineration serves as a symbolic chronicle of a neglected relationship between Nina and bodega-owner Chicky. Chicky demands that reparations be made through food, requesting dinner plans with the stipulation that "you gonna cook for me, honey" (216). Throughout *Fuchsia*, the perpetual absence of a dining table—from a studio apartment kitchen counter to the van, hospital room, and bodega—suggests the struggle to dine commensally, with a carefully cultivated, rather than inherited, family of characters who are all gay and all Latino, eating, searching, and sharing identity (35). *La familia's* appetite proves insatiable, but there is hope. The mobile *pernil* proves elusive, but the *idea* of it, the excuse for gathering, remains savory. Community proves to be the real sustenance.

But what happens when "real" food, a "leftover" signifier standing separate from, but as nourishment for the body, also fails to navigate unmarkable *latinidad*? Students continue to wonder: If you don't look, sound, or taste Latina—when it is not recognizably embodied, marked, or otherwise locatable—can you still be Latina? In recent years, del Valle has had to come out to her family a third time: as a *vegetarian*. Her mother was appalled: "*¿Qu*é *qu*é? What are you gonna eat? […] Ay, you can't survive on only vegetables! […] I'm making *carne guisa*. You're not gonna have my *carne guisa*? And what about *pernil*?" (del Valle interview). At her *tío*'s table, her own family challenges, "What kind of Puerto Rican are you? You won't eat *arroz con pollo*?" Del Valle insists that she still cooks her *pernil* for others who desire to sense and make sense of it, *el sabor*, consuming identity, a taste of home. Emphatically, she contends, "I still identify as Puerto Rican, YO!" (interview).

Though at first it may seem disorienting or anxiety-producing, it can be liberating for students to learn that *latinidad*—itself an amorphous,

geographically inadequate term—is not definitively locatable. Improvising off of del Valle's suspicions about the reliability of labels, I lead students through an exercise in which they attempt to summarize playwrights' biographies—and, optionally, their own layered, multiform identities in relationship to major, sports, nationality, etc.—with elaborately compound neologisms of their own invention. For an inspiring example, we reference these playful lyrics from *In the Heights'* "Carnaval del Barrio":

> My mom is Dominican-Cuban
> My dad is from Chile and P.R.,
> Which means:
> I'm Chile-…Dominica-Rican!
> But I always say I'm from Queens! (Miranda and Hudes)

The terminological inadequacies and ultimate absurdity of this classroom exercise serve to suggest that we are all indeed *improvisando*, malleable and migratory, not readily labeled or located.

Casting against prescribed type—whether for casual, in-class readings, scene studies, or formal performance—is an extremely effective way to achieve a powerful distanciation that will help to dismantle the "real." Back in the computer lab, one of the Latina drama hybrid learners—still lurking behind a "real" Latina woman digital icon—found herself in a unique crisis of identity when a full-figured scene partner for Dolores Prida's *Coser y cantar* did not show up to play the "real" rice-and-beans-eating Ella opposite her assimilated, exercise-obsessed, orange-juice-sipping character. With the help of a green screen, software that layers separate video images into the same frame, and a bit of stereotypical costuming, the student swiftly and successfully exploded the binary by performing BOTH roles to more than satisfy her online project for the hybrid class. Prida's intended layering of identities appeared more vivid than it might have during a live dialogue.

Reinforcing the idea that a hyper-visible Latina body promotes tolerance or power perpetuates stereotypes seeking to mark excessive difference. It is crucial to note the odd coupling of comfort and dismay felt by Latina college students when they process and perform a self-image reflected by the posters generated by the college club Nosotras. Branding consumable excess as "real" is a dangerous, irresponsible breed of feminism. It is perhaps more dangerous on our stages—especially our university ones—than it is in our mainstream media, which college age students are often reconditioned to distrust.

The myth of the "real" Latina woman is produced by a collection of gazes for which we must take responsibility. As playwrights, performers, and

professors, we must work harder to shift the learning curve(s) to incorporate a continuum of in/corporeal possibilities. A diverse representation of Latina bodies and *latinidad*, delineating the spectrum of possibilities between extremes, would erase the stereotypically curvy Latina from view—render her unseen—, but surrendering visibility is the only way to liberate the Latina from this restrictive stereotype. We must re-examine what it means to be visible while casting and considering dramatic texts with college-age Latinas who are represented by—and eager to identify with—the roles that they may be offered.

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