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# Chicana Feminist Acts: Re-Staging Chicano/a Theater from the Early Twentieth Century to the Present

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**CHICANA FEMINIST ACTS: RE-STAGING CHICANO/A  
THEATER FROM THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY TO  
THE PRESENT**

**By**

**NATALIE KUBASEK**

B.A., English Language and Literature, Whittier College, 2003  
M.A., English, Simmons College, 2007

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## **DEDICATION**

In loving memory of my grandmother, María Luísa Ramírez Kubasek

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**ABSTRACT**

*Chicana Feminist Acts* intervenes in the patriarchal forces that negate the historical presence and social agency of Chicanas on the stage of U.S. literature by recovering the transformative power of Chicana drama to enact feminist change. I position early playwrights Josephina Niggli, Estela Portillo Trambley and Teatro Chicana, alongside contemporary feminist playwright Cherríe Moraga, as part of the rich and varied history of feminist cultural production in the U.S. that challenges the systematic sexist oppression of Chicanas. My thesis is that Chicana theater stages a series of feminist “acts” that continuously re-stage Chicana subjectivity to resist fixed patriarchal and nationalist paradigms of gender and sexuality. Moreover, I maintain that, since the 1930s, Chicanas have staged feminist acts in theater that challenge dominant and Chicano gender/sex norms by imagining and performing different Chicana identities. The humanistic social scientific approach I take to this project allows the subjects of Chicana feminist theater to create its living history. Chicana theater comes alive through

interviews with Chicana playwrights alongside archival investigations of photographic stills, playbills, and theater reviews. As a result, the trajectory of Chicana theater that I trace proves Mexican and Mexican American women have challenged dominant paradigms of gender and sexuality long before the 1970s' so-called first wave of Chicana feminism. My research shows that theater has always played a transformative role in advancing the social position of Chicanas to enact social change.



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## Introduction

*Chicana Feminist Acts* re-stages the cultural history of Chicano/a theater to intervene in the patriarchal forces that negate the presence and agency of Chicanas on the stages of U.S. culture and history.<sup>1</sup> The project stages Chicana theater as a series of feminist acts that continuously re-script Chicana subjectivity to resist the cultural and historical erasure of Chicana agency by fixed paradigms of class, gender, sexuality and race within both dominant U.S. and Chicano/a cultural production. In *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (1994), Yolanda Broyles-González offers an alternative historiography of Teatro Campesino that counters the traditional “chronological, text-centered and male-centered” narrative of Chicano theater (xii). Instead, her pedagogical approach privileges performativity and production and de-marginalizes the roles of Chicanas in Movement-era Chicano *teatro*. At the end of her introduction, Broyles-González calls her study an “invitation” for further scholarship on

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the dissertation, I use the terms “Chican@,” “Chicano/a” and “Chicano.” When referring to current Chicana and Chicano culture, identity and history, I use Sandra Soto’s term “Chican@” instead of “Chicano/a” to signify both collective and individuated gender identities. Like Soto, I prefer the term because of its departure from “certainty, mastery and wholeness while still announcing a politicized collectivity” (2). I also prefer the term because its use of “@” breaks the male/female binary that “Chicano/a” maintains, thereby troubling the hierarchical significations and power tensions that the split identity category shores up. See Sandra Soto, *Reading Chican@ Like A Queer* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010) pp 2-3. When referring to past forms of Chicana and Chicano, culture, identity and history, I use the term “Chicano/a” to emphasize the historical moment’s strict gender division. Finally, I use the terms “Chicano Movement” and “Chicano nationalism” to emphasize them as male-defined and male-centered cultural and historical constructs.

areas of “Chican@ performance history in need of both critical examination and recognition” (xviii). In April of 2011, nearly twenty years after the publication of Broyles-González’s study, I witnessed a panel of Chicana and Latina playwrights and scholars echo her critical invitation, during a *plática* on Dramatic Writing during the Latino Literary Imaginary Conference at the University of New Mexico. The panel, which included Chicana playwright Denise Chávez and Chicana scholar Alicia Arrizón, insisted on the critical and social import of theater as a means of asserting Chicana cultural and historical agency, but they agreed that a decade into the twenty-first century, Chicana and Latina theater remained a marginal field of interest on the scenes of U.S. mainstream theater and literary scholarship. They called for academics and theater professionals to close this gap.

Indeed, my own sense of alienation as one of few Chicanas enrolled in theater programs at both high school and college levels in late-1990s southern California corroborates the peripheral status of Chicana theater in U.S. academic institutions where a steadfast tradition of Anglo male theater prevails. During a span of five years, these theater programs did not stage one play written by a non-white or woman playwright. If, as Judith Butler asserts, normative subjects materialize through reiterated and repeated performances of identity sanctioned by institutional powers, forming in their wake “radical erasures, that are strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulation,” then the consistent all-male Anglo repertoire, sanctioned by the U.S. system of education, served only to produce and secure the dominant subject of Anglo masculinity at the same time that it erased and silenced women, and especially women of color, relegating us to secondary roles or completely keeping us off the stage (*Bodies That Matter* 8).

I recall the only time I landed a leading role in a college theater production. There were not enough male actors to fill the cast of an overwhelmingly male ensemble (there were only two female characters in the entire play), so I auditioned for and got the part of a male comedic lead. The experience was both exhilarating and sobering; as I traversed the stage cloaked in a short black wig and a man's suit and tie, I became keenly aware of the freedom and privilege that a male costume and role afforded me. In stark contrast to the minor and often stereotypically "vaguely ethnic" female characters I was often cast in, this male lead moved freely, interacted with almost every character and even took center stage for a moving albeit sentimental monologue. At the same time, my drag performance poked holes in the veil of Anglo masculinity's supposed inherent dominance, exposing gender and race as permeable fibers susceptible to refabricating.

The gender bending performance, in conjunction with Broyles-González's scholarly provocation and the panel on Dramatic Writing's critical concerns, perform their own subversive reiteration across time and on multiple stages, disrupting the cultural and historical erasure of Chicanas in the U.S. by demanding Chicana voice and visibility, thereby exposing U.S. cultural production as a deeply patriarchal and nationalist project. A repeated confrontation of the "the radical erasure" of Chicana agency by Chicana playwrights, performers and scholars unmask identity, culture, and history as performative processes rather than inherently fixed narratives of subjectivity, acting out Butler's claim that the reiterative process of subject formation also leads to its own undoing: "It is also by virtue of this reiteration that gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (10).

Such gaps and fissures in the performativity of identity, culture and history present the possibilities of re-staging identity roles and re-scripting cultural and historical narratives.

By charting a history of Chicana theater as a series of Chicana feminist acts, my project demonstrates how Chicanas intervene in passive and fixed stagings of Chicana identity in dominant male-centered discourses to constantly re-stage Chicana identity as multiple and always in process, and to re-script male-centered narratives of U.S. and Chicano/a culture and history by accounting for the cultural and historical contributions of Chicanas. The term “act” derives from Schechner and Turner’s definition of performance as acts of ongoing intercultural processes.<sup>2</sup> Staged as a series of Chicana feminist acts, the dissertation presents Chicana Theater, not as a fixed system or singular discourse, but as a continually unfolding intercultural performative process that simultaneously works against and on dominating U.S. and Chicano patriarchal ideologies. Furthermore, I employ the term “act” to refer to the plays I investigate as specific performative instances or “stages” of Chicana feminist interventions enacted at particular moments in U.S. culture and history, and to refer to the interventionary actions that the plays perform, or “stage,” to destabilize fixed and passive constructions of Chicana identity within dominant male discourses. Chicana Theater “re-stages” Chicana identity; that is, it repeatedly multiplies, opens up, unfixes and re-signifies Chicana identity, to unsettle patriarchal racialized gender/sex binaries maintained by dominant male-centered discourses. Thus, rather than working toward a finished and absolute staging of identity,

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<sup>2</sup> See Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, eds., *By Means of Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2007).

as a series of Chicana feminist acts, Chicana Theater perpetually rehearses Chicana identity by performing it as a continuous *re-staging*.

*Chicana Feminist Acts* is itself a Chicana feminist intervention in the institutional negation of Chicana cultural production in U.S. academia. My project de-marginalizes the status of Chicana theater within the field of Chicano/a literary studies and Chicana feminist literary scholarship where theater remains an under-explored genre owing to a majority focus on the significance of fiction and poetry as crucial performances of Chicana feminisms.<sup>3</sup> Lack of scholarship on Chicana theater only perpetuates the common assumption among critics that the art form only recently developed, inaugurated by the plays of Cherríe Moraga in the post-Movement era of the 1980s. However, the recovered plays of Mexican-born playwright Josephina Niggli, Movement-era dramatist Estela Portillo-Trambley, and the woman-centered *teatro* group, Teatro Chicana, prove that Chicanas have utilized theater to re-stage Chicana subjectivity as early as the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, existing feminist literary scholarship on Chicana theater tends to privilege textual analysis as its methodological frame, neglecting to consider the element of

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term “Chicana feminisms” to encapsulate multiple feminist perspectives and performances from pre Movement, Movement and Post Movement eras. See Aída Hurtado, *Voicing Chicana Feminisms* (New York, NY: New York UP, 2003) and Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aída Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Najera-Ramírez and Patricia Zavella eds., *Chicana Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> In 1994, The University of New Mexico re-published her acclaimed novel, *Mexican Village* with an introduction by María Herrera-Sobek. In 2007, Elizabeth Coonrod Martínez’s critical biography of Josephina Niggli coincided with the collected publication of her plays edited by William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla. An excerpt from *Mexican Village* appears in the *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* edited by Ilan Stavans and Edna Acosta-Belén (New York: Norton & Co., 2011).

materially embodied performativity and its resistive potential to transform ideological representations of Chicanas. Therefore, this project draws attention to the significance of theater as a performative space for both enacting and physically materializing Chicana feminisms. Instead of relying strictly on textual analysis, *Chicana Feminist Acts* investigates the performative elements of space, movement, design, costume and spectator gaze at work in the plays of Josephina Niggli, Estela Portillo-Trambley, Cherríe Moraga, and Teatro Chicana—a constellation of playwrights and performers who represent Chicana feminist theater on various cultural and historical feminist stages, from the pre-Movement era of the 1930s, the Movement era of the early 1970s, the post-Movement era of the 1980s, to the present day.

The cultural history of Chicana feminist theater mapped out in *Chicana Feminist Acts* also stages a revision of a traditionally male-dominated history of Chicano/a theater that continues to prevail in the field. In *A History of Hispanic Theatre in the United States* (1990), Nicolás Kanellos traces the roots of Chicano/a theater in the U.S. to the mid nineteenth-century when traveling Mexican *teatros*, and then later, local playwrights and theater groups appeared in urban and rural regions across the border states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Kanellos reveals that since the turn of the century, Mexican and Mexican American playwrights and performers continuously staged cultural, political and social tensions between Mexicans and Anglos living in the border states through a variety of theatrical forms ranging from the itinerate *carpa* or tent theater, musical *revistas*, vaudeville, and burlesque variety shows, traditional proscenium melodramas and historical romances. Thus, prior to the Chicano Movement and Renaissance of the late 1960s, Chicano/a theater in its various forms possessed a cultural



and political awareness of the conditions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans living on the border between Mexico and the United States. However, Kanellos's history privileges the contributions of male playwrights and performers, while the efforts of female performers appear secondary to that of men, and female playwrights are completely absent.<sup>5</sup> Kanellos also claims that while *carpa* survived into the thirties and forties, revamped as vaudeville and burlesque, Mexican and Mexican American dramatic theater "died" by 1940 due to the Great Depression and the emerging film industry (70). However, Niggli is absent from Kanellos's history, even though her plays enjoyed productions throughout the 1930s and 1940s in the U.S. Her absence exposes the male-centric narrative of Chicano/a theater history and counters Kanellos's claim that dramatic play-writing among Mexicans and Mexican Americans "died" during this era (70). Niggli's erasure from Chicano/a theater history performs the very patriarchal oppression that her works critiqued. Thus, *Chicana Feminist Acts* contributes to the ongoing recovery of Niggli in order to intervene in the oppressive forces of a dominant patriarchal historical narrative of Chicano/a theater that negates the feminist agency of pre-Movement Chicana playwrights.

Kanellos's oversight is but one indication of the way in which early Mexican-American playwrights, and especially women playwrights, are left out of the script of Chicano/a literary history. By the 1970s, Chicano scholars dismissed early twentieth-century Mexican American women writers, including Niggli, for sentimental and romanticized depictions of Mexico and its people. What is more, Niggli received more

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<sup>5</sup> The only exception is vaudeville comedienne La Chata Noloesca, who formed her own widely popular traveling theater group *Atracciones Noloesca* in Los Angeles in 1930. See Kanellos, pp 93-95.

attention as a novelist than as a playwright. In “The Evolution of Chicano Literature” (1982), Raymund A. Paredes calls Niggli’s novel *Mexican Village* (1945) a “transitional moment” in the development of Chicano fiction (55). He argues that Niggli’s work simultaneously “pointed forward to an emerging school of realism” while “its sensitive rendering of rural life, its emotionalism, and its affectionate portrayal of exotic experiences and personalities...culminated the romantic tradition” of early-twentieth century Mexican-American writing (55). Yet Paredes neglects to consider the playwright’s groundbreaking contributions to Chicano/a theater as the first-known Chicana playwright to conscientiously use theater to write complex female heroines into the U.S. public imaginary.

*Chicana Feminist Acts*’ analysis of Niggli’s first play, *Soldadera* (1936), is indebted to the insights of Tey Diana Rebolledo and Emma Pérez. Rebolledo’s critical excavations of early twentieth-century Mexican-American women writers resists early Chicano scholars’ presumption that pre-Movement Chicana literature lacks a critical voice or subversive potential. Instead, Rebolledo insists that an analysis of pre-Movement Chicana literature “requires acknowledging what the writers were trying to do in their own social context” (4). Moreover, Rebolledo’s scholarship uncovers a wealth of double voiced strategies of survival and resistance against historical erasure through negotiations of Mexican and Anglo oral and literary traditions at work in writings by early Mexican-American women.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, on the stage of history, Emma Pérez’s theory of the decolonial imaginary presents a subaltern historiography that acts as “a rupturing space,

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<sup>6</sup> See Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivera eds., *Infinite Divisions* (Tucson: Arizona UP, 1993) and Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1993).

the alternative to that which is written in history,” through which early Mexicana women intervene in male authorized and male-centered narratives of history (7, 8). Grounded in Rebolledo and Pérez’s analyses, *Chicana Feminist Acts* argues that Niggli’s recovered one-act play, *Soldadera* (1936), intervenes in both U.S. and Mexican male discourses by challenging male-defined passive and primitivist representations of Mexican and Mexican American women.

Chicana playwrights and performers such as dramatist Estela Portillo-Trambley and Teatro Chicana, who challenged the gender politics of Chicano nationalism during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, suffered the same fate as Niggli. Estela Portillo-Trambley’s play *The Day of the Swallows* (1972) receives more critical attention as scholars seek to situate her play within Movement-era Chicana feminist cultural production.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Teatro Chicana published their collective memoirs and scripts in *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays* in 2008, thus documenting, for the first time, the *teatro*’s continual involvement in Chicano/a theater since the Movement era. During the Chicano Movement and Renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Chicano/a theater possessed a distinctly Chicano nationalist consciousness documented in Jorge A. Huerta’s *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms* (1982) and attributed to Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino. Although Huerta’s stated purpose is to demonstrate the diversity of Chicano/a theater, the evolution, themes and forms of Teatro Campesino and Luis Valdez appear to be the definitive paradigm. Formed in 1965 to

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<sup>7</sup> See especially, Cordelia Candelaria, “Engendering Re/Solutions: The (Feminist) Legacy of Estela Portillo Trambley” in *Decolonial Voices* edited by Arturo J. Aldama and Naomi H. Quiñonez (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002) pp 196-208.

educate, politicize, and unionize farmworkers on strike in Delano, California, Teatro Campesino's early *actos* dramatized the oppression of farmworkers, symbolizing the oppression of all Chicano people. Similarly, their later *mitos* dramatized spiritual awakenings of Chicano characters embracing an Aztec and Spanish religious heritage that symbolized the ethnic-religious consciousness of all Chicanos/as. Thus, Teatro Campesino's *actos* and *mitos* symbolically staged the political-cultural ideology of Chicano nationalism during the Chicano Movement.

Although Chicano nationalism seeks to liberate both men and women, the *actos* and *mitos* of Teatro Campesino reveal that the ideology privileges the liberation of men and subsequently subjugates women. Therefore, the *teatro*'s repertoire inadvertently dramatizes sexism within Chicano nationalism and the Movement at large through its male-centered plots that feature men achieving political and cultural liberation while women serve secondary and supportive roles like Mother, Sister, Wife, and Girlfriend, or serve as religious deities facilitating the birth of consciousness within men. However, during the Movement, an emergent wave of Chicana feminism challenged the sexism of Chicano nationalism on various cultural and political stages, including the theatrical stage, as indicated by the recovered plays of Estela Portillo-Trambley and Teatro Chicana, countering Huerta's male-centered history of Chicano/a theater that focuses completely on *actos* and plays written by male playwrights and ignores Chicana playwrights' staged responses to the sexism of Chicano nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Huerta later rectifies the omission of Chicanas from his studies with *Chicano Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) wherein he attends to the works of Chicana playwrights, including Estela Portillo

Huerta's work also reflects another significant methodological gap in studies of Chicano/a theater that *Chicana Feminist Acts* disrupts: he scripts an author-centric history, paying a significant amount of attention to the plays of Luis Valdez and even attributing the development and authorship of the genre of the *acto* to Valdez, with the term "Valdezian *acto*" (17). Huerta briefly mentions Portillo-Trambley's *The Day of the Swallows* (1972) when he states that to date, she is "one of few Chicana playwrights" to be published, while arguing that her play is the only one to feature a Chicana as the central character (208). However, his study pays no mention of the play's overtly feminist critique or its staging of Chicana lesbian desire. Since Huerta, the publication of Teatro Chicana's collective works and memoirs indicate that during the Movement, Chicanas actively wrote and performed plays that not only centralized Chicana characters, but that challenged Chicano nationalism and Chicano/a culture's gendered hierarchy. The works of Estela Portillo-Trambley and Teatro Chicana are thus feminist acts that intervene in Chicano nationalism's privileged male-authored cultural production during the Movement era by re-scripting active cultural and political roles for Chicanas and confronting Chicano/a culture's repression of Chicana desire.

*Chicana Feminist Acts* positions Niggli, Portillo-Trambley and Teatro Chicana, alongside contemporary Chicana feminist playwright Cherríe Moraga, as part of the rich and varied history of feminist cultural production in the U.S. that challenges the systematic sexist oppression of Chicanas. More specifically, it argues for the place of these playwrights within the history of Chicana feminisms because their respective works

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Trambley and Cherríe Moraga, however, the study extends *Chicano Theater's* acute focus on the plays of Luis Valdez.

enact negotiations of dominant norms of gender and sexuality as they intersect with race and class in an effort to continually dislodge Chicana subjectivity from fixed and binary discursive paradigms. The inclusion of Niggli in *Chicana Feminist Acts*' cultural history of Chicana feminist theater revises a prevailing narrative of Chicana feminism by demonstrating that Chicanas performed feminist acts predating the emergence of a so called "first wave" of Chicana feminism during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Distinct from the Anglo Women's Liberation Movement, "first wave" Chicana feminism overtly addressed Chicana positionality within the intersecting contexts of dominant U.S. and Chicano/a culture. Alma M. García explains that Movement-era Chicana feminists "produced an ideological critique of the Chicano cultural nationalist movement that struggled against social injustice yet maintained patriarchal structures of domination," and they voiced the psychological and social conflicts that Chicanas experienced while negotiating these patriarchal structures (García 1). The works of Estela Portillo-Trambley and Teatro Chicana stage Movement-era Chicana feminism's challenge to ideological conflicts between the traditionally domestic and passive roles of women within Chicano/a culture and the expectation for women to seek independence "outside the home" fostered by the U.S. "Anglo tradition of industrial and political democracy" (Rincón 26). Thus their works undo this binary representation of Chicana identity by re-staging Chicanas as political and cultural actors who simultaneously achieve independence and labor to enact change in their communities.

While Movement-era Chicana feminisms challenged patriarchal gender hierarchies within both dominant U.S. and Chicano/a cultures, it reiterated the compulsory heterosexism of Chicano nationalism. As a result, the 1980s saw the

emergence of post-Movement Chicana feminists who leveraged a critique against the repression of Chicana sexuality and the marginalization of Chicana lesbians within Chicano/a culture.<sup>9</sup> Cherríe Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost* (1984) re-stages Chicana identity as a desiring lesbian subject, countering heterosexual and homophobic constructions of Chicanas in dominant U.S. and Chicano/a cultural production. Through a non-linear narrative structure and a split-subject protagonist, *Giving up the Ghost* unravels a patriarchal gender/sex binary, exposing its undergirding colonial and patriarchal mechanisms of power and destabilizing normative performances of gender and sexuality sanctioned by these very mechanisms. The play's experimental re-staging of Chicana identity reflects Post-Movement era Chicana feminisms' expansion of Chicana subjectivity to reflect Chicanas' constant negotiations of class, gender, race and sex. Gloria Anzaldúa's influential theory of new *mestiza* consciousness expresses the cultural and social alienation of queer Chican@s that simultaneously serves as a vehicle for addressing the cultural and social alienation of all Chican@s living in the U.S southwest. She destabilizes Chicana identity by locating *mestiza* subjectivity within the borderlands of Anglo, Mexican and indigenous cultures that the new *mestiza* subject both shifts between and encompasses. As a result, new *mestiza* consciousness "keeps breaking down the unitary aspect" of cultural paradigms and heals "the split" caused by paradigmatic thinking (101). In response to Portillo-Trambley's staging of conflicted Chicana desire in *The Day of the Swallows*, *Giving up the Ghost* consciously performs both the "split"

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<sup>9</sup> See Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South end Press, 1983); Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo and Cherríe Moraga eds., *The Sexuality of Latinas* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1989) and Carla Trujillo, *Chicana Lesbians* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1991).

within Chicanas caused by the colonial repression of Chicana sexuality and also performs a proliferation of Chicana genders and sexualities in an effort to heal the psychological and physical violence caused by a split subjectivity. In addition, Teatro Chicana's constant transformation since the Chicano Movement to address changing social and cultural roles amidst a flux of social circumstances performs a continual re-enactment of Chicana subjectivity that never forecloses its possibilities.

Thus, rather than a singular and fixed discourse, Chicana theater attests to Chicana feminisms as a transformative series of multiple discourses performing a heterogeneous set of resistive strategies on cultural and historical stages throughout the twentieth century yet remains grounded in the lived experiences and material circumstances of Chicanas. Indeed, the diversity of Chicana theater from conventional one-act plays like Niggli's *Soldadera* and Portillo-Trambley's *Swallows*, to Moraga's experimental *Giving up the Ghost*, to Teatro Chicana's community-based *teatro*, proves Chicana theater to be a dynamic series of performative activities and a significant source of Chicana feminist empowerment. The playwrights I examine in *Chicana Feminist Acts* are but a few who play a significant role in the lively and impelling history of Chicana Theater. At the same time that playwrights like Cherríe Moraga, Denise Chávez, Josefina López, Edit Villareal, and Beverly Sanchez-Padilla entered the mainstream, Chicana performance artists like Monica Palacios also participated in the cutting-edge solo performance scene that flourished during the 1980s. In 1978, the W.I.T. (Women in Teatro) caucus formed as an offshoot of T.E.N.A.Z (El Teatro Nacional de Atzlán), the national coalition of Chicano/a *teatro*. The objectives of W.I.T. were "to create professional space for women playwrights and directors, [and] to emphasize strong female roles in order to educate



Chicana/Chicano audiences” (Ramírez 86). W.I.T. drew significant attention to the role of Chicanas within Movement era Chicano/a theater and paved the way for Chicanas to explore diverse theatrical forms. Teatro Chicana actively participated in W.I.T. alongside other Movement-era Chicana *teatro* groups like Las Cucarachas, Valentina Productions, and Teatro Huipil (later Teatro Vision). Unlike Teatro Chicana, who presented *actos*, these other *teatro* groups explored Chicana issues with *teatropoesía*, a theatrical form that Yarbrow-Bejarano describes as “a collage of poetry, prose, music, dance and pantomime” (397). I argue that Moraga’s *Giving up the Ghost* enacts an aesthetics of *teatropoesía* whose blend of artistic forms lends to the play’s re-staging of Chicana identity as a process of disidentification.

*Chicana Feminist Acts* roots its staging of performativity in the theories of feminist and queer theorists of color who situate gender and sex performativity within specific cultural contexts, taking into account the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race and class. José Muñoz argues that “if queer discourse is to supersede the limits of feminism, it must be able to calculate multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender and race as well as sexuality” (22). Muñoz presents an intersectional theory of performativity he calls “disidentification” that conceptualizes minority identity as a performative site of negotiations between dominant discourses of race, class, gender and sexuality where queer and colored subjects are rendered visible, and expose “the ruses and signs of normativity” that disempower minority subjects (21). In addition to thwarting a constructivist/essentialist theoretical paradigm of identity, Muñoz undoes the binary of normative subject/object being that Butler presents in *Bodies That Matter*, by arguing for disidentification as a “third mode of dealing with ideology” that “works on

and against dominant ideology,” rather than completely resisting or completely assimilating to it (11).

Arturo A. Aldama and Naomi Quiñonez argue for a transnational approach to Chican@ gender and sex performativity that accounts for multidimensional strategies of resistance against multiple oppressions across local, regional and hemispheric borders. Alicia Gaspar de Alba addresses the production and performance of an “alter-Native” culture that she defines as a “culture indigenous to the west and southwest” as well as an “immigrant and colonized culture different from hegemonic white American culture” that simultaneously deconstructs and transforms Chican@ paradigms and iconographies of gender and sexuality (iv-v). Theory and practice converge in the works of performance artist and theorist Guillermo Gómez-Peña who advocates for a pedagogical approach to performance art that “challenges authoritarian hierarchies and specialized knowledge by creating temporary utopian spaces where interdisciplinary dialogue and imagination can flourish” and borders of “culture, ethnicity, gender, language and *métier*” dissolve (79). This emergent field destabilizes the singularity and fixity of “performativity,” attesting to the ways in which Chican@/Latin@ identity performances shift and transform on circumvolving stages of culture and history. I situate *Chicana Feminist Acts* within this burgeoning body of scholarship on Chican@ “performativities” and argue for the transformative potential of Chicana feminist theater to intervene against multiple intersecting ideological forces of class, gender, race and sexuality through a constant reformulation of Chicana subjectivity enacted by various performances of genders and sexualities.

*Chicana Feminist Acts* answers Broyles-González's invitation to account for the gaps in Chicana@ performance history. Her study of Teatro Campesino draws heavily on *testimonio* from its Chicana members, performing a scholarly act of "feminist commitment to honor women's words, to validate the notion that a woman's experience is best described in her *own* words...[and] to serve as a corrective to the hundreds of existing works of exclusively male focus" (134). As a Chicana feminist scholar, I seek to uphold this commitment in my own methodological approach to the study of Chicana cultural production. Therefore, *Chicana Feminist Acts* relies heavily on the voices of Chicana playwrights and performers to present a poly-vocal cultural history of Chicana feminist theater. Chapter IV integrates primary evidence from personal interviews with surviving members of Teatro Chicana, privileging their own voices in the process of constructing knowledge about their plays, productions and creative processes. The interviews appear in Chapter V to perform a living history of the Teatro. While Broyles-González calls for a total de-emphasis of textual analysis, *Chicana Feminist Acts* emphasizes instead the performative agency in both the actual writing of a play and the embodied and material elements of its staged production. In this manner, *Chicana Feminist Acts* negotiates methodological politics of performance studies and offers an alternative way to read Chicana feminist theater's multiple resistive performances as a constant transformative process.

My project also continues the work of Elizabeth C. Ramírez, who expands the scope of theater history by situating Chicana Theater within a larger transnational history of Latina performance in the U.S., Mexico and South America. Likewise, *Chicana Feminist Acts* constructs Chicana feminist theater as a transnational history with the

inclusion of Josephina Niggli, a writer that María Herrera-Sobek identifies as a “border writer” because of Niggli’s complicated status as a middle class Mexicana living and writing within the U.S. (xxvii). I maintain that Niggli’s *Soldadera* (1936) is an act of transnational feminism because it intervenes in both Mexican and U.S. cultural production. *Chicana Feminist Acts* also addresses a historical gap in Ramírez’s history: her study reiterates the assumption that Chicana theater began “in the 1970’s and emerged as a distinctive voice in the 1980’s” (Ramírez xix). The trajectory of Chicana feminist theater charted here resists reiterating this assumption. *Chicana Feminist Acts* upholds Rebolledo’s assertion that voice is fundamental to Chicana writers for seizing subjectivity by maintaining that the act of writing for Chicana playwrights breaks their historical silence and objectification, revealing the multi-vocality of Chicana cultural production. *Chicana Feminist Acts* thus re-scripts Chicana theater’s “distinctive voice” as a multi-vocal chorus, one that anticipated Movement era Chicana feminism. In so doing, this project resists perpetuating a definitive and universalized cultural history of Chicana feminist theater.

Like Ramírez, Alicia Arrizón situates Chicana theater in a transnational history of Latina theater but expands this history to include performance art. Arrizón also presents a transhistorical narrative that argues for the significance of theater and performance art for continually redefining Latina identity. *Chicana Feminist Acts* echoes Arrizón in an effort to not only argue for Chicana feminist theater’s important role in redefining Chicana subjectivity, but also to argue for Chicana feminist theater as performative—or as always in process, as it seeks to perform Chicana subjectivity in multiple directions and in response to multiple ideological oppressions. While both Ramírez and Arrizón focus on

Latina theater, I focus specifically on Chicana theater because its cultural history is regionally specific to the U.S. Southwest/Northern Mexico. Even though Niggli complicates national borders as a Mexican playwright who writes from a privileged upper middle class position in North Carolina, her work, like that of Portillo-Trambley, Moraga and Teatro Chicana addresses the historical and cultural conditions and conflicts of Chicanas living in the borderlands of the U.S. Southwest/Northern Mexico.

The opening chapter unfolds on the stage of early twentieth century U.S. folk drama with Josephina Niggli's recovered one act, *Soldadera*, which breaks ground by offering the first known female-scripted theatrical representations of Mexican *soldaderas* on either side of the U.S./Mexico border. Chapter I unearths the resistive negotiations that the play performs within the rigid frame of nativist and primitivist U.S. cultural production in the 1930s to assert Chicana voice and visibility. Heeding Emma Pérez's assertion that women's historical agency can be found at the interstices of male discourses, I argue that *Soldadera* is an interstitial discursive performance of a Chicana feminist cultural agency intervening "within" and "between" patriarchal discourses to combat the cultural erasure of *Mexicanas* and Chicanas on the transnational stage of early twentieth century U.S./Mexican cultural production(s).

Chapter II advances to the arena of the Chicano Movement and Renaissance of the early 1970s, spotlighting Estela Portillo-Trambley's *The Day of the Swallows* (1972). Before the recovery of Josephina Niggli's *Soldadera*, *The Day of the Swallows* was considered the first play published by a Chicana author. It remains the first play by a Chicana to broach the topics of Chicana sexuality and same-sex desire during the emergence of the so-called "first wave" of Chicana feminism, challenging the gender

hierarchy of traditional Chicano/a culture and the era's Chicano nationalism. I contend that *The Day of the Swallows* stages this "first wave" Chicana feminism by dramatizing the desire for autonomy and self-definition that Movement-era Chicana feminists asserted in order to break free from the essentializing forces of traditionally subservient gender roles, while at the same time participating in the Movement's compulsory heterosexuality through its marginalization of Chicana lesbians. Thus, the play performs a conflicted Chicana desire, one that simultaneously exposes the psychological and physical violence of culturally suppressed same-sex desire, as it condemns its Chicana lesbian protagonist to silence.

Chapter III elucidates the ways in which Cherríe Moraga re-stages Chicana desire during a "second wave" of Chicana feminism in the early 1980s. Her first play, *Giving up the Ghost* (1984), marks a radical shift in Chicana theater by rendering Chicana lesbians fully visible as desiring subjects. In so doing, the play breaks a decade long silence in Chicano/a theater regarding Chicana sexuality, and more specifically, Chicana lesbian sexuality, since Portillo-Trambley. This chapter argues that the play performs a politics of disidentification working "on and against" the cultural, ideological and historical forces that not only construct and de-limit identity, but also disrupt and divide community (Muñoz 11). I characterize the disidentificatory politics at work in this play as *teatropoesía*, which I define as a performative discourse whose fusion of genres traverses between individual and collective voices and private and public spaces to stage Chicana subjectivity as constantly in-flux, and to reconfigure a more inclusive Chicana feminist *comunidad* across differences of age, gender, sex, class and race as a means of mending

the rifts caused within and between Chicanas by the oppressive ideological constraints of gender, sexuality and racial binaries.

Chapter IV traverses the mid-to-late twentieth century, analyzing the three stages of the first known all-female *teatro*, Teatro Chicana who constantly re-staged their cultural and community roles for over a decade. Their three iterations between 1972 and 1984 enacts a Chicana feminism that moves across shifting grounds of intersectional identifications of class, race, and gender yet remains firmly rooted in the material experiences of its members. The *teatro*'s beginnings as woman-centered Teatro de las Chicanas carved a creative space for Chicanas during the Movement to re-cast women as intellectual and political agents in their first *acto*, *Chicana goes to College* (1972). By the mid-1970s, the *teatro* recalibrated their feminist liberatory politics to bridge gender, class and racial divides between men and women through a socialist framework, and therefore took to the stage in working-class California Chicano/a communities as Teatro Laboral in 1975. Teatro Laboral's adaptation of *Salt of the Earth* (1975) interrogates the effects of capitalism's gendered and racialized divisions of labor on the relations between Chicanas and Chicanos while also invoking a collective history of Chicano/a class struggle. As the 1980s approached, and the *teatro* members confronted a new set of roles as mothers, social activists and working women, while at the same time battling longstanding social issues of poverty, sexism, and racism on both a community and international scale, the *teatro*'s feminist politics shifted once again, and they re-branded themselves as Teatro Raíces in 1979. Through their *actos*, *So Ruff, So Tuff* (1979) *E.T—the Alien*, (1979) and *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* (1979), Teatro Raíces targeted a new generation of working class Chicanos/as to inspire their young audiences to partake in the cultural and

political struggle to end systemic oppression through education and community activism. These three stages of Teatro Chicana perform three iterations of Chicana feminism thereby demonstrating the way in which changing cultural, generational and social tides bring in new and evolving performances of Chicana feminisms resistive to the essentializing forces of class, gender, and racial oppression.

The closing Chapter acts as a living archive of the ways in which Chicanas presently continue to re-stage their roles both on and off of the theatrical stage. Chapter V presents a recent interview with members of Teatro Chicana staged as a conversation that captures the *teatro*'s dynamic creative process, as they construct a collective cultural history assembled from individual and shared memories, repartee, laughter, and inside jokes. Chapters IV and V follow Broyles-González's pedagogical directive to de-emphasize theory as the privileged way of knowing and instead allow the voices of the *teatro* members to take center stage in the act of constructing a cultural history of Chicana feminist theater. Chapter V further attests to Chicana feminisms as a multi-faceted and ever-evolving performance of Chicana subjectivity through a poly-vocal historical account of Teatro Chicana that positions women as cultural and historical subjects.

*Chicana Feminist Acts* performs a long overdue reply to the call to action articulated by Broyles-González in her 1994 study of Teatro Campesino and to the critical concerns expressed by the panel of Chicana and Latina playwrights and scholars that I witnessed almost two decades later. Ultimately, this staging of a poly-vocal and multi-performative cultural history of Chicana feminist theater invites us to reconsider our double roles as spectators and performers in the theaters of culture, history and identity; to widen our gaze and cast sight on who and what has been pushed out of frame; to



constantly act out by de-centering center stage; and to account for that which has been erased from the script.

## Chapter I:

### “The Only Moving Thing Amidst All That Silence:” Josephina Niggli’s

#### *Soldadera* Sounds-Off Early Twentieth Century Chicana Feminist Theater

Josefina Niggli’s one act play *Soldadera* begins with a quiet tableau of María, a sentinel, perched high on a cliff and standing guard over a camp of *soldaderas* asleep in the early morning.<sup>1</sup> She appears in silhouette as “the figure of a woman” who is “the only moving thing amidst all that silence” (158). Suddenly, the camp’s prisoner, a young man, sneaks down stage right. Noticing the escaping prisoner, María fires a shot from her rifle, cutting through the morning silence and waking up the *soldaderas* from their slumber. María’s rifle shot acts as the catalyst of the play’s action, setting the plot into motion.

The implication of this scene becomes more profound considering that Niggli herself played the role of María in the original 1936 Carolina Playmakers production of *Soldadera* at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned an M.F.A. in drama. Like her character, who is isolated atop “rugged spikes of stone,” Niggli stands

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<sup>1</sup> The term *soldadera* refers to Mexican women soldiers who fought alongside men during the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910 and lasted until 1929. *Soldaderas* came from diverse economic and regional backgrounds and took on various roles. Shirlene Soto writes that these women soldiers “fought, cooked meals, nursed the wounded, washed clothes, collected the soldiers’ salaries, and performed a multitude of services not provided by the Mexican military” (44). Soto further explains that even though *soldaderas* performed a number of important tasks on the front lines of the Revolution, most of these women “remained virtually anonymous” in the annals of Mexican Revolution history (45). See Shirlene Soto, *Emergence of the Modern Mexican Woman: Her Participation in the Revolution and Struggle for Equality, 1910-1940*. (Denver: Arden Press, 1990) pp 44-45.

out as one of few Chicanas to enjoy a writing career in early twentieth-century America's Anglo, male-dominated literary landscape that was hostile to women and Mexican writers (Niggli 158). She is also the first known woman playwright to construct female-defined representations of *la soldadera* in either Mexico or the U.S. Thus, like the reverberating sound of María's gunshot cutting through the quiet morning and propelling the play's action, *Soldadera* shatters the historical and cultural silencing of Chicana voices on both sides of the border and initiates an act of transnational Chicana feminist agency on the stage of early twentieth-century U.S. and Mexican cultural production.

Niggli wrote eight plays during her two years in the M.F.A. program at Chapel Hill. In 1938, the university published her works as a collection entitled *Mexican Folk Plays*, edited by professor and Carolina Playmakers founder Fredrick Koch, under whom Niggli studied. Of all her plays in this collection, *Soldadera* continues to receive scholarly attention due to its explicit critique of traditional gender roles and complex renderings of female characters.<sup>2</sup> William Orchard and Yolanda Padilla point out that a critique of "bourgeois and aristocratic femininity" underlines all of Niggli's plays (6). In fact, this is

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<sup>2</sup> See Alicia Arrizón, "Soldaderas and the Staging of the Mexican Revolution" in *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 42 No. 1 (1998 Spring) pp 90-112; Tabea Alexa Linhard, "Adelita's Radical Act of Counter Writing" in *Dressing Up for War: Transformations of Gender and Genre in the Discourse and Literature of War*, Edited by Aránzazu Usandizaga and Andrew Monnickendam (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001) pp 127-144; Tabea Alexa Linhard, *Fearless Women: in the Mexican Revolution and Spanish Civil War* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2005); Carmen Salazar Parr and Genevieve M. Ramírez, "The Female Hero in Chicano Literature" in *Beyond Stereotypes: The Critical Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Edited by María Herrera-Sobek. (Binghampton: Bilingual Press, 1985) pp 47-60.

a distinguishing feature of her dramatic work. Unlike her two novels, *Mexican Village* and *Step down Elder Brother*, Niggli's plays deal candidly with female subjectivity and offer a more explicit feminist critique of traditional middle class gender roles. Both Gloria Velásquez Treviño and Emily Lutenski point out that in her novels, Niggli explores Chicana identity through male protagonists.<sup>3</sup> However, many of Niggli's plays feature female protagonists who challenge traditional representations of Mexican women prevalent in the U.S. and Mexico's early twentieth-century male-dominated cultural production. In addition, Orchard and Padilla argue that Niggli's female characters perform critical roles in her plays by "actually or symbolically [setting] events into motion," much like María at the beginning of *Soldadera* (19). The feminist critiques embedded in her plays take aim at conventional and popular cultural representations of femininity as defined by patriarchal societal and cultural norms. *Soldadera* centers on a highly symbolic and mythic figure of the Mexican Revolution that continues to bear significance in the Chicano/a popular and literary imaginary.

While *la soldadera* was originally a male-constructed national Revolutionary symbol, during the Chicano Movement, she signified female activism for Movement-era Chicana writers who often equated her revolutionary struggle with the contemporary struggle of Chicanas (Rebolledo 57-58).<sup>4</sup> Written roughly thirty years prior to the

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<sup>3</sup> See Emily Lutenski, "Locating the Modern Mexican in Josefina Niggli's *Step Down Older Brother*" in *Western American Literature*, Vol. 5 No. 1 (2010) pp 4-29 and Gloria Velásquez Treviño, *Cultural Ambivalence in Early Chicana Prose Fiction*, Diss Stanford U, 1985 (Ann Arbor: UMI 1986).

<sup>4</sup> In *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military: Myth and History* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990), Elizabeth Salas explains that the term *soldadera*, to describe female soldiers originates during the Spanish Conquest of

Chicano Movement, Niggli's play inaugurates this tradition of Chicana literature that reinvigorates *la soldadera* with agency and voice.

While Niggli is the first known playwright to stage a female-defined representation of *la soldadera*, she is not the only early twentieth-century Chicana writer to dialogue directly with women's roles in the Mexican Revolution. Like Niggli's plays, María Cristina Mena's short stories counter popular U.S. images of "sultry and seductive" Mexican women with female characters who undermine middle class norms of femininity and mobilize plot (Doherty xv). For instance, "Son of the Tropics" features a rebellious *soldadera*, stripped of romanticism, who makes bombs out of doorknobs that lead to the male protagonist's explosive demise. Other early Chicana writers played significant roles in supporting the Revolution from within the U.S. In Laredo, Texas, Sara Estela Ramírez composed essays, poems and speeches for the PLM (*Partido Liberal Mexicano*) and explicitly advocated for women's rights in her writings. Leonor Villegas de Magnón's autobiography, *The Rebel*, places women at the center of the Revolution, and like *Soldadera*, offers a varied cast of "rebel women" ranging from "rural, destitute soldiers' companions to middle-class teachers, journalists, propagandists, printers, telegraph operators, nurses and to bourgeois socialites" (Lomas xxxiii). Both *Soldadera* and *Rebel* present counter representations to the singular mythic figure of *la soldadera* in male

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Mexico in 1519 when women were used as servants: "Soldiers used their pay (*soldada*) to employ women as paid servants (*soldaderas*)" (xii). While the term originated during the Conquest, Salas emphasizes that the cultural and historical importance of women in battle dates farther back to Meso-American tribes long before the Spanish arrived in the Americas.

Revolutionary discourses, and thereby “reinscribe ‘real’ images” of Mexican women “into historical memory” (Lomas xxxiii).

Because Niggli was a Mexican-born woman writing in an Anglo, male-dominated U.S. literary market during the 1930s and 1940s, and because she consciously took aim at dominant gender representations in her plays, Niggli breaks both gendered and national literary boundaries. As a result, *Soldadera* can be considered a transnational feminist text, functioning as what Emma Pérez calls an “interstitial space” whose Chicana feminist critique moves “within” and “between” U.S. and Mexican cultural production (Pérez 5). Pérez argues that silenced subaltern histories of women “when heard become the negotiating spaces for the decolonizing subject” and are “where third space agency is articulated” (5). Furthermore, she explains that historically, “women have always constructed their own spaces interstitially” from within male dominated discourses, and from such spaces, women intervene in history through “third space feminism” (33). Rooted in Chela Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness that “allows for mobility of identities between and among varying power bases,” Pérez defines third space feminism as feminist agency of third world subjects that intervene “within and between dominant male discourses” (xvi; 32).<sup>5</sup>

I argue that *Soldadera* is an interstitial discursive performance of a Chicana feminist cultural agency intervening “within” and “between” patriarchal discourses to combat the cultural erasure of Chicanas on the transnational stage of early twentieth-century U.S./Mexican cultural productions. Reading Niggli’s script against photographic evidence from *Soldadera*’s debut production under Frederick Koch illuminates how a

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<sup>5</sup> See Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P 2000).

patriarchal and primitivist male directorial gaze tempers the play's feminist visual elements. At the same time, the play's engagement with the popular Mexican *corrido*, "*la Adelita*," and its hyper-feminine Adelita character exposes *la soldadera* as a sexist construction of patriarchal Mexican nationalism shoring up masculine anxieties about *Mexicana* agency. Niggli ultimately combats such male-defined representations of Chicanas by destabilizing the domestic object/domestic threat binary that binds Chicana identity in male-dominated cultural production on both sides of the border. Through contradictory and dualistic female characters, she re-stages *la soldadera* as a symbol of transnational Chicana feminist agency culminating in Adelita's transformation from hyper-feminine and domesticated object to revolutionary agent. The contradictions and dualities at play in *Soldadera* stage an early twentieth-century Chicana feminism that negotiates between paradoxical significations of gender, nation and race to offer complex renderings of Chicanas that complicate a binary system of representation. Furthermore, the ambiguity marking Adelita's suicide at the end of the play leaves Chicana identity open to future possibilities, ultimately marking *Soldadera* as the opening act in a series of re-stagings of Chicana identity in U.S. Chicano/a theater.

Niggli's Chicana feminist act plays out on the battlefield of the Mexican Revolution, thereby reclaiming for feminist purposes "a bourgeois revolution" against the "thirty-five year-long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz" along with the "struggles of peasants in the North and South of the country" (Linhard 128-29). Set in the Sierra Madre Mountains near the city of Saltillo, Mexico, in 1914, the play foregrounds a camp of *soldaderas*, featuring an all-female cast of characters with the exception of the camp's male prisoner called The Rich One. The women have captured a federal soldier and are

holding him hostage in their campsite while they decide what to do with him. The Rich One represents both patriarchal and class domination, which Niggli makes clear in the frame description, explaining that he earns his nickname from his captors because “he represents the hated upper-class which has held them in subjection for so long” (160). Concha, the camp’s leader, echoes this statement when she tells The Rich One that he is “a symbol of all of the hate and horror that the Rich Ones have made for us” (181). In return, The Rich One makes disparaging remarks conflating class and gender towards his captors that he uses to pinpoint and exploit their individual weaknesses, in effect symbolically performing a patriarchal attempt at restraining Chicana identity. The verbal battles that ensue between the *soldaderas* and The Rich One serve to dramatize Chicana resistance towards gender and class domination. Elizabeth Salas explains that historically *soldaderas* symbolized the transgressive and subversive threat of the Revolution to bourgeois social order. The upper classes viewed *soldaderas* as vulgar and nothing more than prostitutes, while army officials viewed them as “disruptive and impediments” (57). Niggli’s play mobilizes these transgressive historical and cultural figures to stage resistance against patriarchal and middle-class norms of femininity. The character Cricket scoffs at the Rich One’s request that they “learn to talk like ladies” and María remarks that “perhaps he feels it is not manly to be captured by a woman” thus acknowledging male anxieties about female independence (164-65). Furthermore, Niggli’s *soldaderas* express pride in their roles as soldiers. Cricket admits to feeling proud and courageous of her involvement in capturing the Rich One, while Concha warns him that “There are no men here to tell us what to do. We stand alone” (165 & 181). Thus, Niggli’s play



refigures the transgressive class significations of *soldaderas* as resistance to middle-class patriarchal domination.

The Carolina Playmakers debuted *Soldadera* on 27, 28, and 29 of February, 1936, under Koch's direction. Alicia Arrizón points out that "contradictions abound" in the play's opening run, in which "Anglo women play Mexican *soldaderas*, they wear clean and colorful skirts and shawls" despite the harsh conditions of their circumstances, and they are "surrounded by basketry and cacti meant to evoke folk art and a warm exotic countryside," even though Niggli's frame description at the beginning of the play imagines a stark and frigid landscape (60). When examined more closely, the contradictions between Koch's staging of the play and Niggli's script evince how *Soldadera's* aftermath as a recovered publication performs an interstitial feminist intervention that disrupts gendered primitivism's discursive constraints on Chicana voice and agency. Schechner identifies a performance's aftermath, "or continuing life" as but one phase of the performance process that can reconstruct or generate new performances (247). The aftermath of *Soldadera* as a recovered play-text offers a new performance of Chicana identity that challenges a primitivist and patriarchal staging of it under Koch's direction.

Pérez argues that not only have women been traditionally excluded from politics and history-making, the repetition of "things said"—that is, the repetition of a dominant masculine historical representation of events—leads to the erasure of women's participation in history (27 & 31). Following Pérez, I propose that the repetition of "things said"—or in the specific case of theater, "things staged"—by the U.S.'s Anglo-centric and male-centered cultural production threatens to negate the cultural

contributions of Chicanas. Pérez further contends that women's historical agency is located in the gaps or interstitial spaces within and between history and that from these spaces, women intervene in the male centered discourses that shape a nation's history. Chicana artists, writers and intellectuals likewise occupy the interstices of cultural production where they intervene within and between the dominant Anglo male discourses that shape the nation's culture. The recovered works of Chicana writers of the early twentieth century by contemporary Chicana feminist scholars reinstates women's cultural activities in Mexico and the United States and attests to these writers' negotiations of the male dominated discourses they labored under in order to assert their critical voices and agency.<sup>6</sup>

As a Carolina Playmaker, Niggli labored creatively under a rigidly enforced primitivist framework for folk drama, which produced sentimental and feminized depictions of folk communities. Koch's Carolina Playmakers was part of an artistic movement in the South during the thirties predicated on a Modernist primitivist aesthetics stemming from "the era's fascination with Social Darwinism, anthropological theories,

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance *The Collected Stories of María Cristina Mena* edited by Amy Doherty (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1997), *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature* edited by Tey Diana Rebolledo and Eliana S. Rivero (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1993), *We Fed Them Cactus* by Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert with an Introduction by Tey Diana Rebolledo (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1994), Sam López, *Post-Revolutionary Chicana Literature: Memoir, Folklore and Fiction of the Border, 1900-1950* (New York: Routledge, 2007), Genaro M. Padilla, *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1993), and Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1995).

and its search for a preindustrial moment that held out for individuals opportunities where they might remove themselves” from the corrupting forces of modern civilization (Rossetti 118).<sup>7</sup> Folk drama in the South opposed the “slick finish” and “streamlined perfection” of mainstream theater so prominent in the north that symbolized for the South, the commercialization of culture in an increasingly industrialized society (Henderson 22). Instead, Southern folk drama cultivated “folk art” from “native” regional materials including “the legends, superstitions, customs, environmental differences, and the vernacular of the common people” (Koch 10). Koch and his Playmakers desired to reach a broad Southern audience by touring the region and performing in both local community theaters and in academic drama festivals. Despite Koch’s aim to “accurately” reflect “the conditions under which various underprivileged classes live and suffer and

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<sup>7</sup> Gina Rossetti provides a brief history of the development of primitivism as a nationalist discourse in the U.S. Derived from eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy, it was used after the Revolution to describe Native Americans as “a living symbol of the new nation’s break with England.” Rossetti explains that at this time, primitivism contained “positive” connotations of “virtuousness” and “good nature” to distinguish Native Americans and by extension, the newly developed American Republic, from England’s “civilized abuse of power,” and persisted as a nativist symbol in early nineteenth century romanticism. Rossetti explains further that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, primitivism was used negatively in scientific and social scientific discourses to marginalize newly arrived immigrants and virtually all non-Anglo populations. Finally, she underscores the significance of primitivism’s “embedded” persistence in American literary discourses, arguing that naturalist and modernist American writers “draw upon earlier romantic images of the primitive and transmogrify them,” resulting in contradictory applications of primitivism to characterize various non-Anglo, working class, and immigrant populations as a means of distinguishing between the American and the Other. See Gina Rossetti, *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and Modernist Literature* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2006) 4-5.

survive” for rural and middle class Anglo audiences, many of his productions reiterated imperialist and paternalistic cultural representations of primitive Black, Indigenous, immigrant, and working classes (Henderson 23). At the same time, because Koch instructed his playwrights to draw inspiration from “the eventful happenings of [their] own experience, the characters of [their] own neighborhood” (Henderson 23), Koch’s framework informed both *what* sort of folk one could write and *how* one could write folk. In Niggli’s case, this meant that the content of her plays be limited to Mexico and Mexican folk, and further, that the playwright stage Mexican folk as specifically defined by Koch’s primitivist and paternalistic gaze. As such, Orchard and Padilla point out that even though “it is impossible to know how much agency the Carolina Playmakers had in producing their material,” the fact that Niggli wrote “exclusively about Mexican themes” when she was with the Playmakers but then “tackled non-Mexican material once she graduated” indicates that perhaps “her role as the ‘Mexican Playmaker’ might have determined her subject matter more than she would have liked” (9).

While laboring under the restrictive confines of a primitivist brand of folk drama, Niggli had to contend with the exotic “othering” of her artistic identity and her work. Koch marketed Niggli as the troupe’s exotic “Mexican Playmaker,” a role that Niggli, at times, accepted, indicated by the photograph of the playwright that appears in *Mexican Folk Plays* (1938) (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Photo of Josephina Niggli that appears in *Mexican Folk Plays* edited by Frederick H. Koch (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1938).

In this photograph, Niggli dons a traditional Mexican folk dress and *sarape*, perpetuating the image of herself as both “exotic and safe, ‘Other’ yet unthreatening” for an Anglo U.S. audience (Orchard and Padilla 8). Nevertheless, Orchard and Padilla stress that such performances of exoticism were expected of “foreign” women writers and that “successfully meeting such expectations often meant the difference between” gaining financial support and publication, or “languishing in obscurity” (9). Niggli’s displays of self-exoticization as the “Mexican Playmaker” therefore served as performative negotiations of the dominant culture that were not only necessary for creative and economic survival but that also allowed her to critique the dominant culture from within the prestigious dramatic institution of the Carolina Playmakers.

Pérez argues that within the discursive confines of male nationalist rhetoric, women perform “a dialectics of doubling” (32). As the “Mexican Playmaker,” Niggli engages in this “dialectics of doubling,” posing as a double agent who performs the exotic object to achieve subjectivity through the act of writing, which enables her to subvert and critique a U.S. imperialist racialized gender ideology. Niggli further plays double agent when she takes on the role of María in the debut of *Soldadera*. As an actress working under Koch’s direction, she participates in a primitivist staging of Chicanas, yet the character also becomes the performative vehicle through which Niggli asserts her Chicana critical voice, both literally and figuratively, from the stage of her play. As María, Niggli can wield a degree of agency, for instance, by instigating the plot’s action with the shot from her rifle, a small yet deeply symbolic act of asserting some control over her own cultural production.

In Koch's write up of Niggli's *Mexican Folk Plays* (1938), he characterizes Niggli's volume as plays about "the humble lives of her own people, their restless history, their legends and the childlike wonder of their folkways," thereby casting Mexico, its inhabitants, and Niggli in an exotic and pacified light (15). An image from the Playmakers' debut production of *Soldadera* included in *Mexican Folk Plays* confirms that the version of *Soldadera* staged under Koch's direction tempers the subtle Chicana feminist critique within the play's visual elements through feminizing techniques including racialized gendered costuming and pacified romantic scenery (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. Photograph of a scene from the first production of *Soldadera* in 1936 that appears in *Mexican Folk Plays* edited by Frederick H. Koch (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 1938).

While Niggli's role as actress requires some complaisance in Koch's depoliticizing stage direction, the recovered script of *Soldadera* indicates that her role as playwright serves as Chicana feminist intervention as its text offers a re-staging of Chicana identity. Long descriptive passages in Niggli's script introduce the play's setting

and characters, offering a more complex set of meanings, and countering Koch's feminized staging. These descriptions appear in the script between scenes and dialogue, and unlike the script's dialogue or stage directions, these descriptions do not get translated into the actual production of *Soldadera* under Koch's direction. Instead, located in the interstices of "things staged" (by Koch), they function as Niggli's Chicana feminist interventions by undercutting the director's patriarchal and primitivist gaze. In these interstitial descriptions, Niggli rejects gendered primitivist rhetoric and unsettles traditional femininity by scrambling visual gender codes thereby interrupting a fully feminized presentation of Mexico.

Niggli's script includes a frame description illustrating a stark and decidedly unfeminine landscape. Niggli describes the scenery as a "rugged" and "grim fortress" dotted with "sparse and scattered" vegetation and "gray" rocks (157). Furthermore, Niggli emphasizes that "here is no flowery green softness, no delicacy of outline," rejecting primitivist equations of the woman's body with nature (157). Yet, the photographic still of the play's production reveals the harsh landscape to be pacified by a soft lighting scheme and simplistic scenery, thereby taming the setting's subversive potential to visually overturn the U.S. primitivist trope of feminized Mexican land collapsed with exoticized *Mexicana* bodies, a trope not uncommon to early and mid-twentieth century U.S. Anglo theater that often depicted a "nonthreatening image of romantic, colorful" Mexico, while Mexican women appeared on stage "embodied as beautiful women and not as political actors" (Habel-Pallán 34). Thus, in addition to romanticized scenery, the photographic still of Koch's production of *Soldadera* shows Anglo actresses wearing markedly gendered and crisp Mexican folk clothing of colorful blouses, long skirts,



dresses, and shawls (60). In contrast, Niggli's script subtly scrambles traditional masculine and feminine codes of dress. For instance, María holds a gun in her hand, and over her "dirty" and "ragged" clothing, is draped a "fringed shawl," while a "man's sombrero" covers her head (158). The sartorial significations within this description ambiguously opens up the possibilities of alternative gender roles in which women are symbolically adorned with femininity but also with the rugged agency traditionally afforded to men. Unfortunately, the highly feminized and well-groomed Mexican folk costumes that appear in Koch's production foreclose the potential to materialize physically visible and embodied alternative possibilities of Chicana identity and instead reiterate stereotypically exotic images, visually tempering the Anglo audience's encounter with politically active Chicana characters on the stage.

The juxtaposition of such seemingly inconsequential differences in Koch's production and Niggli's script reveals Niggli's negotiations of passive representations of Mexican women in U.S. culture and the ways in which Chicana voices and bodies become subordinated under an imperialist and masculinist ideology of racialized gender in early twentieth-century U.S. cultural production. However, Niggli's recovered script emerges from the past to interrupt the historical and cultural erasure of her Chicana feminist voice and agency. Modifying Pérez's notion of "things said," I conclude that the descriptive passages in *Soldadera* are located between "things staged," and undercut the discursive confines of Koch's rigid Anglo gendered primitivist framework for staging Chicana identity.

The play's feminist interventions traverse national borders to interrupt the cultural negation of *Mexicanas* reduced to non-speaking, disembodied love objects in Mexico's

popular national imaginary during the early twentieth century. One of the most prevalent historical and cultural examples of the above process occurs in Mexican Revolutionary *corridos* wherein *soldaderas* are exalted to mythic status. Due to the extreme popularity of the *corrido*, “*la Adelita*,” the name “Adelita” began to be “synonymous with” *soldadera* during the Mexican Revolution (Arrizón 33).<sup>8</sup> Even though the *corrido* popularized this figure in Mexico to the point that “*la Adelita*” became a national symbol of the Mexican Revolution, Herrera-Sobek reveals that throughout its many versions over time, the *corrido* manages to neglect the *soldadera*’s role as an active participant in battle. Instead, its many incarnations reduce her to a nonspeaking idealized love object and foreground her male lover as the speaking subject (92-114). Thus, as Linhard points out, the mythmaking process that romanticizes *soldaderas* in the *corrido*, “*la Adelita*”, simultaneously “epitomizes” and negates Mexicana cultural and historical agency (75).

Niggli’s play interrupts this mythmaking process that silences and disembodies *Mexicanas* by staging Adelita as a speaking and acting subject and also by consciously bringing attention to the character’s symbolism. In the pages of Niggli’s play, the Adelita of *corrido* legend not only speaks but also performs an exaggerated naiveté and beauty that intensifies her symbolic function as a patriarchal representation of *Mexicana* femininity. Yet the play also reiterates Adelita as a love object through constant references to her extreme beauty, in effect participating in the exoticizing and romanticizing male gaze of the *corrido*. The frame description discloses that Adelita

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<sup>8</sup> The term “La Adelita” originates from the popular Revolution-era Mexican *corrido* of the same name that is thought to have been inspired by a woman named Adelita from Durango who fought with Francisco I. Madero and his followers, the Maderistas, early in the Revolution. See, Arrizón, p 33.

embodies “the poetry of the revolution, and the beauty,” which casts her in an idealized light (158). However, Niggli also establishes links between the *corrido* and her character in a way that self-consciously recognizes the play’s own complicity in this idealization, thereby performing an unveiling of sorts to expose the cultural patriarchal mythmaking mechanisms that reduce *Mexicanas* to silenced and disembodied love objects. For instance, in the first scene, Concha returns to camp with a message from Adelita’s young lover, to which Adelita scoffs, prompting the elder woman to tease her by singing a verse from the *corrido*:

CONCHA: ...I have a message for you...

ADELITA: (*with the interest of a child*). What kind of message?

CONCHA: (*handing ADELITA her plate*). From the young Rubén. He wants to know if you still love him...

ADELITA: (*sniffs*). He has been gone a month and not one letter from him. I don’t call that love.

CONCHA: (*laughs and sings teasingly*).

So farewell my beloved Adelita,

So farewell to all that I hold most dear.

Do not sigh if I write you no letter.

I’ll not change you for any girl here

(171)

In this exchange, the play collapses events from the *corrido* with events from the play, creating an intertextual relationship between the two and transmitting double meanings. Collapsing the events draws parallels between “la Adelita” of the *corrido* and Adelita on the stage, in effect reiterating a passive construction of womanhood through the narrative of a lady in waiting who must patiently endure the absence of her lover going off to war. At the same time, the play subverts this narrative by recasting it from the point of view of the female love object thereby granting her subjectivity. Instead of silently enduring her lover’s absence, Adelita verbally expresses frustration, and ultimately rejects this romantically passive role by stating, “I don’t call that love” (171). Thus in this instance, the silenced love object speaks back, interrupting the *corrido*’s pacifying male gaze.

Later on, the scene calls attention to “la Adelita” as a male-constructed figure of femininity serving patriarchal and nationalist interests. The only male character in the play, The Rich One, refers to Adelita, as a “symbol of the Revolution,” and he reiterates the *corrido*’s mythmaking patriarchal gaze by telling the young woman that “when all the soldiers sing the verses” of *Adelita*, they think of her (172). The Rich One’s remarks symbolically reduce the embodied character on stage to the *corrido*’s disembodied love object who serves to stoke the romantic and nationalistic desires of men (172). Once again, Adelita thwarts the objectification process by speaking back to The Rich One: “(She laughs.) But that is foolish. I don’t know all the soldiers” (172). Her reaction performs a clever naïveté that subverts the logic of The Rich One’s claim while also refocusing Adelita as an embodied and speaking subject. Such instances where Adelita speaks back to the *corrido*’s objectification of *soldaderas* ultimately undermines the authority of its patriarchal gaze. Furthermore, the play undoes a domestic object/domestic

threat binary within both Mexican and U.S. cultural production that shores up anxieties about female empowerment. In this manner, Niggli's play intervenes between Mexican and U.S. cultural production, undoing this transnational domestic object/domestic threat binary to expose its underlining patriarchal mechanisms of delimiting Chicana identity. Laura Isabel Serna explains that nationalist cultural production during the early twentieth century, on both sides of the border, naturally reflects the two countries' "historically fraught relationship...defined by a grossly unequal distribution of economic and political power" that manifests in the U.S.'s "numerous attempts to meddle in Mexican domestic politics" combined with its anti-immigrant Repatriation efforts during the nineteen thirties and forties (Serna 3). As a result, both nations evoke contradictory primitivist discourses to demarcate national and cultural borders and to indemnify these borders against the perpetual threat of cultural miscegenation.<sup>9</sup> Central to Mexico and the U.S.'s primitive mirrored gaze is the symbolic rendering of Chicanas as either national ideal or national threat, "shoring up the nation-state and reinforcing its patriarchal structure"

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<sup>9</sup> Anne T. Doremus offers specific examples of Mexico's contradictory construction of the U.S. as both a threatening outside influence and a model for modern progress. See, Anne T. Doremus, "Nationalism, the Pelado and the Myth of Authenticity" in *Culture, Politics and the Myth of Authenticity in Mexican Literature and Film, 1929-1952* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013) 80-103. Meanwhile, Orchard and Padilla describe the U.S.'s treatment of Mexico in popular film wherein historical figures of the Revolution like Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata are depicted as barbarians or savages inherently unfit for governing a nation. See Orchard and Padilla, 11. Finally, Helen Deplar's research reveals the U.S.'s huge cultural interest in Mexico during the nineteen twenties and thirties among U.S. artists and writers for the country's "quaintness, natural beauty, and artistic treasures" (58). See Helen Deplar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1992).

through images of Chicanas as “object of desire” on the one hand, and as “eroticized and whose seductive characteristics...must be muted,” on the other (Serna 143; Devers 17).<sup>10</sup>

Niggli’s Adelita unravels the bind of this transnational patriarchal dual image of domestic object/domestic threat by embodying its contradictions. The character simultaneously disrupts cultural objectification and performs hyper domestic femininity. The contradictory force of her significations consciously confirms and critiques “la Adelita” as a male-constructed symbol of passive Chicana womanhood operating in nationalist discourses to secure patriarchal control over women’s agency. Niggli renders this clear in Adelita’s almost immediate transformation from potential threat to male supremacy into a nullified domesticated love object, staged through the Rich One’s successful seduction of the young woman. Adelita’s naïveté and innocence ultimately leaves her vulnerable to the Rich One’s deception. She takes on the role of domestic care taker by looking after the male prisoner and she verbally defends him against the other *soldaderas*, in effect performing traditional wifely duties and fulfilling the secondary and supportive role of women dictated by patriarchal gender roles. Meanwhile, it is clear that the Rich One’s interest in Adelita is a ruse to glean information about the camp and the whereabouts of ammunition. The Rich One therefore utilizes Adelita as a means of controlling the camp of female soldiers to secure his plans of escape. In this manner, the

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<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth study of Mexican women simultaneously embodying domesticity and domestic threat in nationalist discourse, see Susan Dever, *Celluloid Nationalism and Other Melodramas: From Post-Revolutionary Mexico to Fin de Siglo Mexamérica* (Albany: New York State UP, 2003).

Rich One's manipulation of Adelita plays out the process of nullifying the potential threat that Adelita and the rest of the *soldaderas* pose as female agents through his attempts at domesticating Adelita.

What is more, the Rich One's manipulation of Adelita parallels the common trope in early twentieth century Anglo U.S. cultural production wherein Anglo protagonists manipulate a "dark lady" representative of Chicana identity who positions Mexico as a domestic threat to the U.S. This trope serves to symbolically perform the U.S.'s imperial relationship to Mexico and its domestic subjugation of Chicanos/as in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> Niggli's subversion of the domestic object/domestic threat binary exposes its ramifications for Chicana agency. The Rich One's seductive devices prove successful when he is able to gain Adelita's trust. She discloses to him where the camp stores its ammunition, and as a result, he is able to signal the location of the camp, through a pocket mirror, to *federales* who are closing in on the *soldaderas*. The Rich One's successful seduction of Adelita signifies her transformation into a passive domesticated love object, secured to re-establish the Rich One's male power. Recast as the domestic object, Adelita actually endangers her life and the lives of the other *soldaderas*. Niggli thus destabilizes the domestic object/domestic threat binary, exposing it as a patriarchal means of affirming male supremacy predicated upon the disempowerment of women.

Destabilizing such patriarchal and polarizing renderings of womanhood allows Niggli to refigure cultural representations of Chicanas from a woman-defined point of

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of representations of Mexican women in early twentieth-century American pulp literature see Arthur G. Pettit and Dennis E. Showalter, "Women of the Conquest." *Images of the Mexican American in Fiction and Film* (Texas Station: Texas A&M UP, 1980) 61-80.

view. Thus, Niggli opens up the male-constructed figure of *la soldadera* to new meanings that re-signify complex and multiple Chicana identities. Guisela Latorre and Elizabeth Salas both point out that north and south of the border, *soldaderas* traditionally appear in early twentieth century *corridos*, novels and films as stock characters fulfilling the roles of “mother, prostitute, [and] romantic heroine”(102). Niggli’s play performs a critical intervention in Mexican and U.S. cultural production that interrupts the cultural reiteration of these static and male defined representations of womanhood by offering a multiplicity of Chicana identities through a diverse cast of *soldadera* characters that offers more complicated gender significations. Herrera-Sobek explains that the Mother figure traditionally appearing in *corridos* tends to be represented as either The Good Mother, The Terrible Mother, or The Divine Mother (1). The three mother figures appearing in *Soldadera*, Tomasa, The Old One and Concha, each possess a combination of the qualities belonging to the traditional female archetypes found in *corridos*. Tomasa and The Old One both share aspects of the The Good Mother and The Terrible Mother. Herrera Sobek explains that traditionally, the Good Mother tends to display “a weak weeping personality; she is a helpless and desolate figure tossed about in the turbulent water of incessant tears” shed over the loss of a warrior son (1). Indeed, both Tomasa and The Old One express pain at the loss of their sons:

THE OLD ONE: Sometimes in the night I wake up and  
 hear him crying for me...small mother, small  
 mother!...until I have to cover my ears and scream to God.  
 (*Rocks back and forth.*) When those Federals took him  
 away I ran after them until I fell to the ground, and then I



crawled on my knees for miles and miles until the dear  
 Virgin sent sleep to cover me. Oh, Holy Angels...Oh  
 blessed Child of God!

TOMASA: They took my son, too.

THE OLD ONE: *(as if she were seeing enacted in front of  
 her this story out of the past. The spell of common suffering  
 has bound the women's attention to her)*. When I had  
 reached the place, they had crucified him...put nails  
 through his hands and fastened him against a door. He was  
 looking up at heaven...I closed his eyes, and then his head  
 drooped down as though he were hunting for my breast.  
 Like a little baby he was..."

TOMASA: *(laughs grimly)* They were good to my son.

They gave him ten paces ahead of a starved pack of dogs.

When I found him there was nothing left but the bones. The  
 little rich squirts told me to make soup out of them" (166)

The Old One's cries to God and the Holy Virgin evoke the weeping of The Good Mother, but neither she nor Tomasa are "passive" or "desolate." Instead, the deaths of their sons motivate the two characters to become warriors themselves in the Revolution. While the Old One "has seen too much of death," she also "clings to life with the hope burning in her...that the Revolution must succeed" (162). Thus, even though The Old One and Tomasa grieve the deaths of their sons, they transform their grief into political action, thereby overturning the passivity of The Good Mother figure.

Furthermore, Tomasa and The Old One also possess qualities of The Terrible Mother, who embodies “the destructive death inflicting mother” that transgresses the natural order by bringing about the death of her children (Herrera-Sobek 16). Indeed, of all of the characters, Tomasa and The Old One exhibit a morose preoccupation with death. However, rather than their own children, the two characters inflict their bloodlust on The Rich One precisely because he represents the *federales* who are responsible for the deaths of their sons. When fellow *soldadera*, The Blonde One, tells Tomasa to leave the memories of her son alone, Tomasa replies, “I want to think of him all the time, and every moment I think of him, I want to have a Rich One between my hands” (161). Similarly, The Old One expresses a desire to torture The Rich One to avenge her son, “I say nail him to the tree, like his kind nailed my boy, and then let me slit his stomach from side to side...” (187). Tomasa and The Old One perform a subversion of the Terrible Mother who disrupts patriarchal order by murdering her own children, but here, the bloodlust of Tomasa and the Old One symbolizes a desire to restore a social order that has in fact been disordered by men. Concha confirms this when she says, “we had to forget how to weep, and how to be kind and merciful. We are cruel because the revolution is cruel. It must crush out the evil before we can make things good again” (189).

Concha, as the leader of the group, fulfills a symbolic mother role for the camp of *soldaderas*, thus representing The Divine Mother, or “the protective mother,” who evokes a “benevolent generally passive and most significantly, generally absent figure” (Herrera-Sobek 33). Niggli indicates Concha’s role as the camp’s protective mother in a character description that imbues her with a divine and superior quality:

*As dirty as the rest of them, there is strength that flowers in her body and sets her above and beyond them. Born of the earth, it is the earth's pulse that she has for her heart. She is the one who keeps these fighting, snarling women together...who can punish with a sure, cold hand, but at the same time can heal their wounds. As merciless as the wind and rain, she is warm and healing as the sun* (169, original italics)

Once again, Niggli constructs Concha through dualities, to refigure The Divine Mother, who in her disembodied, pure, and static state, traditionally evokes *la Virgen de Guadalupe*.<sup>12</sup> Concha's dual characteristics evoke *la Virgen de Guadalupe's* indigenous origins of the Nahuatl deities Tonantzín/Coatlicue. The earth mother Tonantzín, associated with life giving and the harvest, is actually an aspect of the ancient mother goddess Coatlicue, the deity associated with destruction and rebirth who is depicted as both "goddess and monster, beneficent and threatening" (Rebolledo 50). Concha possesses dual qualities associated with Tonantzín/Coatlicue. Like both goddesses whose myths closely link them to the earth, Concha is "born of the earth" yet she is "above and beyond" (169). She also possesses both destructive and life giving qualities with her abilities to both "punish" and "heal" and to be "as merciless as the wind and rain" or as "warm and healing as the sun" (169). Niggli's refiguring of The Divine Mother archetype

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<sup>12</sup> For a history and explanation of the cult of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* in Mexico and her mythic and formal function in *corridos*, see María Herrera Sobek "The Mother Goddess Archetype," in *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990) 33-52.

of Mexican cultural production prefigures contemporary Chicana writers who perform their own transformations of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, at times invigorating her with active qualities, or like Niggli, reconnecting the religious icon to her indigenous past thereby reinstating the active qualities of Tonantzín.<sup>13</sup>

Niggli's play also contends with the traditional representation of the unwedded Chicana manifested as the prostitute or lover figure. She complicates this figure with a subversive edge. The prostitute or lover figure commonly evokes *la mala mujer*, "flirtatious maidens whose coquettish behavior leads inevitably to a tragic denouement" (Herrera-Sobek 55). They are often portrayed as loveable or devious but always punished for their sexual transgressions. Hence, the tragic demise of *la mala mujer* serves in patriarchal culture as a cautionary tale for unwed women, and the dangers of female independence. Cricket, a former prostitute turned *soldadera* who has the reputation among the camp as a gold-digger, serves as the play's *mala mujer* figure. Niggli marks this character's sexual desire with moral ambiguity, opening her up to further possibilities. She too exhibits dual qualities, serving as both benign comedic relief and dangerous subversive. Cricket is both "loveable" and "devious." She also asserts her sexual agency, defending her "right" to flirt with men in saloons (170). Furthermore, her coquettish behavior does not lead to her inevitable death. She narrowly escapes being kidnapped and raped by *federales*:

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<sup>13</sup> Tey Diana Rebolledo accounts for Chicana literature's various transformations of *la Virgen de Guadalupe* in "From Coatlicue to La Llorona" in *Women Singing in the Snow* (Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1995) 49-82.

CRICKET: (*half to CONCHA, half to herself*). That Tomasa and That Old One! All they can talk about is their sons. What's a poor woman who never had a son going to say? The only thing that ever happened to me was when the Rich Ones carried me off on my fourteenth saint's day. They brought me back quick enough, I can tell you. (*She sighs*). One of them used soap that smelt like violets. Every time I smell a violet now I can remember the feel of my knife going into his stomach. Oh, well, the poor sinner's getting more rest than I am...be damned to him! (176)

Cricket's act of self-defense violently overturns *la mala mujer*. Instead of leading to a tragic ending, Cricket's independent agency saves her life, and slashes through patriarchal control, rendered here as an assault on female sexuality. Cricket's story assists in marking her as a deviant character, further confirmed by the suspicion she raises amongst the camp through her tendencies to make pilgrimages to the saloon and "roll her eyes" at soldiers "plastered all over with gold" regardless of whether they are rebels or *federales* (183). Concha tests Cricket's loyalty to the revolution by feigning to be tempted by the comfortable middle class lifestyle that defecting to the *federales* could provide. Ultimately, Cricket fails this test of loyalty, encouraging Concha to join the *federales*: "What have we got against the Rich Ones...you and me...we could find plenty of rich soldiers" (184). Yet, once again, her subversive behavior does not lead to her demise. The disclosure of her disloyalty bears no impact on her, the other characters, or the plot.

Niggli thus leaves Cricket open to interpretation, thereby leaving the representational possibilities of Chicana sexuality open to ambiguous and complex possibilities.

In addition to refiguring Chicana representations, Niggli re-establishes Chicana cultural and historical agency. Her strategies for overturning gender hierarchies in male dominated cultural production functions to reassert the historical presence of *soldaderas* as actors in the Mexican Revolution. For instance, Herrera-Sobek's research reveals that the cultural practice of naming in *corridos* symbolically affirms the centrality of men in cultural accounts of historical events. *Soldaderas* tend to appear in these songs as secondary characters, either anonymously or "at times denominated solely by their first names," a convention that "contrasts with the customary use of both names when men are extolled in corridos" thereby establishing a patriarchal gender hierarchy (93). According to Salazar Parr and Ramírez, Niggli adheres to this tradition; however, their reading overlooks the playwright's subtle intervention. Niggli destabilizes the gender hierarchy of this naming custom by giving all of her characters first names only, or nicknames, regardless of their gender. Furthermore, when The Rich One discloses his full name to Concha, she refuses to call him by any other name than the nickname she and her *comadres* gave to him. This is not only a slight that "eradicates any real distinction between the sexes," as Salazar Parr and Ramírez suggest, but I add that it also signifies a subversion of gender power in which women control the means of representation thereby asserting the centrality of women to the play and by extension, the significance of *soldaderas* as participants in the Mexican Revolution (Salazar Parr & Ramírez 50). Thus, in contrast to the minor roles they serve in male dominated cultural production and to their virtual absence in male-authored historical accounts of the Mexican Revolution, the

*soldaderas* in Niggli's play do not exist simply to serve as secondary characters inconsequential to the events narrated. Instead, the *soldaderas* are the central protagonists of the play and key agents in moving the plot forward, contributing to the resignification of *la soldadera* as a present historical actor rather than a subjugated and silenced object.

Furthermore, as speaking subjects, the *soldaderas* collectively speak back to traditional gender roles that relegate women to the domestic sphere, thereby limiting Chicana agency. They vocally criticize gender power relations by airing grievances about the gendered distribution of roles between men and women during the Revolution. For instance, at the beginning of the play, we are informed that Hilario, the male soldier in charge, is away from camp. The *soldaderas* criticize this absent male authority figure for restricting them to the confines of the camp:

TOMASA: (*pointing toward the cave left*). What does Hilario care about women? He'll come back when he needs bullets.

THE OLD ONE: Ay there's the answer. He won't let us fight anymore, but we're good for enough to mold his bullets for him.

MARIA: And guard his ammunition.

CRICKET: And keep a prisoner for him. (164)

The restrictions placed upon the *soldaderas* by Hilario in the play closely reflect the restrictions that real-life *soldaderas* experienced on the front lines. Salas's account of nine historical narratives by *soldaderas* reveals that women soldiers—especially in Villas' camp—were strictly limited to domestic tasks, inciting many women to complain

“about male domination” and to resist this domination “resolutely and forcefully” (89).

The scene thus intervenes in male dominated cultural narratives about historical events by offering a revision of the Mexican Revolution that accounts for the roles of *soldaderas* and the gendered challenges they faced under a patriarchal social system.

Niggli also humanizes *la soldadera* by writing female characters enriched by personal histories. In addition to the memories disclosed by Tomasa, The Old One and Cricket, The Blonde One and María both tell of witnessing the torture and murders of their husbands. Concha explains that her hatred of “Rich Ones” was incited by the murder of her father who was shot while trying to protect his daughter from being raped by a wealthy land owner. Interestingly, the deaths of these male figures symbolically represent the destabilization of patriarchy during the Revolution that allows each of the *soldaderas* to enter the masculine domain of war, as each character takes up arms in response to the loss of a father, son, or husband. The fact that such experiences are acknowledged in this play and that these characters respond to the loss of their loved ones by going to war, a manner that goes against traditional gender expectations, is highly significant given that the decisions or experiences of *soldaderas* were rarely considered in early twentieth-century cultural production, and almost never served as a means of personal agency except to seduce or attract men within the confines of a love triangle. In Niggli’s play, it is therefore significant that the absence and death of men become the catalyst for female agency. Their deaths allow the female characters to break out of their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and daughters and to partake actively in the Revolution. At the same time, the *soldaderas* express distinctly female experiences that have been excluded from the “official” cultural and historical narratives of the Revolution. As a result, Niggli’s



play performs an interstitial discursive feminist intervention because it breaks open a space in Mexican and U.S. cultural production for the depiction of Chicanas as complex human beings with agency and experience, thereby “reassigning and rehistoricizing their symbolic place in the Revolution” (Pérez 33).

Furthermore, Niggli imbues the play with a sense of collectivity among the *soldaderas* that de-essentializes female experience. While Tomasa and the Old One share the tragic stories of losing their sons, the characters are described as “bound by the common spell of suffering” (166). When the characters critique the subservient roles they are given by Hilario, the play describes the women as sharing “the same hope that this time the revolution must succeed” suggesting that for these women the revolution signifies liberation from patriarchal oppression represented by the absent Hilario and The Rich One (166). These descriptive moments of collectivity signify a collective female voice and feminist consciousness within the text. Rebolledo identifies the collective voice as a resistive strategy in Chicana literature that functions as “recourse to historical authority” by emphasizing that “no voice has more discursive authority than any other” (43). The *soldaderas*’ experiences can be thought of as what Rebolledo considers shared *recuerdos*, or memories, that unite women through story telling (33). Before The Old One tells the story of losing her son, The Blond One interjects by saying “Now Old One, we’ve all heard the story” indicating that sharing such stories are a common ritual among them (166). Tomasa responds to The Old One’s story by sharing her own memory of losing her son. This in turn incites Cricket to share her own story. The collective knowledge of each other’s experiences is further reinforced when the Blond One relates the story of losing her husband with the death of María’s husband, thereby combining

their experiences into a shared *recuerdo*. In addition, both Concha and Cricket disclose similar experiences of escaping rape. The sharing of such experiences are thus staged as collective *recuerdos*, or memories, producing a female discursive space within cultural production that voices heterogeneous female experiences. As a result, the collective female voice in Niggli's play functions as recourse to the authorial power of patriarchal discourses that suppresses the diverse voices of Chicana women.

The play's transformation of Chicanas into agents of change on the stage of cultural representation culminates with Adelita's suicidal act at the very end. After discovering that The Rich One has been signaling to *federale* troops, Concha decides that the only way to defend their camp is to destroy the supply of ammunition. Adelita's romantic convictions about the Revolution as something "beautiful" prompts her to sacrifice her life and blow up the guarded ammunition. For the first time in the play, Adelita takes action and breaks out of her role as domestic object to transform into an agent of change. Adelita's suicide literally and figuratively explodes the character's significations as a male defined construction of Chicana identity. However, Niggli's play ends on an ambiguous note. Deeply shocked and saddened, Concha speaks the last lines of the play before it ends with the cast singing the final verse of "*la Adelita*:"

CONCHA: Well, she got to them in time. The ammunition  
is safe. Aren't you glad? Aren't you happy? Hilario can  
fight on for the Revolution. You should show how happy  
you are. You should sing. Yes, sing, you devil's vomit,  
*sing!*

If Adelita should go with another,

If Adelita should leave me alone...

*(as the women slowly join in the song, CONCHA stops singing, and her out flung arms drop slowly to her side.)*

I would follow in a boat made of thunder,

I would follow in a boat made of bone. (192)

Concha's final lines reinstate the Revolution as a male endeavor, one that costs the lives of women. Whereas, before, the *soldaderas* claim the Revolution as their own, Concha's final lines distances the women from the Revolution, revealing that a revolution aimed at securing patriarchal order is no revolution for women. Another layer of ambiguity pervades the last scene through the final image of the *soldaderas* singing "*la Adelita*," that performs the double act of exalting the now deceased Adelita and emphasizing that the romanticism of the *corrido* rings hollow, given the solemn circumstances of its incantation.

Ultimately, the contradictory nature of the ending poses more questions than answers: Does the final scene reiterate *la soldadera* as an idealized tragic hero whose only act of agency results in death? Or does it signify the explosive end of this romantic tradition and the beginning of a Chicana feminist future? Niggli does not provide a definitive answer, nor could she as a Mexican woman laboring within the cultural confines of U.S. nativist folk drama. The last scene's ambiguity thus stands as the play's final performative act of opening up possibilities of Chicana representations with a contradictory staging that resists foreclosure. This resistance to foreclosure ultimately marks *Soldadera* as an interstitial discursive performance of transnational Chicana

feminist agency. The text's ambiguity, double agency, dualities and contradictions indicate its constant movements within and between U.S. and Mexico's patriarchal cultural discourses to stage a subversion and resignification of Chicana identity through complex woman-defined representations. *Soldadera* is not only Niggli's shot that cuts through the silence of suppressed early twentieth century Chicana voices, it is also a cultural explosion whose reverberations unsettle patriarchal order. The year that Niggli writes *Soldadera* in North Carolina, a future Chicana playwright is born in Niggli's home state of Texas. This playwright is Estela Portillo-Trambley, whose play *The Day of the Swallows* will break the thirty-year silence following Niggli's *Soldadera* to perform Chicana feminism on the stage of the Chicano Movement in 1972.

## Chapter II:

### “The Plot Was about Lesbians:” Staging Conflicted Female Desire in Estela

#### Portillo-Trambley’s *The Day of the Swallows*

In an interview with Juan Bruce-Novoa, Chicana playwright Estela Portillo-Trambley admits that when she wrote *The Day of the Swallows* (1972), she was partially motivated by an intent to capitalize on the cultural taboo of lesbian desire within both popular U.S. and Chicano/a culture:

I’m always thinking of a buck. So in a month and a half I wrote *The Day of the Swallows* and I put everything in. The plot was about lesbians; I knew nothing about them but I was going to sell it...it’s a play I wrote in a very short time and for a terrible reason. I was just being mercenary.

(Novoa and Portillo Trambley 170)<sup>1</sup>

While Portillo Trambley’s motivations are certainly problematic, they also speak to the “mercenary” measures some Chicana artist and intellectuals took to secure economic and

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<sup>1</sup> During the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, Hollywood heavily exploited “lesbian plots” in several popular B films such as *Venus in Furs* (1969), *El Topo* (1970), *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls* (1970) and *Klute* (1971). In these films, lesbians appear as agents of corruption or erotic objects of fantasy for male protagonists. “Lesbian plots” were also very common in horror films, in which lesbian sexuality was commonly associated with the fantastic and particularly with vampirism in popular B horror flicks like *The Exquisite Cadaver* (1969), *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Valerie and her Week of Wonders* (1970), *Vampyros Lesbos* (1971), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971), *The Velvet Vampire* (1971), and *Daughters of Darkness* (1971).

creative survival in the male-dominated Chicano/a Renaissance of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>2</sup> By the mid-1970s, critics lamented a decline in the creative and political energy of the Chicano/a Renaissance. However, at the same time, Movement-era Chicana writers were beginning to make their presence known and heard in the literary market. As early as 1969, Chicana feminists were publishing creative and scholarly work that critiqued Chicano nationalism's sexism and articulated a Chicana feminist ideology.<sup>3</sup> In 1972, Quinto Sol published Portillo-Trambley's play *The Day of the Swallows* in its second edition of *El Espejo-The Mirror*, edited by Octavio Igancio Romano-V and Hermino Ríos while Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner's anthology *Aztlán* (1972) included early Chicana writer, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca, alongside contemporary Chicana feminists Enriqueta Longeaux Vásquez and Mary Lou Espinosa. In 1975, Portillo-Trambley was the first and only Chicana to receive the Premio Quinto Sol Award and *Encuentro Femenil*, the first Chicana feminist journal, was in its second year of publication. Thus, by the mid-1970's the cultural movement of the Chicana/o Renaissance was certainly not over and the premature declaration of its denouement at the same time that Movement-era women artists and intellectuals announced their presence in the literary market attests to the Chicano/a Renaissance as a cultural and historical moment benefiting and constructed

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<sup>2</sup> Felipe Ortega de Gasca coined the term "Chicano Renaissance" in 1971 to describe the proliferation of Chicano/a cultural activism and expression ignited by the Movement when publication houses like Quinto Sol and emerging university programs in Chicano/a Studies assisted the Movement's efforts in gaining cultural and political autonomy for Chicano/a people. See Felipe Ortega de Gasca, "The Chicano Renaissance" in *Social Casework* Vol. 52, No. 5 (May 1971) 295-307.

<sup>3</sup> Part I of *Chicana Feminist Thought* (1997) edited by Alma García documents the earliest known publications by Movement-era Chicana feminist activists and scholars.

by men who controlled the means of production and formed a canon of literature that served to mute Chicana voices.

Portillo-Trambley is one among many creative and critical Chicana voices to cut through this cultural movement's institutionalized masculine and nationalist discourse. However, the playwright's commodification of lesbians in *Swallows*, indicated by her intent to "sell" a play about lesbians of whom she "knew nothing about," also reflects the compulsory heterosexuality of Movement-era Chicana feminism that marginalized Chicana lesbians (170). The publication of Portillo-Trambley's controversial first play coincided with the emergence of a so called "first wave" of Chicana feminism that critiqued the gender politics of Chicano nationalism and challenged traditional gender roles in Chicano/a culture. This "first wave" of Chicana feminism developed alongside and in response to the predominately Anglo U.S. women's liberation movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s when women of color espoused feminisms that challenged the racialized sexism of white feminism and the sexism of cultural nationalist factions of the Civil Rights Movement. Alma M. García describes the various feminisms that arose during this particular historical moment as follows:

African American feminists have also traced the origins of their feminist movement to their experiences with sexism in the Black nationalist movement. Although cultural, political and economic constraints limited the full development of a feminist consciousness and movement among Asian-American women during this period, cross pressures resulting from the demands of a nationalist and

feminist struggle led Asian American women in time to organize feminist organizations. Native American women activists also voiced a feminist agenda as they clashed with sexism among their male counterparts.... Similarly, Chicana activists traced the emergence of their feminist 'awakening' to the internal struggles within the cultural nationalist Chicano movement. (4)

Asian American, Black, Chicana, and Native American feminists desired to develop feminisms that took into account their cultural, economic and social status as minority subjects in the U.S. In "The Chicana and the Women's Rights Movement," published in a 1974 issue of *Civil Rights Digest*, Consuelo Nieto articulates a Chicana feminism based on the cultural and social conditions of Chicanas:

The Chicana must demand that dignity and respect within the women's rights movement that allows her to practice feminism within the context of her own culture. The timing and the choices must be hers, her models and those of her daughters will be an Alicia Escalante and a Dolores Huerta, her approaches to feminism must be drawn from her own world, and not the shadowy replicas drawn from Anglo society. The Chicana will fight for her right to uniqueness; she will not be absorbed. (211)

Because of the Anglo-centrism within the women's liberation movement, Chicano nationalists felt feminism was nothing more than an oppressive tool of institutional



racism and therefore it had no part to play in the Movement. Chicana feminists thus confronted male resistance and were often considered traitors or “malinchistas” to the Chicano nationalist cause, as “their efforts to redefine themselves as equal participants transformed them into an oppositional group in relation to their male counterparts and female counterparts who supported the view that feminism was a divisive force within the Chicano movement” (García 5). Nevertheless, Chicanas continued to re-define their roles and participate ardently in the political and cultural Movement through social activism and creative and intellectual labor. They asserted that sexism “was a collective problem” and thus “answered with a collective solution: A Chicana feminist ideology and feminist activities within Chicano/a communities and Chicano/a organizations” (6).

While “first-wave” Chicana feminism challenged the sexism within Chicano nationalism and traditional Chicano/a culture, it did not fully attend to Chicana sexuality nor did it challenge Chicano/a culture’s heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality that repressed same-sex desire. Consequently, Chicana lesbians found themselves marginalized and silenced by both Chicano nationalism and Movement-era Chicana feminism. Carla Trujillo explains the patriarchal cultural roots of repressed Chicana sexuality:

The majority of Chicanas, both lesbian and heterosexual, are taught that our sexuality must conform to certain modes of behavior. Our culture voices shame upon us if we go beyond the criteria of passivity and repression, or doubts in our virtue if we refuse (Castillo 1991; Alarcón, Castillo and Moraga 1989). We as women are taught to suppress our

sexual desires and needs by conceding all pleasure to the male. As Chicanas, we are commonly lead to believe that even talking about our participation and satisfaction in sex is taboo. Moreover, we (as well as most women in the United States) learn to hate our bodies, and usually possess little knowledge of them. (282)

Under the above-mentioned circumstances, Movement-era Chicana feminism exhibited a conflicted female desire. While Chicana feminists challenged a gender hierarchy that consigned women to submissive roles, their efforts to transform themselves into political and social agents stopped short of considering the inextricable role of sex in fixing Chicanas in conditions of “passivity” and “repression” (282). Even when “first-wave” Chicana feminism addressed issues of domestic and sexual abuse sanctioned by an unequal gender/sex paradigm, it fell silent on issues of homophobic assaults on Chicana lesbians. As a result, “first-wave” Chicana feminism reiterated patriarchal repression of Chicana sexual desire, and same-sex desire in particular, even as it overturned patriarchal subjugation of traditional Chicana gender roles.

I argue that *The Day of the Swallows* stages this “first wave” Chicana feminism in three acts that dramatize the desire for autonomy and self-definition that Movement-era Chicana feminists asserted in order to break free from the essentializing forces of traditionally subservient gender roles, while at the same time participating in the Movement’s compulsory heterosexuality through its marginalization of Chicana lesbians. First, the play rejects Chicano nationalism’s male dominated discourse that inhibits Chicana identity and negates Chicana desire. Second, *Swallows* symbolically constructs a

female-defined discursive space from which to stage Chicana desire. Third, through its “plot about lesbians,” *Swallows* presents a conflicted female desire, one that challenges compulsory heterosexuality by critiquing its physical and psychological violence while at the same time reverting to a homophobic narrative that condemns Chicana lesbians to silence. Yet, like Adelita’s suicide in *Soldadera*, Josefa’s suicide in *The Day of the Swallows* is marked by ambiguity as it simultaneously performs the discursive death of the Chicana subject under an oppressive patriarchal system and the desire for an alternative discourse where a Chicana subject in process can be fully realized.

The Chicano/a cultural taboos surrounding female sexual desire may very well contribute to the fact that *Swallows* never enjoyed frequent professional productions, although it did receive a few university productions after its publication in Quinto Sol’s second edition of *El Espejo-The Mirror*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the play’s earliest known staging of Chicana lesbian desire transformed the Chicano/a imaginary landscape, as Cherríe Moraga concurs: “the value of *Swallows* remains in its daring and complex depiction of a lesbian who is actively desirous, whose desire is equal to the urges of a man, but who rightly fears her life to face it” (162). The three-act play takes place in the fictional border town of Lago de San Lorenzo where the citizens are preparing for a yearly marriage ritual

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<sup>4</sup> A production of *Swallows* was put on at UCLA on 20, 21, 22 April, 1979. The play then enjoyed a longer run at the Nosotros Theater Center in Hollywood, California from 4 May through 27 May, 1979. The UCLA production received a brief but positive review in the *Los Angeles Times*. See Nancy Knudson, “Day of Swallows One Act Success” in *The Los Angeles Times* Vol. LXXX No. 18 (Wednesday, April 25, 1979). *The Day of the Swallows* also appears in the anthology *Contemporary Chicano Drama* (1976) edited by Roberto J. Garza. This essay refers to the first edition of *Swallows* published in the second edition of *El Espejo*.

at the village lake. The protagonist and town matriarch, doña Josefa, is chosen to lead the religious procession to the lake, an honorable duty in the *barrio*. All of the play's action takes place within the domestic space of doña Josefa's home, which she shares with her younger lover Alysea, whom she rescued from a whorehouse. Josefa and Alysea harbor a violent secret. After a stable boy, David, witnesses a kiss between the two women, Josefa cuts out his tongue fearing the boy will expose their forbidden love affair. Tormented by guilt, Josefa commits suicide at the play's end.

Like many Movement-era Chicana feminists, Portillo-Trambley vocally rejected Chicano nationalism, and as a writer, she wanted to transcend the politics of Chicano nationalist literature. In the interview with Bruce-Novoa, she criticizes Chicano nationalism for "polarizing everything between men and women" and for locking human relations in an antagonistic power dynamic that produces reductive representations of dehumanized subjects:

Use literature as a political tool and it becomes provincial, time bound...Political literature, no matter how clever it might be, tends to make the stereotypes of the evil exploiter and the poor innocent victim. That is not life. The exploiter is a human being too. He might be violent and selfish and greedy and mean, but deep down...he is still human. Once you've take this away from your character in literature, you've taken away his life. Political literature assassinates characters. (175)

She also takes issue with the Movement's dominant theatrical form, *teatro*, for its limited portrayal of power relations in a 1982 interview for *MELUS*:

I think *actos*...are a form of social protest...Theater cannot survive a diet of social protest; it cannot always be the tool to unite people because it only unites them on an emotional level. And that's not the right kind of unification. If people are going to get together, to have common beliefs and common goals, it has to be done on a mental or intellectual level. (61)

Instead, Portillo-Trambley desired to create a literature that spoke of common human experiences across various temporal, historical and social boundaries in order to simultaneously resist essentialism and connect audiences across differences. Thus, she expresses a desire "to go beyond the local and contemporary, to find a common denominator in unifying people, these would be the kind of imprints that I would like to make in contributing to *el Movimiento*" (Bruce-Novoa & Portillo-Trambley 172). For Portillo-Trambley, literature's powerful effect lies in its potential to complicate reductive representations thereby opening up symbolic systems to deeper significations, analogous to Adelita's suicide at the end of *Soldadera*.

As a "first-wave" Chicana feminist text, *Swallows* opens up Chicano/a literature's masculine and nationalist imaginary. Movement-era Chicano nationalist literature necessarily recovered an indigenous past erased by colonial oppression in the U.S. Southwest. Chicano nationalists mapped this past onto the mythic landscape of Aztlán to resignify the U.S. Southwest as an indigenous homeland. Sarah Ramírez explains that the

concept of Aztlán “provided a spiritual liberation, whose myths, spiritual concepts and symbols Chicano nationalists utilized to unearth a Chicano collective history” while also attempting to “recuperate an indigenous identity, and in some cases, create a humanizing praxis based on indigenous philosophies” (25). However, as a male-constructed imaginary, Aztlán’s symbolic structure mimicked a patriarchal gender hierarchy. As a result, according to Ramírez, “the attempts to encourage revival and pride in indigenous cultures...did not offer alternative visions to the subjugation of Indian or Chicana/Mestiza women” (225). In response, Chicana feminists continue to revise and reclaim Aztlán by revealing patriarchal paradigms embedded in its discourse and by re-imagining a more inclusive utopic homeland.<sup>5</sup> While *Swallows* does not present a Chicano/a utopia, it is part of a history of Chicana feminist texts that remap the discursive space of the U.S. Southwest to disrupt Chicano nationalism’s patriarchal oppression and intervene in a colonial historiography that it perpetuates further.

Emma Pérez argues that to consider the past as “a colonial imaginary opens up traditional categories such as ‘The West’ or ‘The Frontier’ (5). In *Swallows*, Portillo-Trambley re-signifies the idealized spatial category of “Aztlán” by exposing the patriarchal contours that inhibit Chicana identity and negate Chicana desire. She situates the play’s action within an ambiguous colonial past and locale in order to relocate Chicana subjectivity within the “vague, and undetermined” symbolic space of a borderland “created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (Anzaldúa 25). While specific time and place are unstated, Portillo-Trambley provides a detailed frame

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance, Cherríe Moraga’s “Queer Aztlán: The Re-formation of Chicano Tribe” in *The Last Generation* (Boston: South End Press, 1993).

description, culturally marking Lago de San Lorenzo as a *barrio* occupying the border between Mexico and the U.S.:

Two hundred years before the Esquinas family had settled in the Lago de San Lorenzo on a Spanish grant of fifty thousand acres, the Indians were pushed out further into the desert. This was the way of the bearded *gachupín*, with his hot grasp and his hot looks. Their greedy vitality was a wonder to the Indian. It was also death.

But now the *barrio* clustered itself around the hacienda. The conquered conquered the conquerors. (152)

Colonial tensions between the Spanish and Indian populations of Lago de San Lorenzo combined with an albeit sparse use of Spanish and a reference to desert terrain evoke a colonial history, culture, and landscape particular to the U.S. Southwest. The frame description's focus on colonial tensions constructs Lago de San Lorenzo as a contact zone of unequal power relations; it is "an essentially oppressed yet very real combination of distinct cultural heritages" that "clash and at other times become mixed" forging a shifting and contradictory discursive space (Detwiler 147). The frame description also lays out colonial and patriarchal parameters of Church and State that enclose the cultural space of Lago de San Lorenzo and organize the *barrio*'s ritualistic life, including the "identity and free will" of its inhabitants (Southerland 706):

The tempo of life, unbroken, conditioned, flavors its heartbeat with dreams and myths. The hacienda is the fiber upon which existence

hangs. The church, the fluid rose, assures the future promise of Elysium fields. No one dare ask for life.

What is the footfall beyond ritual, beyond livelihood? What is this faint unknown ache in the heart? It's more than just the rasp of hope...At daybreak the fiesta day is sanctified with a *misa* at sunrise; the choir rejoices the promise of day. A holy procession is led by the priest and an 'honored member' of the church. Offerings to the patron saint are generous amidst frugality. The animals are blessed; the people are blessed; all is washed clean.

Perhaps secretly each villager senses the werewolf moon inside him; the bite into passions will be hard and fierce after sunset. (151)

As a place where "no one dare ask for life" (151), Lago de San Lorenzo signifies oppression and stasis, but the text announces its rebellious stance by daring to ask: "What is the footfall beyond ritual, beyond livelihood? What is this faint unknown ache in the heart?" (151). The above questions code agency and identity in terms of desire and movement, and the subsequent action of the play dares to explore the answers to such questions, dramatizing the negotiations for subjectivity that occur within the circumventions of systematic, discursive oppression.

Within this ambiguous U.S./Mexican border space of Lago de San Lorenzo, Portillo-Trambley constructs doña Josefa's home. For women traditionally limited to the confines of domesticity, "home" can signify a liminal and oppressive state of being. Portillo-Trambley makes the oppressive significations of "home" clear in *Swallows* with



a largely female cast, who, akin to Niggli's *soldaderas*, are driven from their homes due to patriarchal violence. Clara, the wife of don Esquinas, falls victim to alcoholism and insanity while both Alysea and Josefa suffer abuse as children. The violence perpetrated by men in her family causes Josefa to leave and forge a new home for herself and other female outcasts of the *barrio*. She creates this women-centered domestic space on the margins of Lago de San Lorenzo, symbolized by her home's distance from the *barrio*, "the only house close to the edge of the lake" (152).

Josefa's house signifies a female-defined discursive space where Portillo-Trambley refigures the traditional domestic household as a collective utopic and safe space for women. While home for female characters in this play originally signifies patriarchal violence, Josefa's home is repeatedly described by women in the play as a heaven and safe haven "from the world of men" (160). Furthermore, its function as the central place of action transforms the "private" and "feminine" space of a woman's sitting room into a public one that invites audiences to bear witness to both collective Chicana expression and the individual desire for autonomy. Rebolledo argues that while Chicana artists and intellectuals desire a room of one's own, they "cannot afford to wait for such a room" and furthermore, the room that they desire is not necessarily the same quiet work space imagined by Virginia Wolfe (*Women Singing in the Snow* 131-132). Instead, Rebolledo identifies the kitchen table as a distinctly Chicana safe space in the home that includes "all the work, ingredients and chit chat that revolve around such a space" (132). Josefa's sitting room serves a similar symbolic function as a collective Chicana work space. It is where Josefa and Alysea labor creatively, weaving intricate lace that Josefa

often calls her life's work and compares to her life's journey, so that the emergence of subjectivity intertwines with creative agency.

This link between creative agency and subjectivity signifies the Chicana artist's self-fashioning of Chicana identity through her artistic labor. Rebolledo points out that for Chicana writers, to articulate their subjectivities is "to articulate that which had never been articulated, to speak the unspeakable and unacceptable" (Rebolledo 148). Similarly, Chicana feminist Bernice Rincón explains that because patriarchal gender roles prescribe an "essentially impersonal" cultural and social existence for Chicanas, "it is impossible for her to have a personal, private life, for if she were to be mistress of her own wishes, passions or whims, she would be unfaithful to herself" (Rincón 25). Writing is therefore a subversive and painful act for Chicanas as it "comes from the very interiors of being" and manifests in a central metaphor of giving birth or *dar a luz*: "gathering light from within" (Rebolledo 149). While the sitting room is surely a domestic space, it is one that Josefa forges for herself out of hardship and pain. From this room, Josefa articulates experiences through the dual metaphor of pain and light, or *dar a luz*: "a lonely, lonely struggle...then to emerge...to find light" that she must defend "at all costs" (Portillo-Trambley 157). Indeed, Josefa goes to great lengths in order to protect the home she has created for herself and Alysea from the incursion of patriarchal violence. While the sitting room functions as a kind of safe haven for women in the play, it proves not to be so safe for male interlopers. The threat of male incursion leads Josefa to mutilate David, an event that problematizes domesticity through interplaying significations of safety and transgression. The opening scene of the play finds Alysea cleaning blood off the floor and hiding the weapon amidst the sitting room's "safe" and "homey" atmosphere. Whereas by

the end of *Soldadera*, Adelita transforms from domestic object to patriarchal threat, *Swallows* opens by figuring female agency as already a danger to patriarchal order (152).

Furthermore, Portillo-Trambley stages conflicted Chicana desire through a protagonist who embodies contradicting identifications. While the remote setting of *Soldadera* situates Niggli's subversive cast completely outside accepted societal gender norms, Josefa traverses *Swallows* as both insider and outsider within the community of Lago de San Lorenzo. She is a well-loved matriarch who Father Prado, the town's sole religious authority, chooses to lead the holy procession on San Lorenzo's feast day, an honor that situates Josefa as a leader inside the community. However, Josefa fears her lesbian sexuality marks her as an outsider, and consequently she maintains distance from the *barrio* by living on the edge of the lake. Her "insider" status is therefore circumscribed by the unspoken cultural taboos surrounding same-sex desire. In order to maintain an insider status, she must repress same-sex desire, by keeping her relationship with Alysea a secret from the *barrio* people. Consequently, Josefa's insider status is fully contingent on repression thereby performing a negotiation of survival that requires the negation of one or more aspects of identity.

The play's representation of a racialized Chicana body also functions to mark the character's insider/outsider status circumscribed by polarized racial identity categories. Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach explain that for Chicana and Latina playwrights, the mestiza body "becomes the racialized ethnic body par excellence...enlisted utopically to represent all Latinas/os" and Chicanas/os (35). Furthermore, if the Chicana and Latina playwright dares to portray bodies that do not conform to audience expectations, "she may find herself at odds with the very community

her writing serves” (35). This is certainly the case with Portillo-Trambley, whose play was rarely produced by Chicanos/as for Chicano/a audiences and received criticism from Chicano/a literary scholars for failing to offer an authentic staging of Chicano/a identity as defined by male dominated Chicano nationalist ideals.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Portillo-Trambley’s protagonist does not embody a utopic mestiza representation:

*At this point, Josefa enters. She is a tall, regal woman about thirty-five. Her bones are Indian’s; her color is Aryan. She wears her hair back severely. Her movements are graceful and quiet. The cuffs and collar of her dress are of exquisite lace. She walks up to Alysea and puts her arm around her. (154, original italics)*

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in his 1975 article “Where are all the Chicano Playwrights?” Jorge Huerta calls *The Day of the Swallows* the only “full-length realistic play to be published by a Chicano or Chicana” (35). However, he questions the extent to which Portillo-Trambley’s play qualifies as Chicano and instead touts Luis Valdez’s *Dark Root of a Scream* as exemplary of Chicano drama because of its “politicized theme [the death of a Chicano in Vietnam] and its bilinguality” (36). He reconsiders Portillo-Trambley’s play in his 2000 study *Chicano Drama*, noting that *Swallows* is significant for its early attempts “to create a Chicano mythos” and to represent Chicana lesbian identity (Huerta 22). Unfortunately, her contributions are once again over-shadowed by Valdez who Huerta calls “indisputably the leading Chicano director and playwright” and to whom he attributes the development of a Chicano mythos on the dramatic stage via the “Valdezian *mito*” (36). See Jorge Huerta, “Where are all the Chicano Playwrights?” in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* Vol 3 No. 4 (1975) pp 32-42 and Jorge Huerta, “Mythos or *mitos*” in *Chicano Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 15-26.

Josefa's mixture of "Indian" bones and "Aryan" color signifies a colonially oppressed body whose outward "Aryan" color conceals her "Indian" bones, causing Josefa to feel both alienation and belonging: "I am Indian you know...yet...not of them in a way. Yet totally theirs" (8; 17). Josefa's conflicted racial identity casts biracial identity as a colonial tension of racial power. Interestingly, Josefa's "Aryan coloring" represses the character's Indian identity in the same manner that her role as community matriarch causes Josefa to repress same sex desire, thus drawing a parallel between racial and sexual oppression that prefigures intersectional Chicana feminism of the late 1970s. Ultimately, Josefa's insider/outsider status dramatizes the reiteration of a hierarchical and binary social system predicated on the repression of marginalized subjects.

As an autonomous and sexually desirous subject, Josefa counters passivity and repression, yet in her role as community pillar, she also fulfills a traditionally servile construction of Chicana femininity. Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach explain that dramatic action in Chicana and Latina play-texts often "revolve around self-definition, articulation of identity, and cultural affirmation" since the playwrights themselves "must reclaim, re-use and re-create their own history" (50). As a result, the plot tends to suffer from "stagnation" that reflects the protagonist's inner crisis (50). Stagnation functions in *Swallows* to signify Josefa's inner crisis of conflicted female desire. The protagonist spends most of the play agonizing over the violence she necessarily performs to protect her sexual identity, her status in the community, and her autonomy. In long and lyrically dense monologues, the character moves between justifying her actions and expressing guilt. The stagnation of plot transmits the character's "stuck" position between

contradictory identifications circumscribed by the limitations of cultural gender and sexuality norms.

Josefa's "stuck" position reflects the limitation of compulsory heterosexuality hindering early Chicana feminism's potential to destabilize patriarchal constructions of female identity. In the early 1970s, Movement-era Chicana feminists were just beginning to unfix Chicana identity from a gender/sex paradigm in which men are sexual agents and women are passive recipients and in so doing, lay the groundwork for the next generation of Chicana feminists to more fully account for Chicana sexuality. For instance, Bernice Rincón's 1971 article "La Chicana" draws a connection between traditional subservient gender roles and sexuality that presage the works of later Chicana feminists like Trujillo and Moraga:

Women are [considered by traditional Mexican culture] inferior beings, because in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional and resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals. The Mexican considers woman to be a dark and passive thing. He does not attribute evil instincts to her; he even pretends she does not have any. Or, to put it more exactly, her instincts are not her own, but those of the special, because she is the incarnation of the life force, which is essentially impersonal...She is an undifferentiated manifestation of life; a channel for the universal appetite. In this sense, she has no desires of her own. (25)

Rincón's article attests to the significant strides of Movement-era Chicana feminists to address the cultural and historical roots of Chicano/a culture's negation of female desire. However, in most cases, female desire is approached through a strictly heterosexual frame. Likewise, *Swallows* conceives of Josefa's sexuality through the purview of a heterosexual playwright, who "knew nothing" of the realities of Chicana lesbians yet utilized Chicana lesbian sexuality as a symbolic "channel" for the play's examination of repressed female desire (Rincón 25).

Once again, Portillo-Trambley stages Chicana identity as a double-edged transgression. Chicana lesbian sexuality is figured as both a violent threat to the community and a vehicle of feminist agency. The play symbolically links lesbian sexuality to violence at the same time that it subverts passive and repressed Chicana desire. Rather than possessing "a wound that never heals," Josefa wields agency by inflicting wounds that save her and Alysea from patriarchal abuse. In addition to mutilating David, the protagonist commits other acts of violence as a means of protection. Clemencia, the milk lady, calls Josefa "an avenging angel...pounding with her stick," referring to the way she uses her walking stick to beat Alysea's rapist when rescuing her from the whorehouse (154). Both violent acts symbolize emasculation involving traditionally phallic symbols of a knife and walking stick. Thus, while Josefa acts instinctively to protect herself and Alysea from physical attack, Portillo-Trambley codes Josefa's agency through masculine signifiers. In this manner, *Swallows* recalls *Soldadera's* scrambled gender codes by presenting another Chicana character whose embodiment of masculine and feminine qualities opens up the possibility of alternative gender identities.

The violence that Josefa must commit to escape domestic abuse as a young woman, to rescue Alysea from rape and to protect them both from the threat of homophobic violence, manifest the psychological and physical violence of compulsory heterosexuality that requires repression and reiterates unequal power relations between men and women. In *Swallows*, this unequal dynamic plays out through male characters threatening Josefa's power. Eduardo's passion for Alysea threatens to dissolve Josefa's relationship with the young girl; David's voyeurism threatens the matriarch's status in the community if the sexual act between the two women that he witnessed were ever discovered; and her life is literally threatened by Tomás, her bitter *tío* who claims he knows of Josefa's crime. Subsequently, the physical and social violence that Josefa both experiences and fears leads her to commit more violence. Josefa must negate the 'other' by silencing David or risk her own cultural and social erasure. The young boy is thus an absent presence in *Swallows*, an erased subject who is never physically embodied on stage, but whose negation propels the dramatic action. His negated status parallels repressed Chicana lesbian sexuality in the play, which again, is never explicitly staged, as the relationship between Alysea and Josefa is only hinted at throughout.

Instead of offering an explicit representation of lesbian sexuality, the play transmutes it by staging expressions of female desire in heterosexual contexts. Alysea is in fact not in love with Josefa, but plans to marry Eduardo, the former husband of Clara (now married to don Esquinas) and whose unfaithfulness plays a role in Clara's psychological demise. In Act I, Alysea and Eduardo perform the only physical expression of love in the entire play, when stealing a kiss before Josefa's entrance. The physical visibility of their sexually desiring act confirms heterosexuality as culturally and socially



legible. In contrast, desire between Alysea and Josefa becomes invisible, expressed only through physical gestures and mild expressions of fondness. Paradoxically, the play depicts Eduardo and Alysea's heterosexual desire as a kind of desire for freedom.

Eduardo fantasizes about "living and loving in the open" while Alysea states, "sometimes I think you have to be out in the open, no matter what (160 & 161). Eduardo and Alysea's clandestine love affair functions as a vehicle through which socially forbidden sexual relations become articulated and their taboo status somewhat challenged by making a case for living an "outed" life. However, staging their relationship as a desire for freedom also means that their heterosexual relationship becomes representative of an ideal state and thus reinstates heterosexuality as a paradigm of love. Furthermore, Josefa also expresses desire within the confines of heterosexuality. She yearns for male acceptance, in effect expressing a sense of identity gained through the approval of men.<sup>7</sup> However, the play troubles this dynamic in its efforts to legitimize female sexual desire. Moments after Eduardo and Alysea disclose their plans for marriage to the audience, Alysea exits, permitting Josefa to have the following erotic exchange with Eduardo:

*Josefa:* Do you think me beautiful?

*Eduardo:* Yes...very mixed in with a dangerous excitement

*Josefa:* You are making love to me...

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<sup>7</sup> In her essay "A Long Line of Vendidas," Cherríe Moraga explains the dynamic of female desire for male approval stemming from a patriarchal gender/sex paradigm in both Chicano/a and Anglo culture. She makes the case that this compulsory heterosexist system of gender and sexuality not only structures unequal power relations between men and women, but that it also leads to a "betrayal between women" (90). See, Cherríe Moraga, "A Long Line of Vendidas" in *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End Press, 1983) 90-103.

*Eduardo:* I make love to all things beautiful...don't you?

*Josefa: (in a whisper)* Yes...oh, yes. (166)

Josefa expresses a yearning to be desired by Eduardo as a beautiful object; on the surface, this positions her as submissive. Yet, the scene also insinuates that Josefa likewise possesses desiring agency when she confirms that she too actively participates in a gaze that “makes love to all things beautiful” (166). The scene thus presents Josefa as both desiring subject and desired object thereby complicating traditionally passive female sexuality. However, within the context of their conversation, sexual desire occurs between man and woman, once again performing a compulsory heterosexism under which Josefa’s same-sex desire for Alysea becomes largely subsumed.

In the final act of the play, the desire for male approval that Josefa expresses to Eduardo transforms into a desire for community acceptance. Guilt ridden, Josefa confesses her sins to Father Prado. However, it is not so much that she feels guilty for her crime against David, but rather that she sees her sexuality as a punishable sin in the eyes of the community: “I am guilty of grievous sins...they are beyond forgiveness...people will judge them so! Father...before I tell you...you must know...I do not feel sorry...I want...I need...the calm...to keep things as they are” (186). Josefa’s need to “keep things as they are” suggests that unlike Alysea, who paradoxically wants to live her heterosexuality “out in the open,” the protagonist desires to keep lesbian sexuality hidden from public view for fear of being ostracized by the community. Moreover, her confession reaffirms that what Josefa deems most horrific is not necessarily the violence she committed against David, but in fact, that David saw her kissing another woman: “Oh, Father! Now...I can see why...now! But...last night...it was not the Josefa he loved

that David saw...I could not stand what he saw! I could not” (188). Hence, Josefa fears public exposure. She also expresses a sense of shame at what David saw, which in her confession to Father Prado remains unspeakable. In this manner, the play resorts to a repressive homophobic narrative in which lesbian sexuality is presented as a punishable and fearful transgression of “things as they are” (186). Consequently, the play reiterates active Chicana lesbian desire as a cultural and social taboo, and risks performing the very ideological repression that it seeks to disrupt.

Critics are divided over the subversive potential of Josefa’s suicide. Moraga is the first to draw attention to the play’s problematic representation of a Chicana lesbian who is punished for transgressive non-heterosexual desire. Likewise, Sue Ellen Case argues that the play’s politics of sexuality are “irredeemable” due to a negative portrayal of Chicana lesbians whose suicide reaffirms heterosexuality’s normative status. However, Stacy Southerland makes the counter argument that Josefa’s suicide is an act of empowerment because it symbolically represents the choice of autonomy, liberating the character from gender and homophobic oppression. Lupe Cárdenas, Janice Dewey, Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez and Nancy Saporta Sternbach draw strong comparisons between Federico García Lorca’s *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* and Portillo-Trambley’s *The Day of the Swallows*. Both are tragedies that take place in oppressed communities where women’s sexuality is silenced. Fearing community reproach and “el que dirán (what will be said about one in public),” the female protagonists of both plays take their own lives (Sandoval-Sánchez 80). However, Sandoval-Sánchez and Saporta Sternbach concur that unlike *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, *Swallows* leaves room for lesbian desire to be imagined by the reader/spectator (81).

I read the critical contention over the play's ending as further confirmation of the play's ambivalent staging of female desire. Like Adelita's suicide at the end of *Soldadera*, Josefa's death symbolically opens up the possibilities for re-staging Chicana identity. I therefore argue that the play's final scene holds multiple meanings that bring into focus the complex process of an emerging "first wave" of Chicana feminism finding its voice under sexist and homophobic cultural and social conditions. Josefa's suicide does indeed interrupt an articulation of Chicana desire through its silencing of lesbian sexuality. However, to read Josefa's violent acts and her suicide as strictly problematic misses the play's ideological critique of internalized patriarchal oppression, a critique that puts Portillo-Trambley ahead of her time. As mentioned earlier, post-Movement Chicana feminists began to develop Chicana feminist theory that more fully took into account the experiences of Chicana lesbians. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano summarizes the first meeting of Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Lesbians that took place in 1987, more than a decade after the publication of *Swallows*. Yarbro-Bejarano explains that a major topic of discussion at this meeting was how lesbian relationships among Chicanas/Latinas often internalized the dominant cultural paradigm of the masculine agent/female submissive:

The greatest part of the discussion was dedicated to roles that represent the internalization of destructive heterosexual patterns. Many examples were given of lesbian couples that replicate the worst models of male domination/female subordination, in which one partner assumes a macho attitude vis-à-vis her partner, controlling her behavior, exhibiting jealousy and possessiveness, and upholding the

sexual division of labor, while the other assumes the role of  
 ‘the wife’ of passive sexual property. (144-145)

Cherríe Moraga expressed her own experiences of internalized patriarchal oppression in *Loving in the War Years*: “The Truth of the matter is that I have sometimes taken society’s fear and hatred of lesbians to bed with me. I have sometimes hated my lover for loving me. I have sometimes felt ‘not woman enough’ for her. I have sometimes felt ‘not man enough.’ For a lesbian trying to survive in a heterosexist society, there is no easy way around these emotions” (49). Moraga and Yarbrow-Bejarano’s accounts reflect post-Movement Chicana feminists’ need for new ideological notions of gender and sexuality that break the cycle of internalized oppression. Portillo-Trambley’s play offers a similar argument by staging the psychological and physical violence of compulsory heterosexuality. When Josefa assumes the dominant position in the play’s subverted paradigm of gender power relations, she can only repeat its destructive authority over others. Even her relationship with Alysea plays out a dominant/submissive dynamic. In the supposed safe haven of Josefa’s home, Alysea takes on the role of feminized care taker and love object. She appears on stage usually carrying out a domestic task such as sweeping or sewing lace, and Josefa constantly dotes on the young woman, frequently remarking on her “pretty” physical appearance, brushing her hair, and repeatedly telling her to “rest” when Alysea becomes anxious. Alysea does not reciprocate this kind of affection and after the crime committed against David, begins to fear Josefa, further marking her status as submissive, while Josefa begins to act possessively towards Alysea. She tries in vain to convince Alysea that Eduardo belongs to “the world of men” and therefore cannot possibly offer Alysea love:

*Alysea:* I love him.

*Josefa:* Love him? Tell me, how long will your precious Eduardo love you? (*pause*)...Clara drank herself insane because Eduardo left her. What do you think he'll do to you?

*Alysea:* I can't believe that...there's more to love.

*Josefa:* (*ironically and bitterly*) Love! Remember the brothel? No different...you choose darkness...all your pains are still to come! Haven't I taught you anything?

(181)

The irony of course is that Josefa's love proves to be just as dark and painful, claiming David as victim, causing emotional distress for Alysea and leading the matriarch to commit suicide. Thus the play's reiteration of an unequal and heterosexist gender/sex paradigm exposes the destructive nature of its internalized oppression and ultimately reveals that subverting this power relation is not an effective form of Chicana feminist liberation.

An argument Gloria Anzaldúa makes in *Borderlands* echoes Portillo-Trambley's critique of literature as a political tool:

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank,  
shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white  
conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of  
oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the

cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. (100)

While Anzaldúa will go on to articulate her ground-breaking theory of Chicana feminism called the “new *mestiza* consciousness” which destabilizes “the subject-object duality that keeps [Chicanas] prisoner,” Portillo-Trambley hints at the need for a new solution in the final scene of *Swallows* (Anzaldúa 100). In this scene, Josefa takes her own life on the very same day that the women in the village are to perform a ritual bathing “in promise of a future husband” (151). Josefa’s suicide interrupts the static, ritualistic lifestyle described in the opening scene, functioning as a symbolic rupture of patriarchal oppression, and like the death of Adelita, draws attention to the oppressive patriarchal forces that limit Chicana identity while simultaneously disrupting these forces. However, Josefa’s demise lacks the dramatic finality of Adelita’s suicide, leaving more room to imagine the possibilities of Chicana identity symbolically initiated by their deaths.

Realizing that she cannot exist in this liminal world of patriarchal violence, by committing suicide Josefa exiles herself from the community and abandons the safe haven of her home, invaded by male intrusion. Unlike Adelita’s, Josefa’s death is staged as a temporary absence as she expresses a desire to return to Lago de San Lorenzo, in the form of light, and her final words before exiting the stage are “wait for me,” uttered to the empty space of her sitting room (191). Her death is never directly acknowledged by the other characters in the play, who merely indicate that they have spotted “a body floating in the lake” (193). The final image of the play is Josefa’s silent sitting room, empty and radiating with an “unearthly light streaming through the windows” so intensely that it “gives the essence of a presence in the room,” suggesting Josefa’s symbolic

transformation that hints at an alternative notion of a fluid or diffused identity (193). The suicides at the end of *Soldadera* and *Swallows* mark these early Chicana plays as Chicana feminists acts that enact the desire for a Chicana subject in process who is “unstable within the order of discourse but consequently free to change, to insert itself within textuality” (Burke 50). The instability of a Chicana subject in process whose paradoxical identity cannot be reconciled in a binary mode of representation leads to her eventual demise in both plays. Adelita’s explosive end performs the instability of a female subjectivity constrained by patriarchal discourse, while Josefa’s death, staged as a temporary absence, indicates its transformable quality.

The vague imagery of light and the fluid symbolic space of Lago de San Lorenzo at the end of *Swallows* suggest a more fluid notion of Chicana identity, hinted at in *Soldadera*, yet unimaginable within the essentializing discourse of U.S. primitivist Southern drama. However, the suggestive ending of *Swallows* reflects the discursive limitations of “first-wave” Chicana feminism obstructed by lingering heterosexism and homophobia. As such, *Swallows* rejects Chicano nationalism by refiguring Chicano/a literature’s masculine and nationalist imaginary to carve a discursive woman-defined space from which to stage a conflicted Chicana desire that moves between the contradictory identificatory sites of insider/outsider, representation/repression and subject/object, thus reiterating compulsory heterosexuality even as it challenges its psychological and physical violence. Finally, the play’s reversion to a homophobic narrative simultaneously silences its Chicana lesbian protagonist and exposes the ramifications of unarticulated desire. Perhaps it is due to the play’s conflicted staging of female desire that *Swallows* left Cherríe Moraga so wanting:



But possibly I was too hungry in the 70's for a Chicana lesbian literature yet to be born; or possibly I *was* seeing something that was really there, but something which since then Portillo has been unwilling to explore further—the taboo subject of Mexican female desire. (162)

Perhaps this hunger is what led Moraga to take to the stage and transform Chicana feminist theatre into a healing practice to resolve the split within individuals (staged in *Swallows* as self-inflicted sexual repression) and the split among Chicanas caused by internalized racist and sexist oppression. In the next chapter, I explore Moraga's Chicana feminist act that further intervenes in a patriarchal and homophobic gender/sex paradigm by rendering a more explicit subject in process through a complicated representation of Chicana lesbian identity put forth in her play *Giving Up the Ghost*.

### Chapter III:

#### Refusing to Identify:

#### Mending the Split within and between Chicanas in Cherríe Moraga's

#### *Giving up the Ghost*

In a 1993 interview with Mary Pat Brady, Cherríe Moraga describes *Giving up the Ghost* (1984), her first foray into playwriting, as a transitional moment in her career. She speaks to the way in which the play served as a negotiation of the playwright's artistic and political role in Chicana feminist cultural production:

When I finished [*Loving in the War Years*] in 1983, I felt like I had finished my own story, not to say that I would not write from my own perspective but in a certain way I thought a burden had been lifted from me. So I continued to write in my journals but suddenly it was not autobiography. It was other people talking to me and that is how *Giving up the Ghost* came about which is a kind of transition because it is more *teatropoesía* with monologues and poetic voices. That is the transition from poet to playwright. (*Mester Vols.* 22-23 No. 1-2 p158)

Moraga's transition from poet to playwright is a move from personal artistic expression to a theatrical aesthetics manifesting a collective creative consciousness. In her 1992 essay, "Art in America Con Acento," Moraga states that playwriting allows her to write about collective experiences of Chicanas through the voices of multiple characters, thereby releasing her from a "fixed relationship to autobiography" and the

“singular voice” of poetry (57). Moraga entered the stage of late twentieth-century feminisms with *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), a collection of writings by women of color, which she co-edited with Gloria Anzaldúa. Shortly after, she published *Loving in the War Years* (1983), a personal collection of essays and poems exploring the cultural and social intersections of her identification(s) as a Chicana feminist lesbian. *Giving up the Ghost* is the first of a cycle of plays including *Shadow of a Man* (1990) and *Heroes and Saints* (1992) that explore Chicana sexuality in the cultural and social contexts of expanding Chicano/a communities.

For Moraga, the collective process of staging plays “creates *comunidad*” (Moraga and Umpierre 59). In particular, writing *Giving up the Ghost* allowed Moraga to construct a *comunidad* of Chicanas. She explains to Luz María Umpierre in a 1986 interview:

This form has allowed me to give voice to a lot. There have been numerous plays about Chicanos, but none particularly about Chicanas, and giving voice to all these women that I know from that very extended family gives me a greater enjoyment in writing, more than I have ever had in my life.

(*Americas Review* Vol. 14.2 p56)

Theater also more directly connects the isolated artist to broader Chicano/a publics as she states in her interview with Brady, “The reason I continue to write theater is because it is one place I can expose *poesía* in the common tongue” and because theater “has the possibility of being more accessible than anything on the printed page” (Brady & Moraga 160). Moraga’s desire to cultivate *comunidad* through her plays is critical considering Chicano/a theatre’s cultural positional shift from the alternative to the mainstream in the

late 1970s and early 1980s, coinciding with an emerging Chicano/a middle class.<sup>8</sup> Yolanda Broyles-González posits that middle-class Chicanos/as working within the mainstream face an “uneasy and contradictory challenge” and must consider the following questions: “On whose terms do we enter? Once we become part of mainstream institutions, whose interests do we serve?” (169). As a middle-class Chicana playwright who benefits from mainstream gains for Chicanos/as, Moraga is conscious of the ways in which the above questions influence her craft: “In conscience I cannot be a playwright unconcerned about how theater is created and for whom. The act of producing the theater, reaching the communities for whom it was intended, and the content of the work are fundamental to my purposes as an artist” (*Art con Acento* 159). Moraga’s desire to utilize theater as a means of creating Chicano/a *comunidad* thus indicates the playwright’s commitment to serving the interests of Chicano/a audiences and of entering the mainstream on her own terms.

*Giving up the Ghosts*’ production history reveals the play to be a performative site of constant transition. Moraga worked closely with directors and actors to bring forth *Giving up the Ghost* between its first development in 1984 at María Irene Fornes’s Hispanic Playwriting Lab in New York City and its world premiere on February 10, 1989 at the Theatre Rhinoceros in San Francisco. Moraga further developed the play at the Foot of the Mountain Theatre in Minneapolis, where it was given staged readings on June

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<sup>8</sup> See Jorge Huerta “Afterword” in *Chicano Drama* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000) pp186-192 and Yolanda Broyles-González, “El Teatro Campesino: From Alternative Theater to Mainstream” in *El Teatro Campesino: Theater in the Chicano Movement* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1994) pp165-235 for discussions on Chicano Theater’s move into mainstream U.S. theater.

16 and June 24, 1984. Two years later, West End Press published an early version of the play, which was later produced in March of 1987 at the Front Room Theatre in Seattle. In 1994, a version of *Giving up the Ghost*, based largely on the Theatre Rhinoceros production, appeared in the anthology *Heroes and Saints and Other Plays*.<sup>9</sup> For Moraga, the play's continuous transformation, from the page to the stage, is a means of putting words into action, a process that actualizes a speaking and embodied subject:

Theater happens in the flesh. After the voices began to speak to me, they insisted on being physicalized. And in this lies the transformative potential in theater. She who has been made invisible and dismembered—begins to assume full dimension on the Chicana stage. She becomes the subject of the work, she moves downstage into the light and opens her mouth to speak. She is no longer invisible nor silent. You cannot be ignored. (*Art con Acento* 158)

Indeed, *Giving up the Ghost* receives extended praise for giving voice and visibility to Chicana lesbians on the stage of both Anglo and Chicana feminist identity politics. Furthermore, Chicana feminists argue that the play deftly rescues Chicana sexuality from the commodifying and essentializing forces of compulsive and racialized heterosexual normativity both in dominant and Chicano/a culture by offering multiple representations

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout the chapter, I refer to the version of *Giving up the Ghost* that appears in *Heroes and Saints*.

of Chicana identity that are complicated by the play's interrogation of heterosexual oppression.<sup>10</sup>

Yvonne Yarbrow Bejarano argues that Moraga's complex representation of Chicana identity performs the ways in which Chicana lesbians "struggle with the internalization of oppressive attitudes and representational codes in the area of sexuality as well as race, culture and class" and thus does not perform an identity politics that embodies a "pure place of opposition or rejection from which [Moraga] can construct or destroy the representation of female desire" (*The Wounded Heart* 4). Instead, the Chicana lesbian body becomes a "field of negotiation," a space of "flux and transition" (4). I argue in this chapter that the transitive characteristics of *Giving up the Ghost*, which Moraga characterizes as *teatropoesía*, are indicative of the play's performative politics of disidentification working "on and against" the cultural, ideological and historical forces that not only construct and de-limit identity, but also disrupt and divide community (Muñoz 11). While the formal aesthetics of *Soldadera* and *Swallows* stages singular and unitary Chicana subjects in process to trouble binary representations of gender identity, the non-linear plot and split subjectivities of *Ghosts'* *teatropoesía* performs a disruption of meaning, and of unitary subjectivity to open up a collective space to imagine multiple Chicana subjects in process, ever-moving between contradictory identificatory sites of gender, sexuality and race. Furthermore, while a heterosexual frame

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<sup>10</sup> See especially, Yolanda Yarbrow Bejarano, *The Wounded Heart: Writing on Cherrie Moraga*. (Austin: U of Texas P, 2001) and Norma Alarcón, "Making *Familia* from Scratch: Split Subjectivities in the Work of Helena Maria Viramontes and Cherrie Moraga," in *Chicana Creativity and Criticism* edited by María Herrera-Sobek, and Helena María Viramontes (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1996) 220-231.

defining Chicana sexuality in relation to men limits *Swallows'* staging of same-sex desire, *Giving up the Ghost's* explicit dramatization of Chicana lesbian sexuality focuses exclusively on desire between women to interrogate the heterosexual oppression informing and obstructing relations between Chicanas. Echoing Moraga, I characterize the play's transitory form as *teatropoesía*, defined here as a performative discourse whose fusion of genres traverses between individual and collective voices and private and public spaces to stage Chicana identity as constantly in-flux, and to reconfigure a more inclusive Chicana feminist *comunidad* across differences of age, gender, sex, class and race as a means of mending the rifts caused within and between Chicanas by the oppressive ideological constraints of gender, sexuality and racial binaries.<sup>11</sup> Norma Alarcón draws attention to the fact that Amalia and Marisa are never in dialogue with each other but “speak their subjectivity” directly to the audience. It is through this process of ‘speaking subjectivity,’ that characterizes the *teatropoesía* at work in *Giving up the Ghost* and that marks the play as a Chicana feminist intervention. *Teatropoesía* functions as a performative discourse of “speaking subjectivity,” akin to the disidentificatory process of “self-actualization” responding to ideological forces that “discriminate against, demean, and attempt to destroy components of subjectivity that do not conform or respond to narratives of universalization and normalization” (Muñoz 161). *Teatropoesía* dislodges Chicana subjectivity from the destructive grasp of gender ideologies that produce psychological, physical and social violence thereby operating as a form of cultural healing and survival.

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<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of *teatropoesía* as a multi-genre artistic form developed by Chicanas in the late nineteen seventies, see Yvonne Yarbrow Bejarano, “*Teatropoesía* by Chicanas in the Bay Area: ‘Tongues of Fire,’” *Revista Chicano-Requena* Vol. 51 No. 1 (1983) 88-96.

Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost* marks a radical shift in Chicana theater by rendering Chicana lesbians visible as desiring subjects. In so doing, the play breaks a decade long silence in Chicano/a theater regarding Chicana sexuality, and more specifically, Chicana lesbian sexuality, since Estela Portillo-Trambley's *The Day of the Swallows* in 1972. Critics, including Moraga, argue that while Trambley's *Swallows* is the first Chicana representation of an "actively desirous lesbian," the play conceives of Chicana sexual desire through a heterosexual framework that commodifies and objectifies Chicana lesbians as it simultaneously represses them (Moraga, "The Obedient Daughter" 162). This simultaneous representation/repression of the Chicana lesbian as a commodified object in *Swallows* performs the compulsory heterosexism of Movement-era Chicana feminism and the heterosexual racism of second wave Anglo feminism of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

During the 1970s, Chicana feminist critiques of sexism within the Chicano/a Movement, and of the Anglocentric bias of the Women's Movement, forced a recognition of concurrent systems of racial, class, and gender oppressions. Both the Chicano/a Movement and the Women's Movement neglected to account for intersectional oppressions in their liberatory politics, causing ideological divisions amongst their members. According to Linda Alcoff, tensions in the Women's Movement between cultural and post-structuralist feminist approaches to gender and sex representations produced an identity crisis summed up as follows:

The cultural feminist response to Simone de Beauvoir's question, "Are there women?" is to answer yes and to define women by their

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<sup>12</sup> See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* Vol. 5 No.4 (Summer, 1980) 631-660.



activities and attributes in the present culture. The post-structuralist response is to answer no and attack the category and the concept of woman through problematizing subjectivity. Each response has serious limitations and it is becoming increasingly obvious that transcending these limitations while retaining the theoretical framework from which they emerge is impossible. (407)

Both cultural and post-structural feminist theories and practices routinely performed the contested category of “woman” as white, middle-class, and heterosexual. For instance, Yarbrow Bejarano observes of feminist theater in the 1970s and early 1980s that despite its “commitment to ‘centering’ women characters, staging their stories and representing issues of gender and sexuality,” representations of female desire are typically heterosexual and “partake for the most part of the privileges of class, white skin and membership in the dominant culture. The perspectives of playwrights who are lesbians of color and lesbian-of-color characters are practically nonexistent” (*The Wounded Heart* 24-25). Even as the Feminist Movement began to interrogate its own racism and homophobia, its theories of sexuality continued to neglect race and class, resulting in identity politics at once exclusionary and tokenizing of women of color. Chicana feminists resisted, alongside other feminists of color, the essentialism of Anglo feminist identity politics by refiguring identity as “a site of struggle where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions” (Muñoz 6). Nevertheless, Chicana feminists failed to consider homophobic oppression maintained by Chicano/a and dominant U.S. culture’s heteronormative gender/sex paradigm and thus reiterated the Movement’s marginalization of queer Chican@s. Consequently, in the 1980s, Chicana lesbian

feminists, including Gloria Anzaldúa, Norma Alarcón, Ana Castillo, Moraga, Monica Palacios, Carla Trujillo, and Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano, worked on a variety of critical and creative fronts to eradicate the oppressive forces of compulsory and racist heterosexism within both Anglo and Chicana feminisms, further complicating identity categories to allow for “hybrid, racially predicated and deviantly gendered identities [to] arrive at representation” (Muñoz 6).

Chicana lesbians certainly arrive at representation in *Giving up the Ghost* as actively desirous subjects. However, the play resists constructing Chicana identity through conventional theatrical modes of meaning production that can lead to static identificatory representations. Instead, its *teatropoesía* obstructs the linearity and singularity of traditional theatrical conventions of plot, character, dialogue and spectator gaze, in order to open up a collective imaginary space to stage subjects in process forged from “the contact between understandings of the self (fixed dispositions) and socially constructed narratives of the self” (Muñoz 6). The play resists a traditional linear narrative and instead offers a synthesis of the personal reflections of the play’s three characters, Marisa, described as “a chicana in her late 20’s,” Corky, Marisa’s teenage incarnation, and Amalia, Marisa’s lover, described as “Mexican-born, a generation older than Marisa” (Moraga 5). Thus, the characters appear to construct self-narratives through poetic monologues and soliloquies while the non-linear “plot” structure disrupts any order of meaning that could potentially lead to a unified representation of subjectivity. To add further complication, the protagonist is a split subject, Marisa/Corky, who embodies contradictory gender significations. Norma Alarcón posits that this split subject “puts into play” dyads of man-woman and “butch”-“femme” as “Marisa is split asunder between her male-like subjectivity and behavior, and her literal female body,” which cannot be reconciled under an imposed

heterosexual gender/sex paradigm (“Making Familia from Scratch” 228). However, at the same time that Marisa/Corky represent opposite poles of gender and lesbian sexuality performances, they also stage a spectrum of Chicana feminist identities that dislodges Chicana feminism from essentializing ideological binds.

Instead of engaging in dialogue, the characters direct their monologues and soliloquies to the audience, at times interrupting or augmenting each other’s individual stories and, in the case of Marisa and Corky, cutting across time, thereby rupturing a normative past/present temporal binary and creating what Yarbrow Bejarano calls “a collage-like field of subjectivity...across which various aspects of female desire are expressed,” but remain unresolvable (*The Wounded Heart* 44). The constant shifting back and forth between characters’ monologues from differing positions on the stage confuses the traditional singular direction of the spectator’s gaze, thus further complicating the construction of meaning. Jill Dolan argues that configuring theatrical spaces so that scenes are staged all around the audience detaches “the gaze into a multidirectional circulation” in which spectators look “constantly, at the performers and at themselves (154). *Giving up the Ghosts*’ use of space produces a similar effect. The three actors constantly occupy the entire space of the stage and remain on set during the entire play. When an actor performs a monologue or soliloquy, she moves downstage, focusing the spectator’s gaze. However, this focused gaze is constantly undercut by the actor sharing downstage space with other non-speaking actors, or by actors speaking from other locations, thereby creating for the spectator a shifting visual pattern of centered and de-centered space and a shifting gaze from one speaking subject to another and back again.

As a result, the play disrupts spectator positionality in a way that disallows a fixed gaze on a central Chicana identity.

Obscuring the traditional linear and singular gaze of theater allows Moraga to reconfigure meaning production as a collective social process. She accomplishes this by undoing the actor/spectator binary of dominant proscenium theater. *Giving up the Ghost* has been largely performed in traditional proscenium theater spaces that maintain a clear divide between actors on stage, and spectators who view the action from a distance. This imaginary divide, commonly known as the fourth wall, spatially insists on a passive and non-participatory audience.<sup>13</sup> However, *Giving up the Ghost* rejects the imaginary fourth wall by enlisting the audience as a collective character called “The People.” In so doing, Moraga recognizes the theater spectators’ role in creating meaning. With the characters directing their speech to The People, the play transforms the passive spectator into a participating actor thereby extending the production of meaning to a collective process. Yarbrow Bejarano thus argues that the play conceives of its audience as a “social audience” in contrast to a singular ideal spectator (*The Wounded Heart* 46). A “social audience” invokes a collectivity of spectators, “shifting the emphasis from the individual, gendered spectator of a particular race, culture and class to an audience composed of people who share one or more of those characteristics” (47). This bears significance considering that *Giving up the Ghost* plays to a variety of audiences both white and Chicano/a, revealing its potential to unsettle boundaries within and between Anglo and Chicana feminists by imagining a

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<sup>13</sup> Although *Ghost* has been staged in traditional proscenium theaters typical of the mainstream, its minimal use of props and bare setting allows for flexible stagings in a variety of social spaces, keeping the play in line with the tradition of *actos* in Chican@ teatro.

feminist community across racial, class and sexuality differences, as Yarbrow Bejarano makes clear: “When ‘The People’ to whom Corky, Marisa, and Amalia address in their monologues are all women, the possibility of women’s community hinted at in the play is reinforced by the interaction among women of different racial, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in the audience” (47). Even though the play opens up the possibilities of cross-racial, cultural, and economic alliances among women and emphasizes a collective mode of meaning production, the play does not fully elide difference, thereby keeping the co-production of meaning in process so that Chicana identity “stays within purview but refuses the norms of legibility and the burdens of visibility” (Soto 3). The play conveys a specifically Chicana identity, yet one that remains in flux, by simultaneously employing ambiguous and pronounced cultural markers through sound, language and physical appearance, eliding an essentialist identity yet staging it in a way that still makes it readable as Chicana. Moraga grounds identity performance in the context of working-class Chicano/a culture through a sparse liminal space that relies only on auditory signifiers to evoke an urban Chicano/a *barrio* soundscape through “street sounds,” and “the streetwise ritmo” of “Motown, soul, Tex-Mex, and Latin Rock” alongside traditional Mexican *rancheras* and *corridos* (*Giving Up The Ghost* Moraga 5).<sup>14</sup> Yi Fu Tuan explains that the de-localized characteristic of sound allows one to emotionally enter an imaginative space: “The listener does not face the sound but rather feels immersed in it” (239). The use of sound in *Giving up the*

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<sup>14</sup> In theater, the term “liminal space” describes an empty stage in which its sparseness opens up endless imaginative and performative possibilities. The term derives from Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality” used to describe the ambiguous stage of a rite of passage in which an initiate is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, or convention, and ceremonial.” See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and anti-structure* (Chicago: Adline Publishing Co, 1969), 95.

*Ghost* draws the spectator into a Chicano/a *barrio* through auditory signifiers to affect a fluid Chicana imaginary space free of fixed visual markers but culturally anchored to Chicano/a oral tradition through song.

This liminal use of space intentionally draws the spectators' attention to performances of cultural identity politics via moving and speaking subjects on the stage. In *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Moraga calls for a theory in the flesh, "where the physical reality of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse together to create a politic born out of necessity" (19). The embodied characters of *Giving up the Ghost* perform Moraga's theory in the flesh serving as performative intersectional sites of cultural politics and flesh and blood bodies. Language and physical appearance are two modes in which bodies on stage become external signifiers of "the physical reality" of working class urban Chicanas. Moraga states that language is a critical performance of resistance to mainstream commodification of Chicanos/as in theater: "Theater for me has much to do with the recuperation of the language of the Chicano as an act of cultural resistance and affirmation. Middle Class American language infiltrates movements and thus casts the revolution in limited and the dominant terms" (*Art con Acento* 157). In Moraga's interview with Umpierre, the playwright provides a personal example of American Middle Class Language's infiltration into Chicana/Latina theatre. She recollects working exclusively with a Latin American theater group in which everyone wrote exclusively in English, "for the purposes of the theater" (62). Moraga was the exception to this rule, writing in both English and Spanish, which, she states, "became an issue" (62). Moraga felt that writing only in English limited the voices of her Chican@ characters, and in fact when she did attempt to write English only characters it proved ineffective (62-63). In *Giving up the Ghost*, each character articulates her selfhood through a "poetic

bilingualism” (*The Wounded Heart* Yarbrow Bejarano 25) of quotidian Chicano/a speech. This poly-vocal speech encompasses a variety of English and Spanish that includes working class Standard American English, American English slang, Chicano English, Chicano Spanish, Standard Mexican Spanish, and caló, while Corky talks distinctly in a “cholo style” dialect common to the cholo subculture of urban Chicano/a youth (*Giving up the Ghost* Moraga 6).<sup>15</sup> Like the use of street sounds and traditional and popular Chicano/Mexican songs, the varied use of language simultaneously constructs and draws one into the complex and rich realities of Chicano/a communities that Moraga stages through *teatropoesía*.

Most significantly, the articulation of multilingualism across the three characters affirms the diverse linguistic subjectivities of Chicanas. Gloria Anzaldúa writes in *Borderlands/La Frontera* that relationships between Chicana feminists are often obstructed by internalized linguistic oppression:

...because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other...we oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the ‘real’ Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. (80)

Anzaldúa’s observation speaks to the way in which language is a performance of cultural identity, but it can also be misconstrued as a marker of authenticity, a mistaken notion that permits linguistic censoring within both dominant and Chicano/a culture. The multiplicity of

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<sup>15</sup> Chicana linguist Carmen Fought uses the term “Chicano English” to describe English structured by patterns of Spanish language spoken by Chican@s in the U.S. southwest. See Carmen Fought, *Chicano English in Context*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

languages in *Giving up the Ghost* eschews linguistic authenticity, instead confirming that “there is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience” (Anzaldúa 80). Thus, speech plays a powerful role in Moraga’s project of creating Chicana feminist *comunidad* by staging performances of multiple linguistic realities that legitimizes Chicana bilingual self-expression, across a variety of language usages, in the face of U.S. dominant culture’s historic censoring of bilingual voices and the tendency of Chican@s to censure each other because of internalized linguistic oppression.

Furthermore, Moraga metaphorizes the process of arriving at representation for Chicanas as “the pull and tug of having to choose between which parts of our mothers’ heritages we want to claim and wear and which parts have served to cloak us from the knowledge of ourselves” (*This Bridge Called My Back* 19). While language legitimizes Chicana bilingual self-expression, physical appearance puts into play multiple and contradictory cultural significations to demand visibility but without reducing Chicana identity to “a quick and certain visual register of a gendered body” (Soto 3). Like language, physical appearance can be mistaken for an authentic performance of the self; however, it can also be a means of renouncing authenticity and prescriptions of culturally and socially “acceptable” appearances. Corky, Marisa, and Amalia are both fashioned from and critique normative heterosexual gender codes within Chicano/a culture that bear down on the female body. In so doing, the play offers a multiplicity of Chicana representations across gender identifications and sexual orientations that resist foreclosing identity performances.

In an interview with Norma Alarcón, Moraga describes Corky as a “*Machita*,” a term typically used as a slur against “women trying to be like men” (134). However, through the



character of Corky, Moraga re-appropriates *la machita*, utilizing the character to render visible the “butch” Chicana lesbian and to interrogate the authority of heterosexual masculinity within Chicano/a culture. Here, it is important to address the controversy surrounding “butch” identifications within 1970s feminisms in order to understand the political thrust of staging “butch” identity in Chicana feminist theatre. The works of Yarbrow Bejarano and Dolan document fracturings within feminist circles, in the 1970s and 1980s, over the political implications of butch-identified lesbians. Yarbrow Bejarano explains that cultural lesbian feminists seeking sex practices of equal power rejected butch-femme on the grounds that it reinforced patriarchal heterosexual gender/sex power relations (*The Wounded Heart* 86). Radical lesbian feminists retaliated, arguing that the cultural feminist attack on butch-femme identifications and sex practices “reproduced traditional concepts of gender by insisting on universal differences between men and women” (87). However, radical lesbian feminists failed to consider “the historical significance of sexualized and racialized representations of women of color” (88). Dolan’s work describes the contested nature of butch-femme identifications within Anglo feminisms that amounted to exiled and abject representations of butch lesbians in 1970s Anglo feminist theatre and realist theatre in particular:

The butch lesbian retains her difference and presents a dangerous threat to heterosexual, gay-assimilationist, and lesbian-feminist ideology. The butch in lesbian realist plays inflected by these ideologies remains ghosted as an anachronism...her isolation and the moral judgments launched against her by other characters place the butch in the position once defined for all lesbian subjects by

heterosexuality. She becomes the enigma to be purged from the lesbian realist text. (169)

*Giving up the Ghost* intervenes in Anglo feminism's purging of the butch identity, announcing in its title a rejection of Anglo lesbian feminist theater's exclusionary politics. The play renounces the reductive representation of the butch lesbian as a "ghosted anachronism" who must be textually "purged" (169). On the contrary, the Chicana butch lesbian in Moraga's play is a bodied and speaking subject who, in Act I, moves deliberately "low and slow" down stage to occupy the center (*Giving up the Ghost* Moraga 7). Furthermore, the play opens up Chicana feminist theater to butch-lesbian representation, which heretofore had not been explicitly staged due to Chicana feminism's marginalization of lesbians in the seventies and due to moral ambiguity among some Chicana lesbian feminists concerning butch-femme identifications, as Yarbro Bejarano finds in the 1987 report I referenced in chapter two:

Some women said that when they first came out, they found themselves acting and dressing butch or femme, but as they became more sure of their lesbian identity, they ceased to feel the need for these roles. The consensus seemed to be in the direction of escaping rigid labels or confinement to one or the other role. The desire for the freedom to incorporate both butch and femme within a single lesbian identity may be a response to the excessive prescriptiveness of role behavior within Latina lesbian culture. On the other hand, since the butch/femme phenomenon is more prevalent among working-class Latinas, the critique expressed in the

workshop may also be a factor of the predominantly  
middle-class identity of the women present (145)

Moraga's representation of Chicana lesbian butch identity works on and against this ambiguity by both presenting butch as a viable identification for Chicana feminist lesbians and by critiquing the limitations of rigid gender and sex roles under the institution of heterosexuality. Wearing "khaki pants with razor-sharp creases, pressed white undershirt," and short, "slicked back" hair, Corky's cholo-style performs a mimicry of working class urban Chicano heterosexual masculinity (*Giving up the Ghost* 6). Muñoz defines mimicry as a performative reaction "against forced gender prescriptions" as it "mimes and renders hyperbolic the symbolic ritual that it is signifying upon" (*Disidentifications* 78). In Corky's case, her mimicry "renders hyperbolic" rigid active/passive gender and sex roles, which Yarbrow Bejarano characterizes as a *chingón/chingada* polarity.<sup>16</sup> Corky takes on the role of *chingón* through an affectation of "toughness," "feigning the false bravado of her teenage male counterparts" and secretly carrying a blade in her pants pocket to remind her "I carry somet'ing/am sharp secretly" (*Giving up the Ghost* 6-7). However, her performance always falters, revealing that her desire to assume a masculine role stems from her rejection of the female prescribed role of *la chingona*. Thus, Corky admits of her *chingón* posturing that she can "never quite pull it off" (8). Her personal revelation that "always knew I was a girl/deep down inside" (8) ultimately undercuts her masculine appearance and constructs Corky as a lesbian subject whose self-fashioning as 'butch' does not necessarily undermine an

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<sup>16</sup> Mexican culture refigures the psychoanalytic binary of active masculine desire/passive feminine desire into a *chingón/chingada* paradigm which figures "the overvalued male" as "The European conqueror, *el chingón*" and figures "the denigrated female" as "the indigenous 'mother' of the Mexican nation, *la chingada*" (9) See Yarbrow Bejarano, 9, 11, 85 & 89.

identification as also ‘woman,’ thus offering “the potential for imagining a different erotics for Chicana lesbians of “having” and “being had” within a Chicano/a cultural context (Yarbro Bejarano 89).<sup>17</sup>

In contrast to Corky, Amalia’s appearance signifies ideal femininity from a Chicano heterosexual male standpoint. Amalia dresses in a traditional feminine Mexican style: “a rebozo wrapped around her shoulders, a blouse falling over the waist of an embroidered skirt. Her hair is long and worn down or loosely braided” (8). She inhabits the “femme” and *chingona* positions and is thus presented as the object of Marisa’s desire. However, she does not always occupy the object position within their relationship. Through Amalia’s own desire for Marisa, Moraga presents the possibility of a feminine desiring subject, scrambling the “simple equation between gender identification and sexuality, femininity and heterosexuality” (Yarbro Bejarano, *The Wounded Heart* 137). The play emphasizes this point when Marisa describes Amalia as “un hombre en una persona, tan femenina” [a man in a person so very feminine] (22). Furthermore, at times, Amalia takes on a maternal role as the actress transforms into Corky’s mother. In this manner, Moraga draws out the way in which female sexual desire is subsumed by the Chicana’s cultural role as mother within a male defined heterosexual order. However, because Amalia herself is also a mother, she challenges the passivity prescribed to Chicana sexuality and to the feminized cultural role of Chicanas within a patriarchal gender/sex system. Alarcón argues that Moraga “effects a process of potential transformations between two women as unlike each other as we could ask for—the lesbian with the subjectivity of a ‘man’ and the traditional heterosexual

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Halberstam also re-imagines a multiplicity of masculinities not explicitly tied to the male body. He argues that attending to what he calls *female masculinities* exposes the construction of masculinity as a male supremacist ideology. See Judith [Jack] Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke UP, 1998).

‘woman’ who may also be our mother” (“Split Subjectivities” 228). Thus, through Amalia, the play re-fashions “traditional” Chicana identity through a character who is both a desiring feminine subject and a mother.

Marisa’s overall appearance is less marked by gender, leading Alarcón to conclude that “for Marisa, neither ‘butch’ (man) nor ‘femme’ (woman) is [an] acceptable” performance of self-hood (“Split Subjectivities” 228). Her apparel is also not explicitly marked by Chicano/a culture, unlike Corky’s cholo style or Amalia’s traditional Mexican dress. Once again, Marisa signifies ambiguity, wearing simply “a pair of Levi’s, tennis shoes and a bright colored shirt,” which suggests her status outside the norms of traditional Chicano/a gendered cultural roles (Moraga 6). Marisa’s ambiguous self-fashioning thus carves out a third identificatory space for Chicana identity between (pre)scripted cultural gender roles. Moreover, her sexuality is the vehicle through which Marisa self-fashions this third space of an identification, asserting to The People, “I’m queer I am. Sí, soy jota because I have never been crazy about a man” (14). It is thus Marisa’s sexuality that partially casts her out of gendered cultural legibility, manifested in the ambiguity of her dress.

Yet, if Marisa’s ambiguous sartorial appearance signifies her status as outsider, her explicitly *mestiza* physicality marks her status inside the purview of Chicano/a culture, because “the idea of the mestizo performing body is key to the political imaginary” of Chicano/a cultural production (Arrizón 58). Moraga attributes to the character “a face of dark intensity and definite Indian features” (Moraga 6), raising the specter of an essentialist treatment of race in which brown bodies signify authentic racial performances. Soto reads authentic performances of race in Moraga’s work as the result of the biracial playwright’s own “desire to be recognized as a racialized subject,” which is akin to the underlying motives of Niggli’s primitivist performance

of an authentic Mexican self, in the role of the Mexican Playmaker (18). However, Arrizón contends that within the context of Chicana feminist performance, “the body of the native woman does not necessarily assert the presence of an authentic self because it challenges cultural ‘purity,’” (*Queering Mestizaje* 63). This is because the native body is “consciously marked by the acceptance of blended Spanish and indigenous pre-colonial roots” (58). Therefore, Arrizón concludes, Chicana feminist artists employ the native female body “as a form of resistance and cultural affirmation” in the face of colonial patriarchal repression (68). Likewise, Soto argues that the objectification of race in Moraga’s autobiographical work indicates that for the playwright, “power, in the form of empowerment and agency, and racial identity are strongly linked” and thus race appears in her works as something “alienable, possessable” (27, 28). However, Soto continues, “Moraga’s ability to objectify race, to desire it fiercely, only makes her more insistent on her right to it and on its inseparability from herself,” thereby also suggesting that race is an “inalienable part of person hood” (28). Soto’s analysis thus suggests that Moraga’s work puts forth a contradictory representation of race. I concur with Soto; however, I argue that the contradictory treatment of race in Moraga’s work is indicative of the play’s *teatropoetica* movement between essentialist and anti-essentialist sites of identification. In other words, while the strictures of Southern nativist drama requires Niggli to fully embrace a primitivist and essentialist performance of Chicana selfhood, Moraga’s *teatropoesía* completely rejects essentialism even as its representations of *mestiza* bodies stages an essentialist notion of racial identity.

Moraga’s insistence on a *mestiza* body rejects the racial purity of patriarchal casting practices in mainstream dominant and Chicano/a theater of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Broyles-González’s research on Teatro Campesino reveals how Chicano/a theater’s entrance into

the U.S. mainstream included racialized gendered casting decisions. As the *teatro* group transformed into a mainstream production company, they adopted an assimilationist ideology to appease a white middle class audience. As a result, directors and producers—predominantly male—began to increasingly cast younger and lighter skinned actresses in lead roles, something that the female members of the *teatro* criticized. Broyles-González explains that such casting decisions rigidly stereotyped actresses into “soft” types and “hard” types—into good or bad” across a divide of age, physical appearance (including skin tone), and personality (146).

Interestingly, *Giving up the Ghost* maintains this racialized gender divide as Moraga describes Amalia as “soft” in all the ways that Marisa is “hard” (8). However, rather than reiterate this binary, the tortured relationship between Marisa and Amalia exposes the multiple gendered, racial and sexual meanings that “hard” and “soft” categories shore up as they mark Chicana bodies on and off the theatrical stage. Furthermore, by centering a Chicana character marked by her “hard” and racialized physical appearance—quite literally centering her, as Marisa appears first in the play, occupying center stage—Moraga recuperates the *mestiza* body from further cultural erasure through white-washed casting in Anglo and Chicano/a mainstream theater.

Nevertheless, the play also participates in the objectification of racialized bodies. There are two instances in the play where the characters take on the roles of Pre-Columbian *indígenas*. After Marisa recollects Amalia’s memory of becoming known as a “puta bruja,” in her village, Corky enters the stage “wearing a native bruja mask. She dances across the stage with rattles in her hand” (19). Later on, in a dream sequence, the three women gather on the stage “clapping tortillas,” a symbolic gesture connoting lesbian sex. Amalia and Marisa kiss, instigating thunder and lightning to affect that “the gods have been angered” (29). Both of these scenes invoke indigeneity to emphasize cultural and social transgression. At other times in the play, generic

indigenous music plays in the background of erotically charged speeches. The erotic and mystifying use of indigenous music and ritual lends itself to reproducing exoticized “dark skinned fantasies” of racialized women (Soto 26). Thus, while the play insists on the active presence of *mestiza* bodies on the mainstream theatrical stage, it also conceives of them as racialized and sexualized objects.

The play’s explicit reference to Marisa’s “dark Indian features,” utilizes race to empower the character’s subjectivity, yet at the same time, scenes of exoticized *indígenas* reiterate objectifying essentialist representations of racialized female bodies. Moraga’s treatment of race inevitably reflects her own privileged racial position, which allows her the option of choosing a racial identity “in contrast to women who have not had such a choice, and have been abused for their color” (Moraga “La Güera” 28). Even so, Moraga points out that what appears to be a “choice” is in fact its own form of racial oppression. In her essay “A Long Line of Vendidas” (1983), Moraga describes her limited racial identificatory options: “To constantly push up against a wall of resistance from your own people or to fall away nameless into the mainstream of this country, running with our common spilled blood” (89). Thus, the *teatropoetic* movement between racialized subject and object positions in *Giving up the Ghost* performs the “pull and tug” of identity between essentialist and anti-essentialist identifications.

While the play’s stylistic devices of physical appearance, language, and soundscape set the stage to evoke the “pull and tug” of Chicana identities moving between essentialism and anti-essentialism, the play’s dramatic narrative performs an interrogation of identificatory points of tensions indicating forces of internalized oppression, or as Moraga puts it, the ways in which women “have been both the oppressed and the oppressor,” when caught in a hierarchical binary system of



identification (27). In her essay “La Güera,” (1979), Moraga argues that creating *comunidad* requires the confrontation of oppression both “outside” and “under” the skin (25). That is, she attributes the disconnections and fracturings between women of racial, class, gender, and sexuality variances within the women’s movement of the late 1970s to the failure of addressing the following questions: “How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed?” (25). The dramatized relations between women in *Giving up the Ghost* externalizes this internalized heterosexist and patriarchal oppression that informs desire and structures relations between women as a means of accounting for the cultural and historical roots of such oppression, and furthermore, breaking the resulting cycle of psychological and social violence staged in *Swallows*.

The play begins to untangle the cultural and historical roots of Chicano/a gender and sexuality identifications by revealing them to be intrinsically linked with desire. As Norma Alarcón reminds us, “the subjective agency of desire, the ineffable energy that may help us transform our world has heretofore been the province of whoever [heterosexual] ‘man’ is,” (“Split Subjectivities” 229). Marisa/Corky’s desire for agency is a performance forged from and regulated by the enforced construction of “subjective agency” as “heterosexual male” within Chicano/a culture. Moraga writes in “A Long Line of Vendidas”: “You are a traitor to your race if you do not put the man first. The potential accusation of “traitor” or “vendida” is what hangs above the heads and beats in the hearts of most Chicanas seeking to develop our own autonomous sense of ourselves, particularly through sexuality” (37). Whereas the above conflicting desires lead to Josefina’s demise in *Swallows*, Moraga stages conflicted desire through an explicit split subject who externalizes the internalized gender crisis produced by the heterosexual and patriarchal

structure of Chicano/a culture that stigmatizes Chicana lesbians as *vendidas*. In addition, Amalia and Marisa's relationship is structured and obstructed by the internalized homophobia and sexism that plays a role in shaping their sexual desires. Corky's butch identification, rooted in a desire to be *el chingón* is a desire for heterosexual male agency that the objectified status of woman and exiled status of *vendida* denies her. She states:

In my *mind* I had all their freedom/the freedom to see a girl  
 kina  
 the way you see an animal you know?  
 Like imagining  
 they got difernt set  
 of blood vessels or somet'ing. (8)

The "freedom" of male subjectivity that Corky desires plays out through fantasies of male-on-female violence informed by sexualized and gendered scripts of active/passive or *chingón/chingona* relations between men and women perpetuated by both dominant and Chicano/a culture. For instance, violence and domination mark Corky's idealized image of Chicano working class masculinity. She describes her envy of "batos who get all cut up at the weddings/getting their rented tuxes all bloody/that red 'n' clean color/against white starched shirts/I love that shit" (7). She then compares the above image to a scene from a movie, and describes the influence of popular American film on her imaginary:

every Saturday you could find me there  
 my eyeballs glued to the screen  
 then later my friend Arturo 'n' me  
 we'd make up our own movies. (7)

Through the ritual of movie-going, American popular culture reinforces this violent power dynamic between Chicanos and Chicanas, which Corky further internalizes and plays out, as she goes on to describe the kinds of movies that she and Arturo make:

One was where we'd be out in the desert  
 'n' we'd capture these chicks 'n' hold 'em up for ransom  
 We'd string 'em up 'n' make 'em take their clothes off  
 'strip' we'd say to the wall all cool-like  
 funny...now when I think about how little I was at the time  
 and a girl but in my mind I was big 'n' tough 'n' a dude. (7)

Eventually, Corky and Arturo's imaginary game takes a realistic turn when they attempt to "strip" a younger "gringo" neighborhood girl named Chrissy (13). It is important to note that Chrissy is the daughter of a minister, signifying her middle class status, and the younger sister of Lisa, Corky's tormentor, who belittles Corky and her sister, Patsy, for being catholic "cuz catholics worshiped the virgin mary or somet'ing" (9). Thus, there are clear class, cultural and racial tensions between Corky and Chrissy that signify unequal and antagonistic power relations between Chicanos/as and Anglos in the U.S. At the moment Corky partakes "for real" in the violence of this racialized heterosexual gender power dynamic by "stripping" Chrissy, she takes on the role of male heterosexual oppressor. Yet, Corky locks eyes with Chrissy, and develops an identification with her:

'n' jus' at that moment...I see this little Chrissy-kid  
 look up at me like...like I was her mom or somet'ing  
 like tú sabes she has this little kid's frown on her face  
 the chubby skin on her forehead all rumped up

like...like she knew somet'ing was wrong with what we  
 was doing  
 'n' was looking to me to reassure her  
 that everyt'ing was cool 'n' regular 'n' all  
 what a jerk I felt like!

*(She pushes 'Tury' away, bends down to 'Chrissy.')* (10)

Chrissy's dependence on Corky for maternal "reassurance" establishes a female connection between the two across racial, age, class and cultural difference, but Corky senses she has betrayed this connection by sexually violating the young girl. Thus, when she assumes the role of oppressor, Corky acts out her internalized heterosexist and patriarchal oppression that makes her feel like a *vendida*; She must pretend "everyt'ing was cool 'n' regular 'n' all" despite feeling "like a jerk" (10). Moreover, the role of oppressor does not automatically liberate Corky from oppression as the incident serves to ultimately unsettle Corky, who spends the rest of the summer behaving "like a maniac" thereby suggesting the character's struggle to continue to conceal and repress her own physical female body and sexuality underneath a failing performance of heterosexual masculinity (13). As both oppressor and oppressed, Corky performs the doubleness of oppression that both acts on individuals and from within individuals to lock human relations in an unequal power dynamic. Finally, only after Corky recognizes her own participation in oppressive heterosexist gendered power relations is she able to establish a meaningful connection with Chrissy, symbolized by the stage directive, "*She pushes away 'Tury' and bends down to 'Chrissy'*"(10). With this simple gesture, Corky practices putting women first, offering the possibility of solidarity between women across differences of age, class, culture and race, through an awareness of internalized oppression.

Marisa clarifies that the desire for heterosexual male agency she experienced as an adolescent intertwines with how she wants to be desired and how she desires women. As an object of female desire, Marisa wants to be put first by women: “I never wanted to be a man, only wanted a woman to want me that bad” (8). Yet, Amalia’s take on their relationship reveals that Marisa’s desire to be wanted by women also stems from not feeling sufficiently feminine enough because of that very desire: “Sometimes I think, with me, that she only wanted to feel herself so much a woman that she would no longer be hungry for one” (20). Amalia sheds insight on the way in which Marisa has internalized the *Chingón/Chingona* binary that shapes her own self-perception of being a lesbian. However, having dropped the heterosexual male performance of her youth, she does not fully identify with masculine agency rigidly defined as it is by the desire for a passive object. On the contrary, Marisa states: “It’s odd being queer. It’s not that you don’t want a man, you just don’t want a man in a man. You want a man in a woman. The woman part goes without saying” (21). Marisa’s desire for a “man in a woman” further emphasizes her longing to break out of a subject/object binary that denies the co-existence of “Chicana” and “lesbian.” At the same time, it reveals the way in which she can only understand her sexuality as a lack—as something unknowable—through this internalized paradigm that renders Chicana sexuality as inconceivable.

Like Marisa, Amalia’s internalized oppression stemming from cultural betrayal manifests in her inability to put Marisa first. Marisa alludes to this by remarking, “the women I have loved the most have always loved the man more than me, even in their hatred of him” (14). Amalia’s past relationship with Alejandro haunts her relationship with Marisa, who feels that their affair would have been “simpler” if only she were a man who Amalia could “fit more conveniently into her life” (20). Alarcón reads Amalia’s inability to express her desire for Marisa as a lack of

feeling “‘man’ enough” (“Split Subjectivities” 228). Therefore, like Marisa, Amalia conceives of her sexuality as a lack of agency culturally defined as male. Only when Alejandro dies does Amalia feel capable of expressing her desire for Marisa, which she describes as a fusion of heterosexual intercourse and a rebirth:

I felt my womanhood leave me. And it was Alejandro being born in me. Does this make sense? I can't say exactly how I knew this except...again...for the smell, the unmistakable smell of the man, as if we had just made love. And coming from my mouth was *his* voice... '¡Ay mi Marisa! ¡Te deseo! ¡Te deseo!' (*Her eyes search for MARISA.*) Marisa!

(24)

Thus, Amalia experiences her desire for Marisa as a displacement of her desire for Alejandro and so even in his death, Amalia continues to put the male first, which ultimately stifles her relationship with Marisa. Furthermore, Corky/Marisa's split derives from Corky's own sense of cultural betrayal, which Moraga roots in the internalized colonial oppression of Chicana women symbolized by Corky/Marisa's rape as a child, which Marisa states, “makes you more aware than ever that you are one hundred percent female” (25). Elizabeth Jacobs's analysis of Corky/Marisa's rape discloses the scene's association with the myth of *La Malinche* from which the *vendida* stereotype emerges. She explains:

The myth of Malinche and the contempt for Chicana women began with a colonial conquest triangle, within which the indigenous male was castrated and lost his language to that of the white rapist father. It is significant,

then, that Marisa's violator is white, rapes her while speaking both English and Spanish, and is associated with a subtext that clearly demonstrates his paternal signification.

(32)

In Jacobs's analysis, the rape scene signifies the colonial point of origin for gender oppression within Chicano/a culture. I add that the rape scene also signifies the passivity of female sexuality which in the traditionally negative rendering of *la Malinche* leaves her open to rape and thus open to the possibility of betraying her people. Corky's testimony highlights this aspect of the myth when she confesses at the end of the soliloquy:

I never cried as he shoved the thing  
 into what was supposed to be a mouth  
 with no teeth  
 with no hate  
 with no voice  
 only a hole  
 A hole!

He made me a hole! (29)

Tiffany Ana López argues that Corky's rape establishes a link between sanctioned male, patriarchal violence and "a history of oppression in which the female body is consistently placed under erasure" emphasized by Corky's cry that "he made me a hole!"(29).The final scenes of *Soldadera* and *Swallows* also enact this erasure through the suicides of their protagonists who fail to perform and conform to patriarchal expectations of Chicana

identity. Similarly, the rape scene in *Giving up the Ghost* shores up the violence of a masculine hierarchical gender paradigm predicated on the negation of female subjectivity.

However, the verbalization of Corky's rape disrupts the historical and cultural silencing of the Chicana by allowing her to speak of her sexuality and the sexual abuses committed against her. Corky thus constructs the narrative of her sexual self-hood on her own terms, and in so doing, Moraga crucially radicalizes the representation of sexual desire that Portillo-Trambley initially stages in *Swallows*. Whereas Portillo-Trambley censures Chicana lesbian sexuality, all of Moraga's characters openly speak their experiences, and directly to The People, inviting the audience to actively bear witness, on their terms and through their unmediated perspectives, to the physical and psychological violence they have experienced within the confines of a heterosexist and patriarchal system that devalues women. The active witnessing on the part of The People forces the audience members to consider their own complicity in such a system, whose hierarchically gendered structure sanctions domestic abuse against women. Together, Corky/Marisa's speech act and the audience's active witnessing perform a ritualized legitimization of the unspoken sexual experiences of and the neglected physical violence against Chicanas within Chicano/a culture, thereby creating an opportunity for Chicano/a *comunidad* to come together rather than to be divided over a critical community issue.

Through the characters' confessional monologues, Moraga provides a glimpse of how Chicana identity and Chicana *comunidad* can experience recuperation, through the acknowledgement rather than the suppression of the shame attached to the characters' feeling of failure. Indeed, Soto argues that the confessional attributes of Moraga's autobiographical writing recuperates shame as a means of empowerment because "it does



not lead to a weakening of the narrative or to the idea that she is debilitated by angst”

(36). I find a similar utilization of shame in *Giving up the Ghost*. In her confessions of rape and her inability to save Amalia, Marisa embraces the shame of such experiences.

This is most evident in the soliloquy Marisa delivers after Corky describes her/their rape:

I don't regret it. I don't regret nuthin.' He only convinced  
me of my own name. From an early age you learn to live  
with it, being a woman. I just got a head start over some.  
And then years later, after I got to be with some other men,  
I admired how their things had no opening...only a tiny tiny  
pinhole dot to pee from, to come from. I thought...how  
lucky they were, that they could release all that stuff, all  
that pent up shit from the day, through a hole that *nobody*  
could get into. (29)

In this soliloquy shame becomes a productive way in which Marisa comes to understand her own interpellation within unequal gender and sex power relations. Rather than something that “must be overcome or healed,” shame itself becomes a personal and social healing practice in its acknowledgement of the effects of internalized oppression, which breaks the Chicana subject out of a passive victimized position that patriarchal oppression forces her into within its hierarchical gender/sex binary (Soto 36).

Nevertheless, while Moraga's staging of Chicana subjectivities in process heals psychological and social rifts within and between Chicanas, as Yarbrow Bejarano notes, *Giving up the Ghost* does not “move us neatly from pain to promise” and defers the audience's desire for closure (*The Wounded Heart* 44). Instead, the play's lack of closure emphasizes “the unresolved

contradictions involved in deeply ingrained gender and sexual constructions” (44). Marisa’s final monologue suggests that such contradictions cannot be easily resolved, yet this does not elide the possibilities of creating Chicana *comunidad*. In her theory of the flesh, Moraga asserts that bridging communities begins with “naming our-selves and telling our stories” (19). In speaking their stories to The People, Corky, Marisa, and Amalia engage in a process of naming the painful and pleasurable sources of their subjectivities through their “most threatening moments of disavowal (self-disavowal as well as the disavowal of others)” (Soto 37). This naming process is a form of healing because it performs a remembering of the ways in which the characters “have been hurt” and have caused hurt (Soto 25). In this manner, the play stages “the need to transform personal and cultural betrayal into more inclusive forms of community” (Soto 30).

Marisa describes this transformation at the play’s end as follows:

It’s like making familia from scratch

Each time all over again...

With strangers, if I must.

If I must, I will. (35)

While the syntax of the phrase “Making familia from scratch” suggests a continuous process of community building, its figure of speech signifies both the possibility of choosing who to make *familia* with and the possibility of refiguring Chican@ *familia* to be a more inclusive community, one that embraces “*all its people, including its jotería*” (Moraga 148).

In “Art con Acento” Moraga calls for a Chicana feminist theatre committed to healing:

The theater I seek is a theater of healing, one that not only

touches the source of the wound but inspires its participants

to act in the material world; to penetrate barriers of race, class, sexuality, geography, to refuse to identify with the 'we' of this America sin acento. (160)

As Moraga's first play, *Giving up the Ghost* enacts the author's transition "from poet to playwright," providing the grounds for cultivating Chicana feminist theater as a healing, or mending practice. The play's disidentificatory politics performed as *teatropoesía*, function on the levels of form and style to create a collective mode of representation that dislodges Chicana identity from the cultural and ideological constraints of gender, sex and race binaries. Furthermore, through its dramatization of sexual relationships between Chicanas, the play externalizes the personally and socially divisive internalized oppression caused by such binary power systems. Ultimately, *Giving up the Ghost's* *teatropoesía* performs a refusal to identify as a means of cultural and social affirmation, mending the psychological and social trauma of repressed Chicana sexuality within both Anglo and Chicana feminist cultural production, thereby creating a more inclusive Chicana feminist *comunidad* that both accepts and moves across differences.

## Chapter IV

### “To Learn with Movement:” The (R)Evolution of Teatro Chicana in Three Acts

In March of 1971, members of San Diego State College’s MEChA chapter, Felicitas Nuñez and Delia Ravelo, came together to write an *acto* to be performed at a MEChA event organized exclusively by its Chicana members called Seminario de Chicanas. The event itself and the process of putting together the *acto* served as a prelude to Teatro Chicana’s dynamic and decades-spanning career as a woman-centered *teatro* continually evolving between 1971 and 1983.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the Seminario de Chicanas was to bridge a generational gap between first generation Chicana college students and their mothers. The young women paid homage to their maternal roots through song, dance and *teatro* and at the same time, offered their audience insight into the struggles they faced as first generation Chicanas going to college.

Nuñez and Ravelo’s *acto*, *Chicana Goes to College*, staged in three scenes the struggle of fictional college student, Lucy, as she confronted familial expectations, cultural pressures, and gender stereotypes while attending university. Lucy served as a composite of the playwrights’ experiences. Ravelo confirms, “Whatever idea, message, or position we took on stage, we wanted it to reflect our reality. Each actor was to use her own words...from ‘I promise to remain a virgin’ to ‘I will kill myself if I don’t go to college’” (11). The young women worried that the *acto*’s highly satirical dialogue and exaggerated cross-dressing performances could potentially further the generational divide by offending the familial audience’s sensibilities and by branding the performers as *hijas desobediantes* in their mothers’ eyes. However, laughter from the audience during the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use the term “Teatro Chicana” to refer to the *teatro* group in general.

performance assuaged these anxieties and conveyed a sense of mutual understanding between mothers and daughters. Overall, the *acto* and the Seminario proved successful. Ravelo remembers, “There was an enormous sense of accomplishment and reunion. The mothers stayed and mingled with their daughters” (12). Likewise, Nuñez recalls: “my mother tugged my arm with her strong hand and said ‘*Como eres bocona* (You have a big mouth). Then she broke into a smile and I swelled with pride” (141). Future Teatro de las Chicanas member Laura Garcia was in the audience at the Seminario. She recalls that the experience of viewing *Chicana Goes to College* helped her achieve class and feminist consciousness. “It began to sink in what we [Chicanas] were about,” says Garcia, “It wasn’t until the Seminario de Chicanas...that I became seriously committed to the Chicanas’ ideals of equality and class struggle” (34). For Garcia, Ravelo and Nuñez, the *acto*’s success served to confirm the transformative potential of *teatro* as “a powerful avenue of communication” and as an agent of cultural and societal change (Ravelo 12).

Inspired by these revelations, Nuñez and Ravelo recruited fellow classmates Laura Garcia, Gloria Bartlett Heredia, Yolanda Flores, Peggy Garcia, Lupe Perez and Maria D. Roman to form an all-female *teatro* group in the fall of 1971. They called themselves Teatro de las Chicanas, a name publically affirming their identity as an exclusively Chicana collective. Between 1971 and 1975, Teatro de las Chicanas added to their repertoire *¡Bronca!* (c1971) and *The Mother* (c1971), the latter based on Bertolt Brecht’s play. The *teatro* performed their *actos* for mostly student audiences at MEChA meetings, educational conferences, college recruitments and local high schools with the intent of using *teatro* as a means of resolving gender inequality, which they believed greatly obstructed the Movement’s overall goal of Chicano/a cultural and political liberation.

By 1975, many of the original members graduated from San Diego State University. Some moved on from the *teatro* while others remained, and still more members were recruited. As both old and new members increasingly entered the work force and became more politically involved off-campus in organizations like the UFW, Teatro de las Chicanas focused their attention on class politics. To reflect this focal shift, the group changed their name to Teatro Laboral, for as member Guadalupe Beltran puts it “we [working class Chicanos/as] *were* the labor at that time” (Beltran, Personal Interview). Teatro Laboral continued to write *actos* addressing gender inequality; however, they situated this issue within broader contexts such as economic disenfranchisement, educational discrimination and unionization in *actos* such as an adaptation of the film *Salt of the Earth* (c1975) and *No School Tomorrow* (c1977). In addition, the *teatro* expanded their performances beyond the university and San Diego city limits by performing at marches, protests, strikes, and town hall and school meetings across southern California.

The *teatro* regrouped a third time in 1979 as Teatro Raíces, reflecting “a new sense of rootedness emerging from changed life circumstances” (Broyles-González xvi) such as starting families and working to maintain cultural and economic sustainability in their communities. Their *actos* *So Ruff So Tuff* (c1979) and *Challenge to Learn* (c1983), geared toward a younger generation of Chicanos/as, advocated for education and activism as a means of community empowerment. Teatro Raíces also addressed gender and class inequalities in global contexts with *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* (c1979), *Anti-Nuke Commercial* (c1979) and *E.T.—The Alien* (1982).

While Teatro Raíces stopped performing in 1983, some members of the *teatro* came together once more in 1999 to write their memoirs and transcribe their plays, a process that took nine years. *Teatro Chicana: A Collective Memoir and Selected Plays* was published in 2008 and members Laura Garcia, Sandra Gutierrez, Felicitas Nuñez, Delia Rodriguez and Guadalupe Beltran reunited for a brief period between 2008 and 2012 to do book tours at universities across the U.S where they performed selected scenes from the *teatro*'s repertoire.

Teatro Chicana broke ground as the first known woman-centered *teatro* and remained rooted in community activism for more than ten years, but their contributions are virtually absent from Chicano/a scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Even after the publication of their memoirs and selected plays, very minimal scholarship on the *teatro* presently exists. Yolanda Broyles-González attributes the dearth of scholarship on women in Chicano *teatro* to Chicano/a scholarship's tendency to reiterate constructions of history through accounts of "great individuals," which both reinforces a male-centered history of

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<sup>2</sup> Teatro de las Chicanas and Teatro Raíces are briefly mentioned in Elizabeth C. Ramírez's *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000). Ramírez cites Teatro Raíces as the "earliest account we have of a women's *teatro*," dating their formation at 1971 (84). However, according to the founding members of the group, and as stated in their interviews and memoirs, Teatro de las Chicanas formed in 1971, making them the earliest women's *teatro* to date while Teatro Raíces did not form until 1979. Ramírez also notes the decisive response to Teatro de las Chicanas' performance at the 1973 TENAZ festival in San Jose, CA. See Ramírez 84. Additionally, in an article entitled "Teatropoesía by Chicanas in the Bay Area," Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano lists Teatro Raíces as one of two all-female *teatros* in attendance at the 1982 TENAZ festival. See Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano, "Teatropoesía by Chicanas in the Bay Area: Tongues of fire" in *Revista Chicana-Riqueña Vol. 11 No. 1* (1983) p 88.

Chicano/a theatre and negates collective creative processes (130). She explains the ramifications of such an historical approach as follows:

The tendency to place individuals at the center of history constitutes a radical oversimplification by which the dynamics of life process are filtered out, and only names, dates, and places are left behind. By creating monuments to individuals, we eclipse the memory of group achievement and feel dwarfed by all these “great men” instead of learning of the strength we have through community and collaboration. (130)

The “great men” approach to Chicano/a theatre marginalizes collectivity and erases the historical contributions of women resulting in a distorted narrative of Chicano/a theater history. However, the existence of Teatro Chicana proves that Chicanas have always and continue to resist historical erasure through transformative theatrical activity. This chapter builds on Broyles-González by offering a collective female perspective of Chicano/a theater as recourse to the distorted historical narrative of “great men” that dominates Chicano/a theater history and to confirm Chicana feminist theater as a revolutionizing collective artistic and social force. I follow Broyles-González’s methodological approach by constructing a cultural history of Teatro Chicana from the words of the *teatro* members themselves, through insight from their memoirs and through personal interviews, in order to produce a collective historical narrative that captures the tensions, struggles and contradictions of Chicana feminist *teatro* as process. As a result, similar to Broyles-González, I de-emphasize theory as “the most significant way of knowing or



communicating” and instead ground this historical account in the lived experiences of women in order to complicate and “fundamentally alter” the historical narrative of twentieth-century Chicano/a theater (134-35).

As an exclusively female collective, Teatro de las Chicanas resolved to confront gender oppression and to script politically and intellectually active roles for Chicanas in the Movement and U.S. society. They continuously re-scripted these roles throughout the *teatro*'s various transformations from Teatro de las Chicanas to Teatro Laboral to Teatro Raíces. Furthermore, their evolutions revolved around an axis of change and collectivity integral to the *teatro*'s organization and theatrical practices, as Nuñez states, “This was at the core of our quest, to learn with movement” (154). In this chapter, I argue that the evolution of Teatro Chicana performs Chicana feminism as process, one that never forecloses upon a fixed notion of Chicana identity or Chicana feminist ideology. Instead, Teatro Chicana enacts a Chicana feminism that moves across shifting grounds of intersectional identifications of class, race, and gender yet remains firmly rooted in the cultural and material experiences of its members' shifting cultural and generational stages. Teatro de las Chicanas' first *acto*, *Chicana Goes College*, confronts the sexism of Chicano nationalism, carves a woman-defined space for Chicanas in the Chicano/a Movement and rescripts Chicanas as active political and intellectual agents. Teatro Laboral transforms their political and intellectual agency into community praxis with an adaptation of *Salt of the Earth*. Through a Marxist framework, Teatro Laboral interrogates the effects of capitalism's gendered and racialized divisions of labor on the relations between Chicanas and Chicanos while also invoking a collective history of Chicano/a class struggle. Finally, in *So Ruff, So Tough*, Teatro Raíces confronts the

challenges of maintaining cultural and community roots in the wake of an emerging Chicano/a middle class and the mainstreaming of Chicano/a culture. It also affirms the legacy of the *teatro*'s Chicana feminist politics. As culturally and politically engaged mothers, the members of Teatro Raíces refigure the Chicana maternal role as both cultural and political nurturer. *So Ruff So Tuff*, *E.T.: The Alien*, and *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* invoke cultural and class consciousness in the next generation of Chicanos/as at the end of the twentieth century, inspiring their young audiences to partake in the cultural and political struggle to end systemic oppression through education and community activism. The three stages of Teatro Chicana perform three different stages of Chicana feminism that resist essentialist constructions of Chicana identity, and their continuous re-stagings of Chicana feminisms embodies the central idea of this dissertation: that Chicana theater attests to Chicana feminisms as a continuous discursive process that works to open up rather than foreclose Chicana identity.

Scholars continue to recover Movement-era Chicana cultural and political activities long suppressed from historical record. The scholarship of Broyles-González, Martha P. Cotera, María E. Cotera, Linda García Merchant, and Alma M. García reveal the ways in which Chicanas during the Movement defied and resisted passive and secondary roles imposed upon them by a patriarchal hierarchy embedded in Chicano nationalist ideology that structured the Movement.<sup>3</sup> Particularly, Broyles-González's

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough discussion of the participation of Chicanas in *teatro* see Broyles-González 129-163; For a collection of Movement-era Chicana feminist publications, see Martha P. Cotera, *The Chicana Feminist* (Austin: Information Systems Development, 1977) and Alma M. García, *Chicana Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1997); for a collection of Movement-era Chicana feminist documents, ephemera, and

research on *teatro* accounts for the resistive strategies of female members of Teatro Campesino to forge new roles for themselves on and off stage. Her research demonstrates that despite the art form's collective and collaborative approach, which "represented a way of performing and a way of living," Movement-era Chicano *teatro* was overwhelmingly male-led and performances privileged male participants as speaking subjects and actors of social change (129). Consequently, Broyles-González explains, "women's roles do not enjoy the dramatic space necessary for the unfolding of a full character. In their confinement, women do not evolve beyond a single dimension" (136). Chicanas were relegated to supporting characters that were narrowly defined in terms of their relationships to men (135). In this manner, Chicano *teatro* reiterated to their audiences a patriarchal vision of the Movement in which women served *la causa* by supporting men self-appointed in the roles of revolutionaries. Members of Teatro Chicana recall dissatisfaction with their limited roles in the Movement at UCSD, leading them to create women-centered spaces to confront systemic gender oppression collectively and to re-cast themselves as revolutionary agents. Throughout Teatro Chicana's career, the group experienced institutional censure by Chicano nationalist theater organizations and their leaders.

During the U.S. Civil Rights era, cultural nationalist factions typically disregarded women's concerns, deeming female emancipation too personal and reflective of the needs of a few rather than the entire group. However, as Kimberlé Crenshaw makes clear, the cultural nationalist tendency to privilege race at the expense of other identificatory

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photographs, see María E. Cotera and Linda García Merchant's digital memory collective *Chicana por mi*

*Raza* at [www.chicanapormiraza.org](http://www.chicanapormiraza.org).

categories neglects intersections of class, gender and race, and as a result, when “practices expound identity as woman or person of color, as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling” (Crenshaw 1242). Chicana feminists who vocally criticized sexism underlying the Movement’s cultural nationalist ideology often faced censure on the basis that woman-centered politics disrupted the Movement’s united front. Felicitas Nuñez states that performances of Teatro de las Chicanas’ *Chicana Goes to College* and *¡Bronca!* at early Teatro Nacionales de Aztlán (TENAZ) festivals, (yearly national gatherings of Chicano *teatros*) were often denounced as “at least ten to twenty years behind the times” because “there was no longer any need to address ‘the woman question’” (Nuñez 145). Furthermore, in his closing remarks recognizing all *teatros* in attendance at the 1971 TENAZ festival, Luis Valdez, the festival’s creator, failed to acknowledge Teatro de las Chicanas’ participation. Elizabeth C. Ramírez briefly notes that Teatro de las Chicanas’ performance at the 1973 festival sparked “serious debate and censure” over the role of Chicanas in the Movement (84). Two years later, Teatro Laboral was completely barred from performing at the 1975 festival due to a registration technicality, even though the institution still kept their money. In 1982, Nuñez and fellow Teatro Raíces member Evelyn Cruz participated in Teatro Meta, a project linked to the Shakespeare Globe Theater and directed by Jorge Huerta and Bill Virchis. When asked by Huerta to play the part of a submissive wife, Nuñez objected to the part’s stereotypical representation. Huerta replied that “it didn’t matter” what she thought because she was “there to act” (163). In particular, Nuñez’s experience with Teatro Meta shores up the problems Chicanas confronted in *teatro*. First, it indicates the gender hierarchy structuring many Chicano *teatros* in which, despite an

ethos of collectivity, administrative and directorial roles were often in the hands of men. Second, it reveals how within this hierarchical gendered structure, women lacked a great deal of control over the roles prescribed them and had very little input in decision-making, as indicated by Huerta's dismissal of Nuñez's input in character development.

Nuñez and Laura Garcia's experiences as members of another *teatro* at UCSD called Teatro Mestizo attests to the ways in which Chicanas performed interventions to leverage some control over their roles on and off stage. Nuñez mentions that the men in Teatro Mestizo were "reluctant at times, but overall cooperative"; however, her memoir reveals that the male participants tended to control the decision-making processes (104). When Teatro de las Chicanas inquired about joining Teatro Mestizo on a summer tour up California, "the males did not readily accept" (150). Additionally, Garcia notes that the roles offered to female participants were often limited and patronizing: "as good as the *actos* we performed in Teatro Mestizo were, they still portrayed women in the traditional roles of 'no sabe de nada' girls—girls who didn't know anything" (33). As a result, Nuñez and Garcia seized every opportunity to refute the *no sabe de nada* stereotype and enact their own agency on stage. Nuñez insisted on trying out for a lead male role in Teatro Mestizo's performance of *The Militants* and she got the part. Through this male role, Nuñez re-positioned herself as an active speaking agent, representing "a major step in the exploration of new possibilities as a performer" stemming from "the living creative impulse that had become frustrated within the narrow confines of stereotyped women's roles" like the *no sabe de nada* caricature (Broyles González 149). However, Nuñez likewise insisted on playing female characters with strength and an assertive delivery that could not be ignored. She recounts a time when an elder male in the *teatro*, Enrique

Ramirez, made the unusual request that she recite her *Madre Patria* lines for him in private. He advised that she “needed to be softer and humbler,” but Nuñez objected, insisting that she “play the role in a stronger voice to get the lines across to the audience” (150). Additionally, Garcia asserts that her cry of “¡mi hijo!” as the mother of a fallen Vietnam soldier in *Soldado Razo* played a critical role in transmitting the emotional gravity of the *acto*’s message, as she consistently brought audiences to tears (33). In fact, this was Garcia’s specialty as Nuñez corroborates, “She was well known for taking her audience to the river of tears” (151). Nuñez and Garcia broke through the confines of passive and stereotypical female roles by creating affecting performances through strong and poignant deliveries, and in the case of Nuñez, taking on male roles, thereby asserting the voice and presence of Chicanas on stage.

Offstage, Nuñez and Garcia, along with Gloria Bartlett Heredia and Delia Ravelo, made similar interventions to assert their voice and agency within UCSD’s MEChA chapter, whose hierarchy of “vocal male leaders and ‘daddy’ allies” stifled the input of its Chicana members (Ravelo 9). “We were reprimanded for being outspoken and headstrong,” Ravelo explains, “When a woman finally had the floor to propose a valuable idea concerning the political or thematic direction of a conference, this idea would be flopped around until a male regurgitated the same thing” (9). Like Teatro Mestizo, responsibilities in MEChA divided along gendered lines limited Chicanas to supportive capacities as Gloria Bartlett Heredia notes, “[in MEChA] women were not the decision makers...we were always the helpers—helping the guys to be successful at the conferences” (44). Ravelo adds that when she requested to be a guard at a high school conference, she was told “this job was not meant for women,” even though, as she points

out, “if someone fired a shot at someone like Cesar Chávez or Dolores Huerta, a female’s body could easily become a shield” (8). However, the Chicanas of UCSD’s MEChA chapter refused to be cannon fodder. Ravelo proudly declares that they retaliated “with blatant disrespect” culminating in “a supreme act of defiance” by developing a women’s caucus within MEChA which eventually organized Seminario de Chicanas and led to the formation of Teatro de las Chicanas (10).

Teatro de las Chicanas functioned as a political and intellectually active space enabling its members to perform a feminist critique of cultural nationalist gender politics through their *actos*. Teatro de las Chicanas exposed and dismantled the hierarchical structure of the Chicano Movement that cultural nationalist politics reinforced and that delimited the political and intellectual capacities of Chicanas. In contrast to Teatro Mestizo’s gendered hierarchy, Teatro de las Chicanas consciously organized a collective that involved members’ shared participation in every facet of production. This continued to be the organizational touchstone of Teatro Chicana throughout its various stages. The members collectively hashed out and researched ideas, wrote, rehearsed and performed as a group. While conflict naturally arose, the collective process served to unify its members both on and off stage. “We all participated,” Laura Garcia explains, “doing so helped us become stronger Chicanas” (28).

The collective creative process revolved around improvisation, which Broyles-González defines as “a-trial-and-error give-and-take system of rehearsal” (xiii). *Actos* are not restricted to a text but are “living organisms” in which meaning transfers through voice and body movement (Broyles-González xiii). Change was the fundamental condition of creation and it was “initiated with each performance of a particular piece,”

explains Delia Ravelo, “then we would adjust and hone it depending on the actors’ needs and audience response” (13). In addition, the *teatro* had to be prepared to respond to rapid cultural and social developments, as Ravelo notes:

At times an issue would surface that required spontaneity, like when we got a call from Sandra Gutierrez on an issue that exploded in her hometown in the Coachella Valley. We wrote about the issue, memorized our lines in the car as we drove out to the site, practiced with our partially written dialogue on arrival, and performed. (13)

Through their collective process, Teatro Chicana cultivated a dynamic message of liberation to educate and inspire their audiences to effect change. Teatro Chicana firmly believed that knowledge is a critical source of empowerment for marginalized subjects. For a majority of the *teatro*’s members, pursuing higher education served as their pathway to personal independence and intellectual growth otherwise prohibited by conditions of poverty, institutional racism in the U.S. education system, and strictly defined gender roles at home. Ravelo explains as much:

We were the daughters who obeyed but didn’t blindly accept everything. For most of the Chicanas, attending college was a miracle that was made reality by the sacrifice of ordinary people. The doors to higher education were opened to us because of educational opportunity grants, work-study programs and loans. Chicanas wanted and opted for a better life through education. We had not meant



to disrespect our parents. We wanted future employment that was unlike theirs, that was better paying and more stable, and had safer working conditions. (10)

Furthermore, the political atmosphere of U.S. college campuses in the 1960s and 1970s fostered political consciousness and opportunities to put education into action through direct political engagement. In addition to MEChA, the *teatro* members also participated in the UFW, Chicano Moratoriums against the Vietnam War, and educational rallies and protests for Chicano Studies. Thus, the majority of Teatro Chicana's *actos* stage education as a way out of multiple oppressive circumstances.

Their first *acto*, *Chicana Goes to College*, is Teatro de las Chicanas' most concerted effort to argue for education as a feminist act of empowerment by presenting a Chicana character actively pursuing a college degree, a process that inevitably leads to both personal and political development. *Chicana Goes to College* performs a critique of the sexism embedded in Chicano nationalism's cultural politics by exposing intersectional race and gender oppression and how it shapes Chicana experience and identity. "The personal is political" doctrine of so-called second wave feminisms in the 1960s and 1970s sought to uncover instances of sanctioned violence toward women as "part of a broad-scale system of domination that effects women as a class" (Crenshaw 1241). For feminists of color during this era, however, it also meant recognizing that "the experiences of women of color are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1243). Rooted in the collective experiences of the *acto*'s playwrights, *Chicana Goes to College* collapses all boundaries between the personal and political. Staged as recourse to Chicana feminist censoring in the Movement, the lived

experiences of the *acto*'s playwrights are transformed into political agency to voice criticism against intersecting racism and sexism and to liberate Chicana identity through woman-defined politicized cultural roles.

The *acto* situates Lucy's struggle for empowerment in three institutional settings that together present a framework of intersecting race and gender oppression: the traditional patriarchal household, the U.S. system of higher education, and the Chicano Movement. In each context, Lucy rejects its racist and patriarchal order by defying the cultural and societal perimeters literally defined by male authoritative figures: Lucy's father; an Anglo professor; Amado, the president of MEChA, and his *carnal*, Nando. In the tradition of Chicano *teatro*, *Chicana Goes to College* satirizes authority by staging male patriarchal rule through exaggerated and one-dimensional characters. Broyles-González explains that the subversive use of satire "turns social hierarchy and dominant authority into something laughable" in order to negate authorial power and to push against "norms of 'good conduct'" (32). The all-female organization of Teatro de las Chicanas necessarily means that women perform male characters on stage and in doing so, overturn gender codes of behavior, dress and speech. In male roles, the actors wear suits or work uniforms, smoke cigars, sit with their legs uncrossed, and curse. They lampoon gender codes but at the same time explore the freedom of taking on modes of expression denied to women based on their gender. Role reversal becomes a way to situate one's self in a position of power while at the same time exposing the mechanisms undergirding gender performances.

The *teatro* utilizes exaggerated and hyperbolic representations of masculinity to undermine patriarchal authorial power. Their memoirs offer photographic evidence of

comedic and overly stylized performances of male characters. Two images feature Gloria Bartlett performing different male characters in *Chicana Goes to College* (see figures 3 and 4). In a 1971 photograph, she plays the Anglo professor of “Scene Two: College,” standing at a podium made of stacked foot stools. Her hair is tucked into a striped leisure suit, and she wears a fake mustache and eyeglasses. Most notably, however, is the white powder signifying the character’s race, which only partially covers the actor’s face for humorous effect.



Figure 3. Gloria Bartlett as the Anglo Professor performing in *Chicana Goes to College* at San Diego State in 1971. The image appears in *Teatro Chicana* edited by Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M Gutierrez and Felicitas Nuñez (Austin: UP Texas, 2008).

In another image from a 1973 performance of *Chicana Goes to College*, the characters sit at desks, presumably listening to an off camera actor deliver her lines during “Scene Three: The MEChA Meeting.” What stands out in this photograph is Gloria Bartlett’s portrayal of Nando, whose tough stance—legs apart and head cocked high and to the side—and costume of all black, including sunglasses and a beanie,

humorously juxtaposes the female characters who appear less conspicuously marked by gender or culture in their posture and dress. Bartlett's highly stylized performances destabilize patriarchal authority. As the Anglo Professor, Bartlett's half-powdered face barely conceals her gender and skin color thus undoing Anglo male dominance by unveiling its performative ruse, while her tough posturing as Nando, juxtaposed against the other inconspicuous female characters, overexposes Chicano masculinity in a way that challenges its authenticity.



Figure 4. Scene Three of *Chicana Goes to College* performed at San Diego State in 1973. *Left-right*: Gloria Bartlett (as Nando), Laura Cortez Garcia, Delia Ravelo (back) and Lupe Perez. The image appears in *Teatro Chicana* edited by Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M Gutierrez and Felicitas Nuñez (Austin: UP Texas, 2008).

Furthermore, the *acto's* hyperbolic dialogue flattens patriarchal law to a one-dimensional caricature. For instance, in "Scene One: Home," Lucy's father objects to her college plans on the following grounds:

Except for girls who become nuns, all females who leave  
their home to go to school or anywhere become

whores...*M'hija, los hombres* and only men leave home because they are men. Women stay home and do not stray out into the world alone. Men do not get pregnant...Just remember anything (*points finger at Lucy*) bad, ugly, awful, and dirty that happens to you will be because you brought it on yourself. (177)

Hyperbole functions here to destabilize the father's authority by rendering his dictates absurd through an exaggerated and simplistic expression of gender roles. Yet, at the same time that hyperbole negates male patriarchal rule, it also shores up cultural and patriarchal anxieties over female independence. The father's soliloquy confines women to the household and grounds female identity in her sexualized body. Female sexuality, and female independence by extension, must therefore be contained and restricted to the home and married life. Thus, Lucy's boyfriend, humorously named Ricardo in reference to Lucy and Ricardo of *I Love Lucy*, insists that instead of going to college, Lucy must follow "the proper way" of marrying him and having his children (176).

The *acto* challenges this patriarchal ideology by recasting domesticity as destructive to the development of Chicana subjectivity. Lucy expresses a loss of identity at the prospect of losing "her whole name" in marriage to Ricardo, who insists that in the "proper way" of marriage "the woman gives it all up for love," a phrase whose sexual innuendo further insinuates that within the confines of a patriarchal marital system, female subjectivity is established when a woman "gives up" her body for marital "love" (176). This patriarchal notion of love becomes physically oppressive when Ricardo violently restrains Lucy as a means of expressing the severity of his marriage proposal.

While the confrontation between Lucy and Ricardo is brief, it bears import. The scene's seriousness cuts through the levity of the *acto's* satirical humor by directing the audience's attention to the violence undergirding gender power relations. It also symbolically breaks the culture of silence, in Chicano/a communities, surrounding domestic abuse; a cultural silence maintained by colonial patriarchal notions of Chicana sexuality as "a dark and passive thing" which men, in their paternal role, are invested with the power to possess and control (Rincón 25).

As caricatural as the scene seems, it stages cultural and societal conditions that affect the lives of Chicanas, including Teatro Chicana members, in very real ways. Ravelo refers to the *teatro* members as the "'different' daughters" whose "pursuit of knowledge was a rebellious act against the constraints of culture, religion, and the world we lived in" (10). Like Lucy, Ravelo was determined to go to college despite a family who didn't believe she should "venture beyond their world of Mexican traditions, fatalistic Catholicism, and male supremacy" and despite an uncle who, like Ricardo, attempted to physically keep Ravelo from leaving for college "in a showdown scenario worthy of a *telenovela*" (6). Other members felt pressured to rush into marriage. In a poem prefacing her memoir, Teatro Laboral member Guadalupe Beltran characterizes herself as "She, the only one in a family of nine who left home for an education/Instead of for marriage" (108). Kathy Requejo, who also joined the *teatro* as it was transitioning to Teatro Laboral, transferred from Santa Barbara City College to UCSD in 1974 in order to "prove" to her family that "as a Chicana" she could "attend college without ending up pregnant." (57). She insists, "I needed to prove the myth wrong" (57). Requejo's independence at college transformed her into "a woman with *huevos*—one who was not

afraid to express her thoughts, take chances, and seek new adventures (57). Gloria Escalera did not join the Teatro at UCSD. She lived nearby in National City, busily fulfilling her roles as wife, mother, and nurse, when childhood friend Felicitas Nuñez recruited her for Teatro Raíces. Participating in the *teatro* afforded Escalera an education in self-discovery:

Before having to play different roles onstage, I could not separate myself from the roles in my life. Before this self-awareness my life was like that of many Latinas or other young women who feel isolated and stuck in a certain location and way of life. (121)

Lucy's choice to go to college and leave the home signals this process of separating one's sense of self from culturally and socially oppressive roles that fix identity "in a certain location and way of life" (121). While the *acto* advocates for education as a means to subjectivity, it also exposes the intersecting gender and racial discrimination that Chicanas confront in the U.S. education system. "Scene Two: College" showcases Lucy's struggle to find an educational footing in spite of an Anglo professor who insists on re-directing Lucy and her friend Chona to vocational school, declaring, "both of you would feel more comfortable learning to be beauticians but not here in this environment. Get some counseling. You need to start from the beginning or go back to where you came from" (180). The Anglo professor's derogatory advice shores up intersectional racial and gender institutional oppression that fixes marginalized women in economic and social subjugation.

In their memoirs, the members of Teatro Chicana reveal their own personal battles with a system of educational tracking based on class, gender, language, and race that delimited their intellectual capacities. Laura Garcia recalls that despite being an excellent student in Mexico, she was put behind two grades in the U.S. because she spoke Spanish. Likewise, Virginia Rodriguez Balanoff remembers being “chastised in kindergarten for speaking Spanish,” calling it a loss of voice that the *teatro* eventually helped restore (79). Gloria Escalera was routinely “paddled” for speaking Spanish at school where she learned “to internalize the racism and [to] hate myself” (123). Two incidents of sanctioned institutional misconduct perpetuated by educators left lasting marks on Margarita Carrillo. Mistaking Carrillo for another Mexican student, also named Margarita, who committed a minor infraction, an elementary school teacher wrongly disciplined Carrillo with corporeal punishment. Once realizing her mistake, the teacher took it upon herself to change Carrillo’s legal name to “Margie” on school documents so to avoid further confusion. “I learned then,” Carrillo states, “That a child of eight has no power to stop a teacher from changing her Spanish name to an English name for her own convenience” (83). Forty-three years later, Carrillo reclaimed her Chicana identity by legally changing her name back to Margarita. Years after the incident, a high school counselor erroneously advised Carrillo to take the same Spanish class twice which kept her from graduating and left her feeling that “for the second time education had failed me” (82). A high school counselor also discouraged Hilda Rodriguez from attending college. This counselor deemed her “not qualified as a student for college” due to low SAT scores and thus concluded that college would be “too difficult” (90). The counselor’s comments reflected an overall attitude at Rodriguez’s school regarding the education of its Chicano/a



students. As a Chicana, she was already at a disadvantage because “the exams were not geared for Spanish speaking students” and furthermore, “Mexican students are not expected to hope for higher education. Shutting down my hopes and essentially telling me to settle for a less intelligent restricted lifestyle was a more acceptable way to treat me” (90). Discriminatory policies and maltreatment at school fundamentally shaped each woman’s sense of self-worth, reinforced feelings of alienation from their own culture and language, and attempted to bar them from accessing higher education. Thus, their memoirs document the inculcating force of intersectional oppression to inhibit subjectivity.

Formed from the playwrights’ collective experiences, the second scene of *Chicana Goes to College* performs recourse to systemic gender and racial discrimination by calling into question the extent to which higher learning can be a means of empowerment for individuals historically marginalized within the U.S. educational system. On the surface, this move appears to go against the *acto*’s case for education as a feminist act of empowerment. However, as the scene progresses, it is clear that such a move functions to re-stage Chicanas as active players in their intellectual development. The college classroom headed by an Anglo male professor figures the U.S. educational system as a racist and patriarchal institution inhibiting Lucy and Chona’s intellectual development. Lucy and Chona admit to feelings of alienation, and the professor provides a limited forecast for their future in college: either they must “start from the beginning” by taking remedial courses, “or go back” to where they came from (180). Presented with limited options, Chona contemplates giving up while Lucy decides to take education into her own hands and encourages Chona to do the same: “We can easily learn how to apply

mud to our face, but wouldn't it be great if we can also learn to write? So what if we have to start from the beginning? What have we got to lose" (180). At this moment, Lucy rejects the encumbered role perpetuated by U.S. education's systemic intersectional discrimination that sets her up to fail or give up. Instead, she re-casts herself as an active subject by seizing whatever educational opportunities are available. By learning to write, Lucy can write her own future.

"Scene Three: MEChA Meeting" critiques and overturns Chicano nationalist stereotypes of Chicanas as unintelligent and unintelligible. The scene depoliticizes Amado, the president of MEChA, and his *carnal* Nando through satire, and repositions its Chicana protagonists as political actors. Lucy's agency parallels Chona's interest in volunteering for the UFW, signifying her own call to action. Lucy and Chona briefly switch roles, as Chona convinces a reluctant Lucy to attend a MEChA meeting. "It was partly through the efforts of MEChA that we got to college," Chona reminds her friend, "I feel that we need to make time for a good cause" (181). Lucy agrees, inspired to utilize her college education to give back to her community: "As college graduates someday we can help in this struggle as nurses or teachers" (182). Lucy and Chona's commitment to becoming agents of social change starkly contrasts with the male leaders of MEChA, Amado and Nando. Anxious to attend the next party, the male characters are dismissive of any real revolutionary work, interrupting a recruitment announcement by UFW representative, Dora, and ending the meeting short. By contrast, Lucy and Chona opt to stay behind to discuss with Dora ways to get involved in the organization. The scene confronts Chicano nationalism's tendency to dismiss Chicanas as inherently apolitical, a

common bias used to justify women's auxiliary roles in the Movement and one that drove Delia Ravelo to prove the stereotype wrong:

The men in the group explained that there was not enough time to educate women to think politically. Were they telling me that women were incapable of being educated politically? I couldn't believe this type of mentality! So I became a student teacher for a political science class in Chicano Studies. (9)

Likewise, Teatro de las Chicanas provided Ravelo, along with the other members, a means of exercising political agency. Through their *actos*, Teatro de las Chicanas wrote themselves into the Movement and enacted feminist politics to transform ideological roles by advocating for gender equality. In particular, the third scene of *Chicana Goes to College* reveals Chicano nationalism's unequal distribution of power between the sexes to be antithetical to the Movement's liberating objectives. Chicano nationalism locates cultural survival within traditional Chicana gender roles and thus praises "the 'Ideal Woman' of *el Movimiento* for representing strong, long-suffering women who endured social injustice, maintained a family as 'a safe haven in a heartless world' for their families and as a result, assured the survival of Chicano culture" (García 6). Such strictly defined gender roles maintain a categorical separation between culture and politics, confining Chicanas to the realm of culture thereby denying them access to political agency. Chicano nationalists emblemize the "Ideal Chicana" through cultural and religious icons like *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, and through the popular and massively reproduced image of Aztec Princess Iztaccíhuatl, lying lifeless in the arms of her warrior

lover Popocatépetl, an image encapsulating the ideological contradiction of Chicano nationalism (see Figure 5).<sup>4</sup> Rooted in a pre-colonial Aztec past, the image of Popocatépetl and Iztaccíhuatl fosters cultural pride and symbolizes resistance to colonial racial oppression at the same time that it reiterates colonial patriarchal gender roles figuring women as pacified and sexualized objects—literally lifeless in the hands of man.

*Chicana Goes to College* satirizes this Chicana-as Aztec-Princess stereotype in the following speech delivered by Amado to the female members of MEChA:

AMADO: These women are our Aztec Princesses who bear  
our children and continue the ways of our people. Our  
people who have been repressed, compressed, depressed,

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<sup>4</sup> Popocatépetl (“The Smoking Mountain” in Nahuatl) and Iztaccíhuatl (“The White Lady” in Nahuatl, or also known in Spanish as “*la Mujer Dormida*” [“The Sleeping Woman”]) are the names of a pair of volcanoes that overlook Mexico City, Mexico. The mountains are named after a pre-Conquest myth about an ill-fated love between a warrior prince, Popocatépetl, and Iztaccíhuatl, a princess from a neighboring tribe. The princess’s father agrees to their marriage only if Popocatépetl returns victorious from a battle against a rival tribe. However, while Popocatépetl is at war, a rival suitor of Iztaccíhuatl circulates a rumor that the warrior died in battle. Iztaccíhuatl dies of grief and Popocatépetl lays her body to rest on a mountain. Popocatépetl stands on an adjacent mountain eternally watching over his lover, holding a smoking torch. Movement era Chicano/a art popularized the image of Popocatépetl carrying a lifeless Iztaccíhuatl to her resting grounds. The image is reproduced even today, through street murals, paintings, posters, flyers, sculptures, clothing and accessories. For a discussion of Chicana artists’ response to the iconic image’s sexualized and pacified representation of Chicanas, see Shifra M. Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas: Art and Social Change in Latin America and the United States* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994) p 202.

and oppressed. We men must rise up as proud Aztec warriors to defend our helpless women and children.

*(Amado reaches for a glass of water and rearranges his hair and shades while Nando fans him with a paper. Lucy and Chona give each other a puzzled look)*

AMADO: And our women will keep and tend our beautiful culture that gives us pride that feeds us the *maiz*, the *frijoles* and the *nopales* that make us unique to all the others. We are special. We are a proud people. And now we are calling forth our beautiful women to help us by volunteering in the typing, clean up, and food committees. (184)

Núñez explains that the Chicana-as-Aztec Princess stereotype exaggerates “the problem of separating the female body from the mind and spirit,” a problem that not only depoliticized Chicanas during the Movement but also justified sexual abuse towards them by its male leaders (Núñez 147). “We had politically conscious grown men ‘pulling trains’ or taking advantage of over-intoxicated females when the opportunity arose,” explains Núñez, “this was why we could not stress enough the importance of women educating themselves and becoming politically aware of the dangers of our society and how the male ego system feeds into this degrading train of thought” (148). Scene three thus depoliticizes male characters in *Chicana Goes to College* to pull back the veil of Chicano nationalist ideology that conceals sexual abuse perpetrated by men in positions of power, a problem highlighted in the *acto* by Amado and Nando’s thinly veiled sexual

advances toward Lucy and Chona, which contradict Amado's speech upholding Chicanas as cultural ideals.



Figure 5. Iconic painting *La leyenda de los dos volcanes* (ca. 1940) by Jesús Helguera depicting the myth of Popocatepetl and Iztaccíhuatl. This particular reproduction appears in *Jesús Helguera y su pintura, una reflexión* by Elia Espinosa (Cd. Universitaria: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2004).

The *acto* counteracts the Chicana-as-Aztec-Princess stereotype with a female-defined alternative image that restores mind and spirit to Chicana identity. In “Scene Four: Chicana Resolution,” Lucy gains inspiration from a brooch emblazoned with the image of a huntress. She discovers that the huntress is Artemis, the Greek Goddess of the hunt and of fertility. Lucy likens Artemis to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, calling her “a link to an ancient ‘Sweet Virgin,’” whilst evoking the Chicana icon’s dual identity as *la Virgen de Guadalupe/Tonantzín*, “the goddess of animals, child-birth, and instinct, and a protector of young women” (189). Thus, Artemis/*la Virgen de Guadalupe*/Tonantzín presents a multi-faceted embodiment of Chicana identity, encompassing intellectual, spiritual and physical agency that collapses culturally and historically fixed paradigmatic representations of female subjectivity. Furthermore, “Scene Four: Chicana Resolution” presents Lucy and Chona as intellectually and politically conscious subjects articulating their transformation to the audience by reading aloud a letter that Lucy has written to her mother. In this letter, Lucy expresses a sense of wholeness achieved through “being aware, getting involved and caring for others” (188). In addition, the letter reveals that political involvement with the UFW reconnects the protagonist to her cultural and familial roots and to her working class background.

The final scene attests to the *teatro’s acto* as a living entity capable of effecting change. Lucy reveals that she wrote the letter to invite her mother to the Seminario de Chicanas, and thus, the experiences of Teatro de las Chicanas and the imaginary experiences of Lucy and Chona converge, dissolving performative boundaries between theatrically staged action and real life agency. The veil of character lifts as the performers articulate, through Lucy’s letter, their resolve to utilize education as a means to both

individual and collective growth. The scene breeches the boundary between audience and performer as the letter's audience becomes not Lucy's fictional mother, but the actual mothers of the performers in attendance at the Seminario, creating a cross-generational collective enacted by "affirming and cultivating the connections between themselves—the young women who had left home to enter university—and their mothers, who continued in a working class existence" (Broyles-González xviii). *Chicana Goes to College* constitutes a break-through performance for Teatro Chicana as it destabilizes the patriarchal foundations of traditional Chicano/a culture and breaks ground by forging woman-defined roles for Chicanas in the Movement. The *acto* also breaks silence by articulating a feminist politics that accounts for the ways in which intersecting racism and sexism bear down on the day-to-day lives of Chicanas.

In a 1976 piece entitled "Sexism in the Movimiento," Anna Nieto-Gómez notes an emerging strain of Marxist Chicana feminism intent on interrogating the white male supremacy of the U.S.'s capitalist economy. She argues that "Marxist-Leninist ideology and women's history of socialist countries offer a clear analysis as to the function and division of the sex roles and of racism" but that Chicana feminists were only beginning to "apply this analysis" to their economic and social circumstances (99). Teatro de las Chicanas' transformation into Teatro Laboral in 1975 marks a turn toward Marxist ideology as a means of broadening their Chicana feminist analysis of intersectional oppression. Whereas Teatro de las Chicanas leveraged a critique against sexism within Chicano nationalism and exposed the systemic intersectional oppressions of racism and sexism, Teatro Laboral interrogated the economic oppression of Chicanas as a means of situating and understanding their experiences of systemic sexism and racism within a



historical context of Chicano/a class struggle. From this historical standpoint, Marxism allowed the *teatro* to utilize the stage as a bridge to create solidarity by revealing how institutionalized intersectional oppressions subjugate working class men and women equally.

The Teatro's Marxist turn did not consume their identity politics but rather deepened the members' analysis of materiality, providing a context for understanding their own experiences within larger contexts of systemic oppression. Creating and performing in an *acto* required self-education through research and intense study groups aimed at cultivating "an essential unity of a person onstage and offstage" (Broyles-González 87), as Gloria Escalera explains: "I joined their study group and began reading political newspapers and becoming aware of world injustices. I knew about injustices already; I had lived them but I never had the tools to understand them. Well, *teatro* had a way of teaching me" (Escalera 125). Likewise, Sandra Gutierrez describes her developing class consciousness as "opening my eyes. Of being able to attach a system of analysis to things I saw around me—poverty, discrimination, sexism (75). For Guadalupe Beltran, the *teatro*'s intellectual practices were a meaningful educational alternative that accounted for national and global social histories of marginalized peoples commonly excluded from the histories learned in U.S. classrooms:

I learned so much about politics and subjects that a regular classroom cannot teach me. I learned about issues related to migrant workers, welfare, unemployment and the roots of what is to eventually become the civil war in El Salvador.

(Beltran 113)

An understanding of such collective social histories also fostered more personal awareness and growth, as Hilda Rodriguez relates:

We discussed and related our book knowledge to life's experiences and examples. I was able to understand my struggle for self-identity. One of the books we had to read was *The Woman Question* by Karl Marx. I became stronger and more independent. By the time I played a coal miner from New Mexico in *Salt of the Earth* I felt much more confident about this role and the roles to come. (Rodriguez 93)

Acquiring self-knowledge helped to heal individual psychological and social wounds and nurtured solidarity across difference, as in the case of Felicitas Nuñez:

*The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* by Friedrich Engels...provided a very welcome understanding for me of all women's universal history and helped me to objectively understand my personal feelings of embarrassment, confusion and resentment over being female. These negative feelings were connected in many ways to my experiences in a male-supremacist society...it was such a relief to learn that it was sane to question my place, and it was normal to want to change, to eliminate stereotyping...Learning diminished isolated feelings and

connected me to my culture and universe in a new and expansive way. (Nuñez 138-139)

An integration of Marxist analysis deepened the members' cultural and social ties, thereby politically mobilizing them to take their message of liberation beyond the University and into the working class Chicano/a *barrios* of southern California. Thus, Laura Garcia states, "As we came to understand Marxist analysis more, our plays began reflecting this, and we moved away from being just against the *machismo* to being for the working class" (Garcia 39). In addition, their focus on the Chicano/a working class paralleled the new roles that founding members began to take on as they graduated from the University and mentored a new crop of young Chicanas. Armed with degrees, the graduated members transformed their college education into community and political activism, taking on jobs such as educators, health care workers, and union organizers, thus bridging politics and praxis. They encouraged younger members to do the same. "The first generation of Chicanas had influence on the next generation that was coming in," explains Garcia, "Felicitas and that group before us—they were like the big sisters looking up for us, getting us into politics, into marches" (Garcia, Personal Interview). The *teatro* marked their changing roles and expanding intersectional politics with a new name:

The Teatro de las Chicanas was renamed when we became more politically involved and we realized that the name had to be changed so it would reflect our political views to the community. We were getting more involved with working class issues and needed a name that they could relate to. We

came up with the name Teatro Laboral. We performed for migrant workers, community groups, and our friends (Beltran 114).

Members also believed that utilizing class as a unifying category could resolve ideological conflicts within the Movement that perpetuated sexism. They first explored this strategy in *¡Bronca!*, a very brief *acto* specifically aimed at male Chicano students involved in MEChA. In *¡Bronca!* the performers call *machismo* “the tool of the oppressor” and incite their *carnales* to “unite with their sisters to fight the oppressor” (192). The *acto* ends with the chorus’s collective cry of “Only by men and women uniting as equals can we obtain the liberation of our class!” (192). This became Teatro Laboral’s principal message which they developed further in *Salt of the Earth*, an adaptation of the 1954 U.S. film based on a 1951 miners’ strike against Empire Zinc Company in Grants, New Mexico.

The original film did not enjoy critical acclaim in the U.S. during the 1950s. McCarthyism’s political strangle hold over Hollywood led to the suppression of the radical film and the blacklisting of its producers and writers. However, *The Salt of the Earth* enjoyed a cult following during the Movement when UFW strikes raised national public awareness of the exploitative conditions of Mexican and Filipino/a migrant workers in Delano, California.<sup>5</sup> The kernel of the idea for Teatro Laboral’s adaptation of

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<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion of the film’s history, see Lorence, James J., *Suppression of Salt of the Earth* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1999). For a discussion the film’s positive and negative representation of Chicanos, see Alicia Schmidt Camacho, “No Constitution for Us” in *Migrant Imaginaries* (New York: NY UP, 2008) pp 113-15.

the film sprang from Peggy Garcia and Felicitas Nuñez's experience volunteering one summer for the UFW. Garcia remembers cleaning a bathroom with no running water and toilets overflowing with feces that convinced her an *acto* must be created "to help expose the truth about the conditions that many of the migrant farm workers worked and lived under" (Garcia 24). Unsanitary living conditions are a central issue in their adaptation of *Salt of the Earth*. It is the rallying point for the *acto*'s women, who express grievances about the lack of running water in their households and thus they demand to participate in their husbands' strike.

The adaptation was also inspired by the *teatro* members' own migrant and working class backgrounds. Kathy Requejo, Virginia Rodriguez Balanoff, Guadalupe Beltran and Hilda Rodriguez grew up picking and sorting fruit alongside their siblings, parents and grandparents across California. In their memoirs, Requejo, Balanoff, and Rodriguez make note of the debilitating effects of working with and eating crops covered in pesticides, while Beltran discloses the humiliating experience of being molested at the age of six by a foreman. Performing in *Salt of the Earth* and other *actos* about the exploitation of working class labor allowed the *teatro* to transform their experiences through political agency. Lived experiences gave their performances pathos and credibility, as Sandra Gutierrez confirms, "We put our hearts into the delivery of our lines. This was because the play was rooted in a political frame of reference, something we viscerally related to" (75).

This is particularly true in the case of Hilda Rodriguez, who admits, as a teenager toiling in the fields of Coachella, Bakersfield and Fresno, her determination for a college education and a good job blinded her to the UFW strike's importance: "I, a strike breaker,

without remorse...ignored the farm workers because I thought they were fighting for a lost cause” (92). However, performing for the *teatro* convinced her that class struggle was not futile. Rodriguez channeled her past experiences into characters with eye-opening results:

Now I was acting with remorse, pleading for sympathy and teaching the importance of the UFW grape boycott from my stage to a live audience...what was happening to me was that now I was learning and understanding with the eyes and from my heart. (93)

The stage allowed Rodriguez and the other members to return to UFW politics. Through a university education, they experienced class mobility, gaining access to knowledge made available to a certain class of people (white, male and middle class). While education permitted the *teatro* members to develop class-consciousness, it also distanced them from the day-to-day struggles of their working class communities. *Teatro* functioned to bridge this gulf between the members’ intellectual class-consciousness and the UFW’s direct activism on the ground.

Through their performances, Teatro Laboral bridges distance, space and time to create a living collective history of Chicano/a working class struggle and resistance, attesting to *teatro* as a practice of living memory, which Broyles-González defines as performing “lived experience combined with the greater communal historical experience” of Chicano/a people (20). In *Salt of the Earth*, personal histories of Teatro Laboral that undergird the *acto*’s performances converge with the history of the 1951 New Mexico miner’s strike. Furthermore, the action onstage directly reflected the lives and culture of

its working class Chicano/a audience. *Salt of the Earth* speaks to *teatro* as a cultural practice employing Chicano/a markers through bilingualism and the incorporation of popular and traditional Mexican songs to construct a distinctly Chicano/a working class reality. Broyles-González explains that the fusion of performative elements such as theatre, music, and dance common to Mexican oral performance, “reflect[s] the working class scramble to make do, to survive by drawing on all of one’s resources” (49). In *Salt of the Earth*, dialogue and song fuse to convey the emotional levity of a scene. This fusion of seemingly disparate practices generates a performance that resists “Euro-American cultural dominance or intrusion which Chicana/os experience daily” (125).

The *acto* also incorporates African American blues, thereby constructing a united front of performative cultural resistance across racial divides. This move counters cultural nationalism’s separatist politics that stressed self-determination apart from the nation’s dominant culture and other emergent cultures. Teatro Laboral’s *actos* enacted a politics of liberation across difference, as Beltran indicates:

Either you believe equality only for Chicanos and Chicanas  
or you believe in equality for *everyone*: Chicanos, blacks,  
and whites, and Native Americans. And that’s what divided  
the Movement back then, you know? It took different  
routes and when we talk about, you know, becoming  
involved, we became involved in other organizations that  
were not so narrowly focused on Chicano and Chicana  
rights, but for everyone. (Beltran, Personal Interview)

In *Salt of the Earth*, gender is the categorical vehicle that dismantles group domination to establish class unity. Tensions between the miners and their wives obstruct the productivity of the strike, thus underscoring how a hierarchical division of labor based on gender fosters disunity among the sexes. This tension plays out between married couple Espe and Ramón, who serve to personalize class struggle and reveal how class oppression structures the day-to-day reality of working class families. Moreover, through the couple's conflict, the *acto* establishes a link between the racial discrimination and poor labor conditions of the miners at work and the gender discrimination and unsanitary living conditions of their wives at home. Espe's grievances about the lack of plumbing and sanitation in their home are met with dismissal by her husband who states "there are more important issues then [sic] sanitation. The safety of the workers comes first" (206). Yet, when Ramón criticizes Espe's involvement in the strike, she counters with "you just want me to stay in my place. And you look down at Anglos when they try to keep you in your place" (223). The *acto* destabilizes hierarchical divisions of labor based on gender through role reversal. When Espe is jailed, Ramón must take over the domestic work in their home. As a result, Espe's concerns about unsanitary housing become Ramón's concerns, prompting him to conclude that hot running water must be a priority in the union contract. The scene destabilizes a gendered hierarchy of labor through role reversal to demonstrate that class oppression affects men and women equally.

Role reversal also reveals female and male labor to hold equal value. Female participation is crucial to the strike's survival and success. When an injunction is filed that prevents the miners from striking, the community passes a vote allowing the miners' wives to continue the strike. The wives' ultimate success proves the significance of their



efforts. Therefore, role-reversal tactically equalizes men and women in this *acto* rather than reiterates domination of one group over another, a point that the *acto* stresses by staging the struggle of a community working to resolve conflict and effect change through dialogue, compassion, and working together. This point is reiterated in almost every scene. In “Scene II” Ramón and his Anglo counterpart, Jenicks, work out their racial tensions by coming to an agreement that hierarchical racial divisions of labor only serve to alienate workers. “All workers are valuable,” explains Jenicks, “Disunity and division turns workers against each other...we end up betraying our society, our world, ourselves” (208). Throughout the play, Espe defends her involvement in the strike to Ramón not by tearing him down, but by advocating for equality. When the vote allowing women to strike passes, she makes the following appeal: “The women want to be supportive. We are not making men seem less important” (216). Later on, in “Scene VII,” Ramón feels that the strike is futile and disapproves of the women’s involvement to which Espe replies, “You need me Ramón, like I need you. And you cannot win this strike without me” (223). At the *acto*’s end, barriers between the performers and audience members dissolve as the audience is encouraged to participate in the scene’s action. The town sheriff and his deputy attempt to evict Ramón and Espe from their house, taking furniture and household items off stage and into the audience. The cast members stage resistance by placing the props back on stage. Eventually, Ramón encourages the audience to join in the resistance:

*(Ramón motions for those witnessing the eviction to pick up what has been dumped near the audience and take it back into the house. The sheriff and the deputy try to stop them,*

*but all the household items keep getting returned. People in the audience can also return some of the household items, or they can stand in the path of the deputy and sheriff, who are bringing out the furniture. The deputy and the sheriff after a while give up).* (225, original italics)

The *acto*'s end performs community action that breaks "classical illusions of uniformity and consistency of established middle-class theater" and allows audience members to "alter the course of events" (Broyles-González 46; 48). Allowing the audience to directly shape the performance was common practice in the *teatro*, as Ravelo describes:

There was always a question and answer period after each play. The audience had open invitation for questions and discussion about what they saw. This is where our study groups come in handy, because we were armed with the knowledge to defend our position and at the same time we were open to new ideas or suggestions. (13)

Question and answer sessions equalize relations between performers and audience members, who work together to carry out symbolic acts of cultural and social change, thereby cultivating "continuity between life on and offstage" (Broyles-González 87). This practice deviates from mainstream theater conventions that maintain a divide between the fictional world onstage and reality offstage by inviting the audience to actively engage the performance and shape it through dialogue with the actors.

Ultimately, the *acto* stages liberation as a process of working things out. Struggle is an integral part of this process, as Espe's strike *comadre*, Mary, advises:

Anything that brings change is going to be difficult.

Anything that makes us learn is going to be painful. Some will react strongly against change but if change benefits the majority then the pain we bear is worth the happiness we can gain. (224)

For its members, the *teatro* served as a constant learning process effecting change in their lives and the communities they served. Its members agree that struggle played an integral role in the *teatro*'s sustainability. Becky Mendia characterizes the *teatro*'s constant process of struggle as “a constant volcano”:

The road was never easy. It's always been conflict. It's always been—it's been *constant* evolution, a constant volcano. But every time we blew up, it came up, it was beautiful. The sight that came out of it was beautiful. And the people that we affected and the end result was just this beautiful sparkle that just came up. But, let me tell you, underneath it was a lot of boiling, a lot of heartache, a lot of hurt feelings, a lot of miscommunications with each other, you know? But, through it all, we came back through it, and that's teatro. (Mendia, Personal Interview)

Likewise, Felicitas Nuñez calls the *teatro* “a process of changing, interchanging and transforming our roles onstage and in life,” thus affirming its theatrical activity as a kind of Chicana feminist praxis (167). The *teatro* evolved a third time in 1979 as Teatro Raíces, erupting after a dormant period of two years during which time its members were

well into careers, motherhood and marriage. As the 1980s approached, the energy of the Movement declined, correlating with the entrance of Chicanas and Chicanos into the American mainstream and middle class. Broyles-González describes this period as follows:

It is not accidental that the entrance of Chicanas/os into mainstream theater is a phenomenon of the 1980s. The Chicana/o demographic explosion and the meager social gains won as a result of the Chicano movement have somewhat altered the historical options available to some sectors of our people who have become upwardly mobile. The sudden emergence of a Chicana/o middle class in the 1980s brought with it an unprecedented participation in the white mainstream institutions formerly off limits for reasons of race, class, and gender. The challenge to Chicanas/os working within mainstream institutions is and will remain an uneasy and contradictory one. On whose terms do we enter? Once we become part of the mainstream, whose interests do we serve? (169).

Members of Teatro Raíces were keenly aware of the fact that the emergence of a Chicano/a middle class marked a decline in the cultural and political activities fostered by the Movement and that the Movement did not eradicate the problems of racism, poverty and sexism. Guadalupe Beltran explains that the above dilemma motivated the *teatro*'s members to regroup:

Teatro Raíces now targeted a younger generation, high school students and their parents. Too many teenagers were becoming parents and going on welfare. We felt the need to educate them on the importance of continuing their education. There were still issues of unemployment, immigration, education, welfare, and El Salvador. We were performing at high schools, colleges, homes, and once at a night club. (114)

The group's reformation as Teatro Raíces also reflected the members' new role as mothers, who were setting down cultural roots in their homes and communities:

We can't name ourselves Teatro Laboral. We now have families, you know? We now have to portray something to the community. No, it has to be called something else. And this is where we came up with the name Teatro Raíces because now we were spreading and we had kids and we wanted to get involved in the educational process because these kids were going to be growing up in that process

(Beltran, Personal Interview)

Thus the *teatro* emerged a third time with the intent to continue fostering cultural and political awareness within their families and communities. They actively performed between 1979 and 1983 when a groundswell of a new wave of Chicana feminism began to take shape triggered by the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back* in 1981 and the emergence of Chicana feminist publication

houses, like Kitchen Table, and organizations, like W.I.T. (Women in Teatro)—of which Teatro Raíces were active members—that created professional spaces for Chicana feminist intellectual and creative production. This new wave of Chicana feminist artists and intellectuals more directly addressed Chicana sexuality, accounting for Chicana lesbian identity, and critiquing compulsory heterosexism in early Chicana feminism, as well as homophobia within Chicano/a culture. They also advocated solidarity between women of color worldwide by articulating a third world feminism exposing the intersectional colonial, racist and patriarchal oppression of U.S. imperialism. Moreover, Chicana feminists of the late 1970s and early 1980s confronted the dilemma of Chicano/a class mobility with cultural production that bridged intellectualism and community activism.

The *actos* of Teatro Raíces demonstrate places of departure and overlap with the critical concerns of this new wave of Chicana feminism. While their *actos* do not broach the topics of lesbian sexuality, or homophobia within the Chicano/a community, they do confront cultural stigmas attached to Chicana sexuality and they re-situate their critique of class and gender within a global context. Ultimately, like the new wave of Chicana feminists who interrogated cultural, economic, and social borders and utilized Chicana feminist cultural production to bridge divides, Teatro Raíces's *actos* bridge generational, cultural and social gaps within their communities as well as between their communities and those across the U.S.-Mexico border. These bridges address the cultural, economic and social issues confronting the next generation of working class Chicanos/as, exposing the U.S.'s interlocking systems of power at work domestically and globally to inspire

critical consciousness in their young audiences with their three major *actos*, *So Ruff, So Tuff*, *E.T.—The Alien* and *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*.

In their first *acto*, *So Ruff, So Tuff*, the members return to the issues of educational discrimination and economic disenfranchisement within the U.S. The story follows a single mother and her two children as they both figuratively and literally navigate through institutionalized intersectional oppression. In their second and third *actos*, *E.T.—The Alien* and *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*, Teatro Raíces situates inequalities of class, gender and race within a global context to inform Chicano/a audiences on the impact of the U.S.'s. oppressive economic and military forces at work in South America. *E.T.—The Alien* follows a south American woman, Enriqueta, on her journey North and the dangers and discrimination she faces crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and working as a maid, *campesina*, and factory worker in the U.S. *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* satirizes U.S. military and capitalist interference in El Salvador's civil war by dropping into the thick of the war one of mainstream American television's most bigoted (and most beloved) characters, Archie Bunker from *All in the Family* (1971-1979) and *Archie's Place* (1979-1983).

The *actos* of Teatro Raíces employ satire and comic subversion as a means of exposing the internal mechanisms of power that gird systemic oppression. All three *actos* perform a pastiche of American and Chicano/a pop culture to appeal to a young audience of working and middle class Chicanos/as and to expose ideologies of race, gender, class and nation embedded in dominant American media images and narratives recognizable to Chicano/a youth. Such tactics serve to make discriminatory rhetoric shaping such popular images and narratives ineffectual and “challenges all that appears immutable, stable and

unchanging—most notably the existing social hierarchy and dominant authority” (Broyles-González 30). For instance, a *Twilight Zone* frame narrative introduces each scene in *So Ruff, So Tuff*, where the “Unknown Area” of the television show’s setting is refigured as the alienating margins of society, which the family of characters cruise through in a low rider. War’s “Low Rider” plays in the background signifying a popular Chicano/a imaginary familiar to a young Chicano/a working class audience. *E.T.—The Alien* directly references the extremely popular children’s movie *E.T.—The Extra Terrestrial* (1982) rendering more explicit the rhetoric of inhumanity and marginalization present in popular American culture in which undocumented migrants are consistently referred to as “illegal aliens,” a point further emphasized when the protagonist, Enriqueta Tijeras, is turned over to La Migra by her rich employee, who reports Enriqueta as an “extraterrestrial alien” (234). *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* utilizes the well-known television character’s bigotry to emphasize the general American public’s ignorance on U.S. imperialism abroad. Guadalupe Beltran originated the role of Archie Bunker in the *actos* and explains why she was drawn to the character: “He portrayed a bigot, but in his real heart, he was portraying it to try to prove a point to the world that this is how bigots are. That this is what they believe in but it’s because they are ignorant of what they’re doing” (Beltran, Personal Interview).

Through Archie Bunker and other Anglo characters, the *actos* satirize whiteness and specifically take aim at white male privilege to undermine Anglo male social and cultural authoritative power to direct the future of the *actos*’ young protagonists and by extension, the future of the U.S. Instead of pursuing a college degree, the protagonists of *So Ruff, So Tuff*, Rudy and Rosie, are encouraged by Anglo teachers and employers “to



put an end to their dreams” by entering the work force and getting married (194). In addition, Rudy is lured by the lucrative opportunity to work for drug dealer Big Daddy Joe Loco, a job that promises the material gain of “a better car, more chicks and some sharp threads” (196). Farcical statements like the latter punctuate dialogue throughout the *acto* thereby drawing attention to stereotypical Anglo-defined mainstream representations of Chicanos/as. During “Scene II: The Cruise,” The Mother, Rudy and Rosie are referred to as “trouble maker,” “your type,” “trash,” and “weird people” and are accused of laziness, unreliability and suspicious behavior by Anglo characters in positions of power. Similarly, while working as a maid, the protagonist of *E.T.—The Alien*, Enriqueta Tijera, is referred to as a “peon,” by her wealthy employers and as “your kind” who “take all the jobs” by a homeless woman and by a union organizer, named Mr. Union, who claims that “illegal aliens,” like Enriqueta, obstruct the unionization of U.S. citizen farm workers (235, 236). In *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*, Archie Bunker reiterates a patriotic and nativist popular rhetoric to justify U.S. military interference in El Salvador: “We’re going over there to teach their military junta how to make them people respect their God and country, right or wrong, in the good ole traditional American way” (247). The *acto* then parodies the television character’s so-called “Bunkerisms” to expose the xenophobic subtext of the “good ole traditional American way” (247). He refers to his neighbor Mrs. Valdez as “taco bell,” to an El Salvadorian taxi driver named Pedro as “Pepe,” and asks an American General if the “commies” who support El Frente Democrático Revolucionario are named “*Chile con carne*” (247-254). These exaggerated characterizations lampoon the power of Anglo male authority that such figures represent while their reiteration of derogatory sentiments exposes “the accomplice nature of

language to authority” (Ybarro-Frausto 46). Furthermore, in the case of *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador*, the *acto*’s parody of Bunkerisms makes explicit the accomplice nature of seemingly benign popular forms of American television to transmit xenophobic representations of Chicanos and Latinos.

Highly stylized performances of Anglo masculinity match the characters’ hyperbolic rhetoric in an effort to further dismantle Anglo male supremacy. Like Gloria Bartlett’s performance of the Anglo male professor in *Chicana Goes to College*, Evelyn Cruz and Guadalupe Beltran’s performances of Anglo male characters in Teatro Raíces’ *actos* effect merely crude representations of Anglo masculinity, offering mixed significations of gender, thereby exposing its authorial ruse. For instance, in a photographic still of Evelyn Cruz as “Sassco Personnel” in *So Ruff So Tuff*, the actress’s exposed feminine jewelry undercuts her character’s hypermasculinity conveyed through a gruff demeanor and exaggerated costume consisting of an oversized hardhat, large cigar and an undone work-shirt and tie (see figure 6). Beltran’s performance of Archie Bunker also scrambles gender significations through barely concealed cross dressing—while she wears a men’s work shirt, khakis, and work boots, her long black hair pulled into a pony tail and her dark nail polish remain exposed to the audience (see figure 7). In the same way that Corky in Moraga’s *Giving Up the Ghost* refutes the authority of Chicano masculinity by never “pulling off” an authentic performance, Beltran and Cruz’s cross dressing refuses to pull off Anglo masculinity as a means of dismantling the authoritative power of Anglo male supremacy by scrambling codes of gender and race.



Figure 6. Evelyn Cruz as Sassco Personnel in Teatro Raíces' *So Ruff So Tuff* (1982). The image appears in *Teatro Chicana* edited by Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M Gutierrez and Felicitas Nuñez (Austin: UP Texas, 2008).



Figure 7. Gloria Escalera (kneeling), as Gloria, mourns the death of Archie Bunker played by Guadalupe Beltran in Teatro Raíces' *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* (1981). The image appears in *Teatro Chicana* edited by Laura E. Garcia, Sandra M Gutierrez and Felicitas Nuñez (Austin: UP Texas, 2008).

Teatro Raíces' satire undoes white male supremacy as a means of uncovering its encoded presence in American mainstream culture in an effort to externalize the internal oppressive forces at work in seemingly benign American popular images and narratives that infiltrate Chicano/a communities through dominant media.

However, Teatro Raíces's critique of oppression is not limited to social and cultural forces outside the Chicano/a community. Their confrontation of cultural and religious taboos surrounding Chicana sexuality breaks silence on topics of abortion and rape long repressed within Chicano/a communities. Indeed, speaking Chicana sexuality was a crucial facet of Chicana feminism during the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, unlike the work of playwrights like Portillo-Trambley or Moraga whose intended audience was Chicano/a, but who played largely in dominant theater spaces to a mostly Anglo constituent, Teatro Raíces continued to perform in public spaces such as high schools and community centers, thus directly engaging Chicano/a audiences on the muted topic of Chicana sexuality with the intent of both educating their audiences on issues of abortion and rape, as well as challenging the taboos surrounding such topics that only continues the cycle of sexual and domestic abuse. In personal interviews, the members of the *teatro* reveal the internalized effects of this heavy cultural silence that even kept them from speaking to each other about their own experiences. In fact, Guadalupe Beltran relates that it was not until the publication of the memoir that members fully addressed their own experiences:

We talked about boyfriends, we talked about this, we talked about the family, but we didn't talk about these taboo issues? How is that possible when we are women that are

fighting certain issues and then to see these stories and we never talked about them? We were too ashamed. We were too worried. Which was one of the struggles why we didn't want to write the book; I mean, you didn't want to write your story because *they're going to hear about it. They're gonna [sic] know.* And then all of a sudden, *Whoa! I should've talked about this sooner!* We waited too long.

(Beltran, Personal Interview)

Laura Garcia agrees with Beltran and adds that their intent to break silence and speak about their own sexualities in their memoirs was necessary to continue their feminist legacy of education and action:

I think [reading about] the sexual abuse was very, very difficult for all of us. And I think at that time, I was going through the process of accepting it—that it happened. What am I going to do with the anger? And how am I going to survive it—but not only survive it but become a warrior because I don't want to be a victim of it, but I want to overcome it. And then what do I do with it?...we're passing on the torch of not only what the Movement was and how we participated in it, but whatever elements or kernels of lessons that are there for the next generation, for them to take on. And I think that the sex thing—talking about it was

very difficult...things that we didn't know about each other. (Garcia, Personal Interview)

*So Ruff, So Tuff* and *E.T.—The Alien* captures a stage in the *teatro*'s process of developing a collective voice regarding the material effects of a cultural and social silence that informs Chicana sexuality and bears down on Chicana bodies. Through their *actos* that address the issues of abortion and rape, the *teatro* transforms personal and collective trauma into community activism. The early *acto*, *So Ruff, So Tuff*, addresses the issue of abortion only briefly, through a short dialogue between The Mother and Rosie, who debate over Rosie's choice to get an abortion at fifteen, indicating the psychological and social effects of the religious and cultural taboo surrounding abortion in Chicano/a communities. *E.T.—The Alien* handles more directly the issue of rape, shoring up national anxieties about immigration and cultural ideas about female sexuality that are simultaneously inscribed on the Chicana and Latina body.

*So Ruff, So Tuff* stages abortion as a generational conflict between Rosie and The Mother who signify competing cultural ideologies: Catholic-influenced pro-life views espoused by the Mother and pro-choice feminist advocacy expressed by Rosie. The dialogue plays out as follows:

RUDY: You think you got it all together. I happen to know you got an abortion when you were only fifteen.

MOTHER: Rosa, ¿pero como? On no, wahaa!

ROSIE: Mother...I didn't want you to know; I'm not proud of myself...at that time I just wanted to die of shame. I'm sorry.

MOTHER: Waha...Dear God, save my children...Oh, my heart is broke. Rosita is not a virgin and Rudy, you are thinking of dying like Mantecas. Stop it, the both of you. Rosa, you ask for forgiveness for taking a life.

ROSIE: Ma, I had to decide. Abortion was my choice because I am not ready to give up my life to raise a child. I've learned from my mistake, I hope you can forgive me one day. (202)

The scene literally performs a breach of silence when Rudy exposes his sister's secret. The Mother instructs her daughter to "ask for forgiveness for taking a life," reiterating traditional Catholic doctrine deeming abortion a sinful act that must be repented. Rosie, however, counters by defending her decision as a choice grounded in the reality of her life circumstances: "I am not ready to give up my life to raise a child" (202). Rosie's reply to her mother thus indicates the very real social and economic factors underlying a woman's decision to have an abortion. Furthermore, the *acto* puts pressure on the religious and cultural stigma of abortion in traditional Mexican culture to emphasize the material effect the stigma has on Chicanas. Rosie's shame and embarrassment keeps her from telling her mother about the abortion, indicating psychological ramifications perpetuated by the taboo of silence rendering Chicana sexuality an unspeakable topic even between mothers and daughters. More upsetting to the mother is the fact that Rosie lost her virginity, subtly revealing that what is unspeakable about abortion is not the act itself but rather the implication of a woman acting as a sexual agent, thereby going against traditional patriarchal Catholic notions of passive female sexuality. Moreover, Rosie does not

apologize for her choice to have an abortion, nor does she ask God for forgiveness, thus rejecting the religious notion that abortion is a sin. Instead of asking God for forgiveness, Rosie hopes her mother will one day forgive her, further underlining the cultural stigma against women who have abortions, perpetuated by a silence that would pit Mother against child. Teatro Raíces' subtle critique of the religious and cultural stigma of abortion within Chicano/a culture indicates the *teatro* negotiating how to initiate community dialogue on a taboo topic in a manner that accounts for and engages all points of view while also emphasizing the very real psychological and social effects of repressed Chicana sexuality.

*E.T.—The Alien* provides a more explicit critique of the material effects of cultural and social repression of Chicana sexuality in large part because the *teatro* wrote and performed the *acto* for International Women's Week in San Diego in 1982. Members believe that the *acto*'s examination of discrimination and exploitation of Latina immigrants in the U.S. remains relevant to this day. Beltran explains that they wrote the *acto* "for a community base" but that "it could be played anywhere...and it will still relate to what is going on" (Beltran, Personal Interview). The *acto*'s South American protagonist who crosses the Mexico-U.S. border to find work situates the *teatro*'s cultural critique within a transnational context thereby indicating that issues of rape and repressed female sexuality effecting women of color migrating through America are intricately related to colonial oppression. *E.T.—The Alien* thus stages these issues as both community and national problems, bridging the experiences between Chicanas and Latinas across borders.



*So Ruff, So Tuff* addresses abortion through dialogue, keeping the conversation somewhat at a distance from its audience, and employs subtle interventions to critique the cultural and religious silencing of the issue within Chicano/a communities. By contrast, *E.T.—The Alien* approaches through staged action, the cultural attitudes and cycles of oppression that simultaneously sanction sexual violence against women and negate its victims. Characters narrate their back-stories and present circumstances to the audience, forcing active witnessing on the part of the audience members. The *acto* begins at the U.S.-Mexico border where, before crossing over, Enriqueta breaks the fourth wall and delivers a soliloquy detailing the economic conditions that force her to migrate north:

ENRIQUETA: My name is Enriqueta Tejada—they call me E.T. I am from the continent of South America, across the Mexican border. In Latin America the poor are not as hidden as in the United States. Once you cross the border poverty is vast and naked. There are the super-rich who have taken all the land and are protected by the government, and then there are the foreign companies, many of whom are runaway shops from the United States of North America. They pay their workers a meager \$6.75 an hour, while they only pay South American workers a \$1.00 a day. But now even these factories are closing down. There are many organized protests in South America against injustice and hunger. Those in power have smothered these sparks of revolution. In spite of this

oppression, people like me will continue to struggle for a better life at whatever cost. (230)

The cost of Enriqueta's struggle for a better life becomes tragically clear in the next scene when an immigration officer, La Migra, rapes her as soon as she crosses into the U.S. Again, unlike *So Ruff, So Tuff's* situating of Rosie's abortion in the past, to create a kind of distance between the culturally transgressive act and the audience, the physical and psychological effects of economic oppression Enriqueta experiences materialize on the stage through direct action. While not completely visible to the audience, the rape takes place on stage, behind scenery:

*Migra laughs for some time. Takes E.T. to the floor behind the dry bush on center stage. Migra bends, choking her. E.T. stops screaming when Migra stands up, fixing pants, pulling zipper, and laughing. Migra 2 enters stage right.*

(231, original italics)

The rape of Enriqueta by the immigration officer holds multiple interrelating significations. It symbolically acts out the economic exploitation of Latinas by the infiltration of U.S. capitalism southward that Enriqueta experienced in her home country, thereby dissolving temporal borders to convey her circumstances as an ongoing effect of colonialism. Furthermore, by playing out the rape scene on stage, the audience bears witness to the physical and psychological violence against Latinas that such exploitative economic colonialism sanctions. As such, the rape scene ultimately symbolizes the negation of basic human rights facilitated by the enforcement and policing of national borders. The *acto* thus makes clear that sexual violence is not a hypothetical situation

relegated to the abstract by dialogue and distanced by time. Rather, it is a present and corporeal reality that can no longer be shrouded in silence. Furthermore, the *teatro* stages this act of feminism using 1982's highest grossing film, *E.T* as its critical frame. This strategy turns on its head the film's benevolent and heartwarming story to make explicit the dehumanized status and treatment of immigrants in the U.S.

The *acto* also critiques the cultural stigma of rape within Chicano/a culture, thereby imploring the community audience to reflect on its own complicity in the exploitation and sexual violence of Chicanas through traditional Mexican culture's patriarchal repression of female sexuality. Nine months after Enriqueta crosses the border into the U.S., she works as a sewer in a factory sweat shop. Pregnant and in love with a fellow worker, a Chicano named Juan, she discloses her condition to him, and Juan rejects her:

E.T.: Juan, when I was crossing the border (pause), I was raped. Now I am pregnant.

Juan: What are you saying? Why did this have to happen to me? Now I cannot make you my wife; you are not a virgin. I have too much pride to accept this.

E.T.: I also have pride, and you are mistaken if you think that I am less of a woman because of what happened to me. All I wanted was to work and to better my life. I have chosen to keep this child and make a living for the both of us. I will do what I can to help my family back home. I, (pause), we will go on with or without you. (238)

Akin to The Mother's reaction to Rosie's abortion in *So Ruff, So Tuff*, Juan refuses Enriqueta because he believes that rape renders her no longer a virgin. What is more, Juan perceives himself the true victim of Enriqueta's rape when he demands "Why did this have to happen to me?" (238). The *acto* criticizes traditional Mexican culture's male centrism that would be so threatened by female sexuality as to render abject women sexually assaulted by other (Anglo) men. However, the *teatro* offers an ambiguous resolution. It rejects the social negation of Chicana sexuality through Enriqueta's refusal of an abject status: "you are mistaken if you think I am less than a woman because of what happened to me" (238). However, it also participates in this abjection, when in the final scene Enriqueta dies in childbirth, starkly reiterating that the cost of a migrant Latina's struggle for a better future is her very own life.

Nevertheless, performing the abjection of Enriqueta instigates the audience to break their own roles of complicit silence and take action. Thus, at the end, Güera, a Chicana companion of Enriqueta, vows to take care of her friend's child and implicates the audience in this deed by directly asking "Why does it have to be this way? What is the future of this child?" (238). Rather than offering a clear cut solution, the *teatro* puts this responsibility in the hands of the audience. This strategy of irresolution is a distinguishing marker of Teatro Raíces' *actos*. *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* ends similarly, as an El Salvadorian Guerilla faces the audience and asks, "What would you do in the face of poverty and hunger?" (258). While *So Ruff, So Tuff* does not end with a rhetorical question posed to the audience, it does not offer a clear resolution to the paradox it addresses of an emerging Chicano/a middle class at the end of the twentieth century other than "to struggle with all of the contradictions" (202). Laura Garcia's explanation of the

intellectual purpose of the *teatro*'s *actos* sheds light on their turn to more ambivalent closing scenes. "We were talking about issues people were facing and changing people's minds," she relates, "*Teatro* is about affecting you intellectually. You put out new ideas and some people don't grasp them. You hope everyone [will] but if not at least it's changing [their minds]" (Garcia, Personal Interview). The *teatro*'s ambivalent tactics perhaps serve as a means of intellectually engaging their audience on issues that need addressing in the Chicano/a community. The ambivalence marking Teatro Raíces' *actos* also reflects the *teatro*'s ever-shifting purpose as the Teatro's curtain call drew near and its members increasingly sought to pass on their experiences and knowledge to newer generations of Chicanos/as.

The *teatro* officially disbanded in 1983, a year after writing and performing *E.T.—The Alien*. Intellectually engaging younger audiences to reflect on their own roles in the community and seek their own solutions to issues can be an act of passing on the torch of the *teatro*'s activism and re-igniting the struggle for equality within contemporary Chicano/a communities. In fact, continuing the struggle is the self-proclaimed legacy of Teatro Chicana, whose members continue to live *teatro* daily by translating it into career paths and community activism. Through constant change and collectivity, Teatro Chicana constitutes a collective Chicana subject in process forged from multiple performances of Chicana identities rooted in the diverse experiences of the *teatro*'s revolving company of actors. Their inclusion in Chicano/a theater history interrupts its monolithic masculine story marked by the individual achievements of 'great men' by attesting to the critical contributions of women and accounting for the significant role of collective creative processes.

## Chapter V:

### “We Pass the Torch to You”: A Conversation with Members of Teatro Chicana

This interview with former members of Teatro Chicana occurred on 3 January 2016, at the residence of Felicitas Nuñez. The participants are representative of all three of the *teatro*'s stages: Felicitas Nuñez and Laura Garcia represent the early years of Teatro de las Chicanas (1971-1975); Guadalupe Beltran, Sandra Gutierrez and Virginia Rodriguez represent Teatro Laboral (1975-1977); and Becky Mendia and Delia Ravelo represent Teatro Raíces (1979-1983). The interview is itself a Chicana feminist act that generates an alternative history of the *teatro* through oral and embodied performances of shared experiences and memories, personal revelations, and inside jokes. It thus proves the significance of Chicana performativity as a form of living history passed down through oral and embodied practices. The interview also captures the collective dynamic of Teatro Chicana's creative and intellectual process composed of interjections, contradictions, digressions, imitations, riffs, building off each other's ideas and laughter that coalesce into an *acto* and thus attests to Chicana theater's interactive form of performativity that enacts a collective Chicana subject in process. It is precisely the multi-expressive, collective and interactive qualities of Teatro Chicana enacted in this conversation that proves Chicana feminism to be an ongoing, poly-vocal and multi-directional performance of cultural and historical female agency.

**Becky Mendia:** So, in this particular group that's gathered here today, we have some original members of the teatro, we have members that came later on. Me personally—

Becky Mendia—I wasn't in college with them, so I didn't—I wasn't in that scene, I came in later on. I'm Felicitas's—

**Felicitas Nuñez:** Sister in Law—

**Mendia:** Sister in Law. I was forced into it.

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** Felicitas said, “you have no choice,” which a lot, you know—that's how a lot of us came into teatro because there was an order that needed to be done or someone needed to fill in a spot and whoever was around, “come on you're going, that's it,” you know?

So, a lot of us—that's how we learned teatro and to be part of it and [some members] left it and came back once the book was written. I personally did not write a story in the book, but I had the opportunity to be around the women, for forever, it seems, since they were *in* college. So, anyway, so that's this group—this particular group that's here today. It's kind of a mix of everybody, right?

**Natalie Kubasek:** So the first question is when did you join the teatro group and what led you to join the teatro group?

**Virginia Rodriguez:** I'll go ahead and start.

**Kubasek:** Ok, yeah, go ahead.

**V. Rodriguez:** I started later. I had just moved to San Diego. These people here [in the room] are either from San Diego or going to school in San Diego—

**Sandra Gutierrez** [whispers to V. Rodriguez]: What's your name?

**V. Rodriguez:** Oh yeah! My name is Virginia Rodriguez and I grew up as a farm worker in Coachella...and so I started to go to San Diego City College thinking that I could try to get into one of the nursing schools there. And [Teatro Chicana] happened to have an open

slot and they needed a live body and they threw me in. That's—it was sort of like, “we need this, we need that,” so, you would fill in an empty slot and you would be male or female or whatever happened to be there based on the void.

**Gutierrez:** That was what? 1978?

**V. Rodriguez:** I think—

**Gutierrez:** No, no, no, no, no. It was seventy...

**V. Rodriguez:** Seven?

**Gutierrez:** Seventy Four.

**Delia Rodriguez:** It was before Seventy Seven.

**Guadalupe C. Beltran:** At first—Guadalupe Beltran—(to V. Rodriguez) yours [sic] was before me and I started in Seventy Three. You were already there.

**V. Rodriguez:** No, I didn't graduate high school until Seventy Two, so it couldn't have been.

**Beltran:** So you came after me?

**V. Rodriguez:** I came after, yeah, in Seventy Four.

**Gutierrez:** Yeah, we graduated in Seventy Three. So, I went to San Diego State that fall of Seventy Three and I joined the Teatro that spring semester, Seventy Four *por allí*.

**V. Rodriguez:** I came that winter but I didn't start working with them until—I came to watch but I ended up being co-opted [laughs].

**Gutierrez:** It was probably Seventy Four or Seventy Five sometime around there...yeah.

**D. Rodriguez:** I also have a different way I got into the teatro. I was shanghaied [sic] into UCSD.

[Group laughter]



**D. Rodriguez:** I only call it shanghaied [sic] because I was going to San Diego State and the recruiters were just going everywhere just trying to grab people to go to UCSD, you know?

**D. Rodriguez:** And so of course, that wasn't my plan but, you know, I just kind of went along with it. But I saw [Teatro Chicana] perform...I said you know what? I want to do this, but—so that was nineteen seventy seven-ish [sic] and I was on my way to get a teaching credential and the education and all that was a big issue, which still is now, and that's how that happened.

**Beltran:** I'm Guadalupe Beltran. I went to San Diego State after HEP: High School Equivalency Program. We went through this other company called Acap. But, I remember being bombarded—

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** ...By politics. Never in my life have I ever been so bombarded...and I took this class where Delia Ravelo and Moya were teaching—

**Gutierrez:** Oh my god [laughs].

**Beltran:** ...Political Science—

**Gutierrez:** What a combination.

**Beltran:** Yes. And then I went to a MEChA meeting and Teatro had performed their first, which was, I think, "Chicana"...

**Gutierrez:** "...Goes to College."

**Beltran:** "...Goes to College." And I saw them perform and the politics of it—I said, I have to somehow get into *teatro*. Plus, in my mind, I can act better than that!

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** But that's what I thought, you know?

**D. Rodriguez:** If *they* can do it!

**Beltran:** Yeah, if *they* can do it, I can do it. But, it was a struggle because I just couldn't go and apply. It was like—it felt like it was a close knit [sic], okay?

**Gutierrez:** Mm-hm.

**Beltran:** The only thing that helped me was that I was living at—renting a house with Mickey and Angie—

**Laura Garcia:** Mikaela?

**Beltran:** Mikaela and Angie, and Feliz (Felicitas Nuñez) had gone over to try to recruit them and I was, like, in the back, you know, trying to get involved.

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** Yeah, Feliz was more like, “ehh. Nah.”

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** But they—*somehow*, they needed somebody, and that's how I was able to get in because if they hadn't needed someone at that moment, then, I probably wouldn't have ever have joined. But I remember having to borrow some shoes and a hat for that first play that we did. That's how I got involved.

**Garcia:** And what was the first play?

**Beltran:** You know, I think it was—it might've been...

**Gutierrez:** “Chicana Goes to College”?

**Beltran:** Yes, because I was just a small little part, just sitting down as one of the students or something—small little part. So...

**Mendia:** And that was my first one, too—was “Chicana Goes to College.” We actually went to San Diego State and performed there for the MEChA?

**Felicitas Nuñez:** For—it was recruitment.

**Mendia:** Oh recruitment, yeah. It was high school. All the high school students came and we got all dressed up, all chola’d out [sic] with the big eye lashes on all sparkly and just really exaggerated with the Chicana, you know, going to—

**V. Rodriguez:** Chola! [Laughs]

**D. Rodriguez:** Chola going to college!

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** And I was so afraid. But oh my god those kids *loved* it. They *loved* it. The applause, they just—you know, it was just amazing that we *saw* we made a difference, *immediately*. We could see we made a difference with that. And the next play that we did was “Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador.”

**Nuñez:** [pointing to Beltran] She’s the star.

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** Archie Bunker was my hero. He portrayed a bigot, but in his real heart, he was portraying it to try to prove a point to the world that this is how bigots are. That this is what they believe in but it’s because they are ignorant of what they’re doing. They just fear, and you have those still. You have those people who are going for government—Donald Trump—because they are ignorant of life. They listen to this and they believe it—

**Garcia:** He’s an asshole!

**Gutierrez:** I don’t think he’s ignorant.

**Beltran:** And so I really wanted to do justice to [Bunker] because he was my hero.

**D. Rodriguez:** But the people that follow [Donald Trump] are ignorant.

**Beltran:** That's a good point. He uses them.

**Garcia:** Very much so.

**Mendia:** And then, too, we're part of the Teatro...

**Nuñez:** Laboral.

**Mendia:** And then we evolved one more time and became Teatro Raíces. So it was Teatro Chicana, Teatro...

**Nuñez:** Laboral.

**D. Rodriguez, Beltran, Gutierrez:** Laboral.

**Mendia:** And then Teatro Raíces. And then it came back full circle, back to Teatro Chicana.

**Beltran:** What happened was that we were Teatro Chicana—we evolved and we did for—

**V. Rodriguez:** Political—

**Beltran:** ...Political—for the college students and all that. And then most of these college students got involved politically in their work, like NASCO and places like that, that we thought, *okay, if we're going to be doing plays for them, then we have to change our name*. We can be all feminine and women and do teatro, but we can't call ourselves Teatro Chicana when we are dealing with different issues. And—

**Gutierrez:** The focus shifted.

**Beltran:** The focus shifted and that's why we decided to call ourselves Teatro Laboral because we were the labor at that time, then. And we were passing leaflets, and we had not performed in what? A year or two years? And Felicitas came by, and I remember

Felicitas coming to my home and saying, “Why don’t we start *el teatro* again?” But I had a child. I had Fernandito. And the thing was, we can’t do—we can’t name ourselves Teatro Laboral. We now have families, you know? We now have to portray something to the community. No, it has to be called something else. And this is where we came up with the name Teatro Raíces because now we were spreading and we had kids and we were—we wanted to get involved in the educational process because these kids were going to be growing up in that process. And which is why we called ourselves Teatro Raíces when we did the performance on Rudy, “So Ruff, So Tuff,” the immigration issues, and see? Everything changed—*it* changed. That’s how we wound up going one to another to another.

**V. Rodriguez:** “E.T.?”

**Beltran:** “E.T.: Enriqueta Tijera.” That was more for a community base. And the issues that were at that time—which they still are, *still*. “E.T.” could be played anywhere—

**D. Rodriguez:** You know it. In any country.

**Beltran:** ...And it will still relate to what it is going on.

**D. Rodriguez:** Yeah. Mm-hm.

**Mendia:** That was the evolution.

**Beltran:** That was the evolution.

**Kubasek:** There seems to be a shift back to Chicana feminism. From the presentation that I saw at UNM and other articles and interviews that I’ve read, it seems like *that* is kind of a focus. I remember talking with [Teatro Chicana] about Juárez and what was happening there. So, is feminism back in the center?

**D. Rodriguez:** I know how that happened and how you even got that idea. And it was when me and you [to Beltran] remember? In 2006 we went to Santa Cruz. We didn't even know what M.A.L.C.S. was, I'm not kidding you. It was before our book was published and we put in an application to go to M.A.L.C.S. And we just looked at it and we put it all in and we got accepted. And so we did that workshop—[to Beltran] remember we did that workshop?

**Beltran:** We did a workshop.

**D. Rodriguez:** Which was a headline workshop. We didn't even know what M.A.L.C.S. was.

**Beltran:** We talked about how the street theater process—how we changed from one character to another and we did changes right there and all that. But, we didn't know what M.A.L.C.S. was and that's when we realized whoa, there are a lot of women, a lot of young generations of women there, *a lot*, [to D. Rodriguez] remember?

**D. Rodriguez:** Ah ha. So then—what happened then is I got interested because of my—you know, what *I'm* interested in—I got interested in the authors of the book of the scientists, so I went to their workshop and there was other people, like, our age that were going back to school. So from [MALCS], before our book was published, we got to know María Coterá and everybody like that. So we were starting to get involved with everybody at the university and then when our book came out, we were able to do tours because we had done some networking beforehand and then that's how it got into the feminism. So we went to the University of Washington at Pullman, you know, we went to all these tours that were set up for us. Remember we did all the Washington tours? And a whole

bunch of other ones, and then Texas and all that and then all those [feminist] issues turned out to be—you know that's how we got to be—

**Kubasek:** So would you say that Teatro Chicana is still active? An active theater?

**V. Rodriguez:** We're working hard towards our retirement!

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** But maybe—you know your first question as to how Teatro Chicana came about and one of the things you mentioned [before the interview] is that how the “Chicana Goes to College” really resonates with the young women today. You know, we were first generation Chicanas going to higher education, university, and that's how all our plays generated. If something's happening and we want to do something about it and we want to use teatro to teach—and that's how Felicitas and Delia, right? Both got—[To Nuñez] you guys came together and wrote the play for “Chicana Goes to College,” right?

**Nuñez:** Yeah, it was a group.

**Garcia:** In a group, yeah, to present to our mothers. And it wasn't *teatro* before, just this—you know, for the *seminario para las madres*. It was dance, it was, “and now *a los todos*, [mock singing] *ahhh bailando*.” Modern dancing. It was *teatro*. It was song. It was, you know, cultural things, not just speeches with talking whatever, but with using the art in its different forms to talk to our mothers. Very few mothers came, but [pointing to Nuñez] her mother came—

**Nuñez:** I dragged her there!

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** But very few mothers came, but a lot of college students—the women *did* come and I was in the audience. I knew them just from being in San Diego State—

**Gutierrez:** [whispering to Garcia]: What's your name?

**Garcia:** Her name?

**Gutierrez:** No *your* name!

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** Laura Garcia, and then “her” is Felicitas Nuñez. But um, when Lupe (Beltran) mentioned HEP, the High School Equivalency Program, that was for the children of farm workers that had dropped out of high school. And we had—and I was part of that—and we had the chance to go back to school, get our GED and from there, there was a big push for us to come into the college campus by [Nuñez]. I mean, you know, when I came into San Diego State, Felicitas was in her third year. [To Nuñez] Right? She came in Sixty Eight and our HEP came in 1970. So, anyway. So I was part of the audience when they performed “Chicana Goes to College” and the mothers were there. And then I heard [Nuñez] talk about the Teatro and that's how—*las mi'jitas aprendieron*. The first generation of Chicanas had influence on the next generation that was coming in. I mean, there was always, like—Felicitas and that group before us—they were like the big sisters looking up for us, getting us into politics, into marches, into, you know, Chicana classes, into sex classes. [To Nuñez] I remember you guys did something with contraceptives and the pill. It was you, and somebody else. Of course, I didn't go because I already knew everything.

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** I thought I already knew everything and I wasn't gonna [sic] take the class on contraceptives and the pill and I ended up pregnant.

[Group Laughter]



**Garcia:** That just shows, you know, how dumb we were, I think. We were smart and dumb at the same time! But yeah, the first generation led the way for us to fit in.

**Nuñez:** It was really something because a lot of them had gotten into [*teatro*] for the first time. Well, not a lot of them, maybe three or four. I remember saying, “Come on get in their guys. What have you got to lose? Your virginity?” And then everybody started cracking up. So that relaxed us a little bit but as far as attending TENAZ, that’s when we started picking up the important stuff, like when you hold hands with each other before you begin a presentation, or giving each other encouragement, because we were just, like, we have something to say and we’re gonna [sic] say it. We had no technique for how to support each other except with big hearts. Like Sandra says in her story, she says, “*No tenemos casi nada pero ganas.*”

**V Rodriguez:** [To Nuñez]: I came later so I’m dying of curiosity, when you said [What have you got to lose? Your virginity] was that when the mothers were there?

**Nuñez:** Oh, no.

[Group laughter]

**Gutierrez:** So, I’m Sandra Gutierrez and I joined the Teatro in probably nineteen seventy four, in the spring time. And I didn’t come in through HEP, I came straight in from high school. And it was a very lonely experience for me because I didn’t know people except for my cousin who was in college. The very first class I had was a biology class and who did I meet but Laura (Garcia).

**Garcia:** Yeah I was running late because I forgot...oh yeah, I was pregnant!

[Group laughter]

**Gutierrez:** We talked about friendship and the birth of her son. But, it was Laura who got me into the Teatro. It was when I met them and befriended them and it was my second semester then. And I think the first play I performed in was “¡Bronca!” And then performing in “The Mother,” was the other play. It was an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht. So anyway, I remember that and I was always the boy, which everybody laughed at because I was such a *chichona*, you know?

[Group laughter]



Figure 8. A conversation with Teatro Chicana at the residence of Felicitas Nuñez (3 January, 2016). *Left-Right:* Laura Garcia, Sandra Gutierrez, Virginia Rodriguez, Becky Mendia, Felicitas Nuñez, Delia Rodriguez, Guadalupe Beltran, Natalie Kubasek (the interviewer). The photo is from my personal collection.

**Gutierrez:** But I was only in the Teatro for only a year and then I left college to do political work. But I brought the Teatro back when I was working in the Coachella Valley and I talk about that in the book. I was working with the United Farm Workers and there was an incident at a local school where it was typical to hand out corporeal punishment. This teacher slapped a Chicano kid and it was a Chicana teacher who stood up and said, “Hey, what are you doing slapping kids around?” and she went to the principal and the principal basically ignored her and said, “Well, it’s a policy, so their allowed to do that.” So she and another teacher lead a walk out and came to the United Farm Workers and asked us for support and of course we were ready to go down there. So we did. We gave them our support and then I asked the Teatro to come and perform a play. On the way in from San Diego—

**Beltran:** We wrote it on the way in the car. We got in the car and everybody started giving ideas, which is the way we always do everything, anyway.

**Nuñez:** I wasn’t there but you could see the independence of the members. They take it on. This is what we try to form: the strength of every person to go on your own and speak for yourself.

**V. Rodriguez:** [To Beltran] so, who played? It was you and...

**Beltran:** Margie, Delia (Rodriguez)

**Gutierrez:** And these were women who pretty much came from the valley, so they had family here, so of course they came.

**Mendia:** Which play did you guys perform?

**Beltran:** We made it up! We don’t have it written down.

**D. Rodriguez:** It was a teacher slapping a kid—we re-enacted what actually happened—and then the support that came from the community—

**Beltran:** But when we got there, Sandra (Gutierrez) came by and gave us more information and she helped us finish it, because [to Gutierrez] you knew what was going on. We just had an idea of what you had said, but once we were there, then you said, “Okay, well, this happened and this happened.” And we don’t have it written down because it was something we did just once.

**Gutierrez:** And I got to tell you, it was quite the community action. One of the reasons for the successfulness was because we had a Spanish language radio station and the D.J. very much supported the community, so he kept promoting the meetings and the walk out. So, first it was the elementary school, and then the junior high school across the street, and then when the UFW got involved we immediately went to the high school. Well, I had only been out of high school for a couple of years so I knew the kids. The president of MEChA was the younger sister of a girl I had gone to school with. So I had called and said we wanted to meet with the MEChA people. And they came out and we explained what we’re doing. And it was “WALK OUT! *¡Orale! ¡Chingada!*” What high schooler doesn’t want to leave school, right? Then the other folks were prepared. They had trucks and they had water... *¿como se dice?* Water cans. *Ya estaban listos* for a walk out, you know? The high school is a few miles out from Coachella

**Garcia:** It was hot?

**Gutierrez:** Well, no it wasn’t. It was cool. It must’ve been, like, in the winter time. So we escorted them from the high school to the city. And I remember this little kid, you know, brought out some weed and I went and had a little political talk with him, “Do you realize

we could all go to jail? Do you understand that you're putting us all into jeopardy? Is that what you really want to do?" So he puts it away. It was like, a little political moment, you know?

[Group laughter]

**Gutierrez:** But, yeah, that was successful. The culmination of that was a schoolboard meeting and I remember it was a packed meeting. I mean, these were people who never went to school board meetings; you're talking about *gente, trabajadores*, farm workers, you know, they've never done anything like this. I mean UFW people did...*pero la otra gente*, no. We had a full house, people sitting on the floor. And it was one student who said something or did something and one of the school board members just had a violent, violent reaction to this kid and he, like, recoiled from this verbal attack...and of course this got everybody pissed off. Parents and everybody were just like, "Oh Hell no, we're taking you guys on." But a guy I'd went to school with just got a law degree and we hit the school board with a law suit and that was the end of it. The school board changed its policy, no more corporeal punishment. So we had a big moment but that's because we had Chicano lawyers willing to take it on, and community support. So, we didn't go in there unorganized, you know, we had the union behind us, the students behind us, we had the radio station that kept broadcasting the hell out of it, right?

**Garcia:** And you had the Teatro.

**Gutierrez:** Yeah, and we had public awareness on the issue and kept putting pressure on them. The lawyer we had, Sam Maestas—

**Beltran:** Oh you had Sammy? I didn't realize it was Sammy.

**Gutierrez:** But that's community organizing: you line all your elements up; that's what you have to do, and *teatro* taught me that and the political work taught me that. It's not just enough to be a good teacher with a good heart. Because these women who were teaching them were from the Chicano Movement, you know that; you know that you have to line up all these—all your horses in order to enable something to happen. But that was my participation.

**Mendia:** It's always women. It's always the women that rise up, so is that feminism? Or is that being a woman? It's knowing that *you're* the one that's gonna [sic] have to make the changes because as a woman you're the one that does direct your family; you're the one that sets that path going on, so, is it feminism? Or is it the strength of a woman that can come out and take that on?

**Garcia:** But education too, because like you [Gutierrez] were saying *tienes ganas* but if you don't know what to do with your anger or fire, you could be shooting someone else—

**Beltran:** Or following someone else because you're following the anger of that person that you agree with but you don't know any other information. Again, Trump.

**Garcia:** One of the things with the Teatro was that we did read and we did study like you [Beltran] were saying, you made the play based on the information you were given, and she [Gutierrez] was part of that community that knew what the issue was and what the solution would be, which is the end of corporeal punishment.

**Beltran:** In all our plays we had to read up first. We always had to. We had the information and everything and we would take that information and write the plays based on the issues at that time.

**Gutierrez:** I got to tell you, when the women came and performed there in Coachella, they just loved them and maybe it's because we're their daughters—we symbolize the future of our elders at the time. Their seeing all these young people, very intelligent, saying something, doing something, being willing to get up and act in front of everybody.

**Mendia:** We were not always together. The women, as they wrote their stories, they bonded together. The book was published. Not everyone was happy with it. Also, some of them were happy, some of them not. So, there was a lot of turmoil. It hasn't always been easy. And when you get a group of—and I don't know if it's just women, or if you get a group of activists together, or whatever, but it doesn't run just smoothly. It took—we were separated for almost two, three years. It was a separation before we all came back together again, you know? So, it hasn't been—I mean we can't just say you know it was a smooth—

**Nuñez:** Glamorous—

**Mendia:** yeah, glamorous, because it wasn't. Even afterwards. Even during the book readings there was a lot of issues, you know, before we'd go out onto the stage with the book readings, You know, whose gonna [sic] do this, and melt downs and it was not—

**Garcia:** [laughs] Are you talkin' [sic] about me?

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** No, I mean even myself! I had to use the word *coyote*.

**Nuñez:** *Co-yO-te*

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** I had to say “*yo soy una coyote*” and I say it wrong, you know? So, I mean it's just—it has never been easy. The road was never easy. It's always been conflict. It's

always been—it's been *constant* evolution, a constant volcano. But every time we blew up, it came up, it was beautiful. The sight that came out of it was beautiful. And the people that we affected, you know and the end result was just this beautiful sparkle that just came up. But, let me tell you, underneath it was a lot of boiling, a lot of heartache, a lot of, um, hurt feelings, a lot of miscommunications with each other, you know? But, through it all, we came back through it, and that's *teatro*.

**Beltran:** That's what keeps us together. *That's* what keeps us together: The *teatro*—

**Mendia:** And that we could voice these things.

**Beltran:** The issues and everything we believe in as a collective.

**D. Rodriguez:** I wanted to talk a little bit about the male participation. Because during the career of Teatro Laboral, we did have male participation: Eugene, and Marco...I don't know who else. And we wrote "No School Tomorrow." It was a bomb, okay? It was not good because we tried to do that *Saturday Night Live* type of thing? And you know, it takes kind of a lot of skill, you know? And so it was a bomb. And also just like any issue now—political issue—if the issue isn't big enough, you're not relating too much to the audience. It was a very...

**V. Rodriguez:** Narrow?

**D. Rodriguez:** Narrow focus on it. So then of course, it doesn't grab the same as "Chicana Goes to College,"—it just doesn't grab the same so you have to search for another issue that's broader.

**Gutierrez:** What was so wrong? Because it focused on the Bakke case?

**D. Rodriguez:** The Bakke case. And you know, it only affects certain people and then you have to intellectually understand all the stuff that's going on behind the scenes.



**Gutierrez:** It's very complex.

**D. Rodriguez:** Very complex. Okay, so then that was the male participation *in* the teatro. But we were doing the Washington tour, we went to [Pullman]—and I was so thrilled that we saw a real stage [laughs] at the Pullman College, I was so thrilled! And the tech-y [sic] guy, he was a Middle Eastern—I don't know where he was from, another country—and I couldn't get the power point to work, you know, so it would show the authors and all that. So, he helped me with that and he watched our whole performance. And so afterwards, he came up and he said, "That was so powerful." And I went, "You mean the power point?" And he goes, "No, the whole thing! I wish this could happen in my country," you know? And we were bombarded by everyone that was at the university so I didn't really get to get more information from him. But that is a global influence that we had and that really touched me, you know? That a young male would come up and say something like that, you know? The same happened in South Texas when we were at McCollum and, oh my gosh, because of the demographics of the place and the student population and all that, the way that they were talking, it wasn't just the women, it wasn't just Chicanas, it was also the males, you know? And we think it's something so simple that we're doing and it doesn't have a lot of importance until someone starts talking to us and super validates it all over again.

**Beltran:** And then you have the men who were behind the scenes. I had a husband who was very supportive. We never had a problem with having to say, "Hey, I'm in *teatro*. Hey, I'm gonna do this." Never had an issue with that. Very supportive. And I'm sure everyone else had the same.

**D. Rodriguez:** Just the issues.

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** What I mean is, you had that husband that supported you.

**Gutierrez:** Because they understood.

**Beltran:** Yeah.

**Garcia:** Because it was the times, you know? The times of the Chicano Movement and either you believe equality only for Chicanos and Chicanas or you believe in equality for *everyone*: Chicanos, blacks, and whites, and Native Americans. And that's what divided the Movement back then, you know? It took different routes and when we talk about, you know, becoming involved, we became involved in other organizations that were not so narrowly focused on Chicano and Chicana rights, but for everyone. And we had a vision of a different society, and the guys, or the men shared that same vision. So there was no gender clashes—I mean, yeah there was certain times when we needed to break but as a group there was no gender clashes because we had the same vision of a better world or ideal society, whatever it is. And so, those are the guys that we ended up marrying or getting together with. My husband and I, we have been staying together for like forty two years. Yeah. And, I mean, it hasn't been easy [laughs and makes punching gestures with her fists] but we still share the same vision that is going towards trying to make, you know, the world a better place. But we started out in the Chicano/Chicana Movement and we evolved and emerged. And I think the same thing is happening today where you're seeing some of the same issues today that are cutting across gender or racial lines that is gonna [sic] force people to group for a vision of a different thing. But with our presentations, the audience—the females of course—but the males were very receptive. I remember a kid from San Jose State coming up to us. He was saying, "I am so glad you

guys are here and [sharing] your experience and I'm buying this book for my mom because now I know what my mom had gone through."

**Gutierrez:** I remember that.

**Beltran:** I remember that.

**Garcia:** And then in San Jose, too, when we presented at the library there was three cholos or three *vato locos* and came up to the table and said, you know uh, [pushes shoulders up and curls fists, impersonating the cholos] *cholitos aqui*: [in a deeper voice] "We really like your plays and I wish our women would've come!"

[Group Laughter]

**Beltran:** Yes, I remember!

**Garcia:** "We want them to be women like you guys!"

**Nuñez:** "You care!"

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** And at the classes we did in Chicago, both the men and the women were overwhelmed with us being there and they asked just as much questions as the women did.

**Garcia:** We had been together in the seventies and some of us moved out from San Diego and some remained. And then when we started writing the book it had been, like, twenty five years since I had seen Felicitas (Nuñez) and Lupita (Beltran) and I hadn't seen Delia (Rodriguez) in twenty five years. So coming back together was a little bit of an experience. We were not the eighteen and nineteen year olds or twenty year olds from back then. We were women and we are very strong women, you know? We're very opinionated and we did clash. A lot. But what helped us was, it was the same that we

learned back then: “ok, let’s agree what the book is going to be about. Let’s have three or four questions that we want everybody to answer and then go from there.” And then everybody had those three or four questions that they had to address one way or the other. Some of us did and some of us didn’t and their stories weren’t published. At least in one case, she didn’t address it—we’re still friends—but she wanted to talk about something else. She didn’t want to talk about the Chicana years and how that changed. Others adjusted their stories and one of the things that Sandra said—well we all said—was “we don’t know how to write; we’re not writers.”

**Beltran:** Which is why the chapters are so beautiful because everybody might not know how to write but they had a story, and that story is what came out.

**Garcia:** I had to take writing classes, and memoir writing. I didn’t know what a memoir was. I wanted to write a story [for the book] and it took me a while to learn it. And maybe I didn’t know how to organize it, but like you [pointing to Beltran] were saying the story was good, and someone else can copy edit it. But it was difficult for all of us.

**Mendia:** I didn’t write my story because of that. My daughter was going to help me because Felicitas contacted me, and so I did a first draft, you know, and said, “Ok, well, I’ll try it.” And then my daughter sent me back the draft full of red marks.

[Group laughter]

**Mendia:** It was too overwhelming for me and I said I cannot do this. And so that’s when I backed out of it. I said I just can’t because it was way too much. So I said no, I can’t do this, I can’t be part of this. But I *am* part of it. Even though my story is not in there, my story *is* there. And when we did book tours I *can* contribute because I am an eye witness to everything that we did—all of our different involvements at different times. So I kind

of feel more fortunate because I am an outside observer who got to see everything they were going through, and then step in and say, “Wait, hold on,” and that was the beauty of it. I think I got to be a part of the most beauty of all of the creation of this.

**Gutierrez:** The fact that this was, I felt, for many of us, this was the first time we were asked to talk about ourselves and our development and our involvement. Because when we were young, we just did it. And then, as a reflection of, “well how *did* you do it?” And then you had to sit and think about it. Wait a minute, there was this factor, and this factor and that factor, so we would try to meet every six months and whoever wrote something for the first time would read it. And I remember sitting next to Gloria at Delia’s (Rodriguez) house—what’s Gloria’s last name?—

**Núñez:** Escalera.

**Media:** She was reading this piece and she was trembling. Just trembling from having to stand up and read this piece, but she did it, you know? She read that piece. And her piece was so powerful. Such a powerful story that I was stunned at just hearing it. And I thought to myself at this point, *oh my god, if we pull this off, this book is going to be incredible because of everyone’s story*. I mean we just don’t really talk about ourselves. We just don’t. And yet hearing individuals’ development and involvement and how it came to be—their stories are a reflection of what society was and what it was for a Mexican family at that time as young women. And we very much talked about that so it was a real powerful thing. The fact that we wrote about our own biography for the first time, what a powerful thing. This whole memoir thing is so powerful which is why I support projects where we interview our elders and ask them for their stories; you know, *how* did you do this and *why* did you do this...

**Beltran:** We did plays with these women—and I’m talking me in general—and yet you think that you know them and *not* know them until you read their stories, and think, *oh my god. Me, you, you, and you: we went through the same thing and we never talked about it?* We talked about boyfriends, we talked about this, we talked about the family, but we didn’t talk about these taboo issues? How is that possible when we are women that are fighting certain issues and then to see these stories and we never talked about them. We were too ashamed. We were too worried. Which was one of the struggles why we didn’t want to write the book; I mean you didn’t want to write your story because *they’re going to hear about it. They’re gonna [sic] know.* And then all of a sudden, *Whoa! I should’ve talked about this sooner!* We waited too long.

**D. Rodriguez:** It was healing.

**Beltran:** That is true. That is so true.

**Gutierrez:** Remember when we were doing a workshop and we had a story that was read that mentioned incest in the family? And I really remember this discussion because we heard the story, went to sleep for the night and came back to talk about it and we said, “Okay...this is a taboo subject that families don’t talk about, you know? Incest in the family. So, the woman is very brave to write about something like this and if we don’t put it in the book and we don’t publish it—if *we* don’t, then who is? *Somos son chingonas* here, you know? If we don’t publish and we don’t come out and talk incest in our family, then whose gonna [sic] talk about it? Whose gonna [sic] address this issue? Somebody has to break the silence. We need to have this discussion. And I remember that the person who wrote about it really didn’t want to. She said “I wrote this, but I don’t want it in the book.” And we were like, “Well, okay, it’s going to be a process so that it’s okay for it to

be in the book.” So that the individual who’s writing about it can be okay with it being in the book.

**Beltran:** And we only wrote one fourth of it because there are other things that happened during the time of *teatro*, during getting to college and even after college that we didn’t talk about.

**Gutierrez:** And it took us nine years to write it. What was it? Seven years to do the writing and then two years to do the production? So it was a long process. And I think it needed to be a long process; it needed for us to come back every six months and kind of check in with what we’re doing with this. What *can* we and what *do* we want to write about? What *is* it that we want to address? How can we make sure that it is a book that is going to be used and read? Or else why do it?

**Kubasek:** How much of the creative process of writing the book—figuring out the message or the purpose of the book, etc.—how much of that paralleled how you created your plays?

**D. Rodriguez:** Kind of the same way. Just kind of throw it in and mix it up!

**Gutierrez:** As Laura keeps reminding us, it was a collective process, and the Teatro operated as a collective which meant that we all had a say in what it was and once we reached a consensus and a decision was made we would adhere to the decision. And the memoir itself was an evolvment. It wasn’t that we had a clear vision of what it was on day one. It kept evolving because as we’re working on it we’d think, *wow, we really could use something else*. And the other thing is that we had advisors from the colleges and they were very clear about, listen, if you want the colleges to use it then you need to

have *this* in the book or *that* needs to be in there and so we'd come back and work on whatever needed.

**Garcia:** Yeah we had besides—

**Gutierrez:** Antonia Castañeda.

**Garcia:** Yes, Antonia Castañeda, Deena González—

**Beltran:** Susan Oliver.

**Garcia:** Yeah, Susan Oliver helped us a lot. I think Susan helped us as to what's the purpose? Why are you saying what you're saying? I remember specifically I was talking to her about drug abuse and drinking and she was telling me, "Why do you want to talk about that? And I go, "Because I did it." And she said, "Well you have to have a purpose. Is it because you wanna [sic] teach that, you know, people have problems and they abuse alcohol and drugs but you were able to overcome and *how* did you overcome it?" She said, "Because this is going to be used in the university and what do you want students to get from it?"

**Gutierrez:** Yeah so it's not just the shock element like so much of I see in lyrics and writing now just to shock people.

**Mendia:** I was shocked by our book. I was shocked by the stories. I had some moments in that book that I just was like, Oh my god!

**Garcia:** I think [reading about] the sexual abuse was very, very difficult for all of us. And I think at that time, I was going through the process of accepting it—that it happened. What am I going to do with the anger? And how am I going to survive it—but not only survive it but become a warrior because I don't want to be a victim of it. But I want to overcome it. And then what do I do with it? And so it was at a time when some of us



were processing it and the book helped you know? Because you just...and you know one of the things that Susana would say, “You don’t want people saying “¡Ay *pobrecita*, Ay *pobrecita!*” And we *didn’t* want people to think, ¡Ay *probrecita!* No. I mean, we’re not writing a *novella*. We didn’t want empathy or sympathy like that. We wanted to be educational, like Lupita (Beltran) was saying, we’re passing on the torch of not only what the Movement was and how we participated in it, but whatever elements or kernels of lessons that are there for the next generation, for them to take on. And I think that the sex thing—talking about it was very difficult...things that we didn’t know about each other. One of the stories that shocked me the most—not shocked like in a bad way but I thought like, *Oh my God*—was Gloria (Escalera).

**Gutierrez:** Oh Yes.

**Garcia:** When she married in black. When she was pregnant and her parents thought she had to get married.

**Beltran:** Shotgun wedding.

**Garcia:** At fifteen. And it wasn’t shock of the shotgun wedding but it was her rebelliousness.

**Gutierrez:** Her rebellion in wearing all black.

**Garcia:** The statement in dressing in all black.

**Beltran:** But she was forced to get married. She didn’t want to get married.

**Garcia:** Right.

**Gutierrez:** But that she would have the presence to rebel. This is the only way I have to rebel. This is all I have. She was pissed. She was pissed off and she wore black.

**Garcia:** And that’s the essence of Gloria.

**D Rodriguez:** She didn't have enough power to *not* do it. She had enough power to say something.

**Gutierrez:** And that's what I feel about Delia Ravelo and her piece that basically said of all the women who got to college in the *teatro*, we all had a little bit of rebellion in us. We had to.

**Beltran:** We had to otherwise how would we have gotten to college? Yes! Because I was the very first one just to get a GED. I had seven brothers and one sister and I had to fight to let them to let me go to a school to get my GED. That is very strong when you come from a family of seven brothers who—you are put down and all of that—and to be able to—that little fire and then your older brother says, “Let her go.” And if it weren't for that what would I have become? And then, by the time I got to San Diego State, I didn't need any help. I just said, “I'm going.”

**Gutierrez:** I think with most of us though, we had to fight—

**D. Rodriguez:** To do *anything*.

**Gutierrez:** Well, to get to college. What I'm saying, yeah to be able to fight just to graduate from high school but then to be able to leave home and go to college. I'm going *away* to college, we had to fight for that. I remember, if it hadn't been for my mom I wouldn't have been able to go but Dad was the one I had to—

**V. Rodriguez:** Overcome.

**Gutierrez:** I was like, “No, Dad, I need a four year university so I can get the degree I want.” Anything in my arsenal to argue and win the argument.

**Garcia:** But even to fight against yourself and your fears. I was so scared and I cried all the way. I was getting picked up by a friend and I'm crying and sobbing. And my father

would say, “You don’t have to go,” and then I would say, “I have to go!” And he would say, “But you can stay home,” and I would say, “I have to go!”

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** Crying all the way because I was so scared. “I have to go!”

**D. Rodriguez:** I’m glad you got it out! Some of us had anxieties. You know, you’re sacred but you have to be the tough girl. You can’t let anybody know that you’re scared, you know? That was my experience.

**Garcia:** Sobbing all the way from Brawley to San Diego [mimics crying]

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** And once I got there, and I saw the dorm and the guys, and my room that I shared with just one person and everything, I go “This isn’t so bad after all! Why was I crying on the way here?”

**Núñez:** I think one of the biggest turning points for me was my contact with Delia (Ravelo). I was there two years and then she came. And she had on a *reboso*. I was like, [rolls her eyes in mock annoyance]. In those two years I had grown politically and I had matured in so many ways. And I guess she was, like, strange to me but yet I strongly identified with her. And I didn’t know what it was about her. I just—my heart went out to her. It was so strong, you know? But when she looked into my eyes—and she spoke beautiful Spanish, beautiful English—and I thought, *damn. What’s wrong with her?*

[Group laughter]

**Núñez:** That first impact. We’re all here talking about how later we learn about our lives. Somehow we don’t talk about intuition or emotions so much; you look at the views and what you sense, but what was the intuition that says there’s something here that I don’t

understand but I want to reach out? And I want to support it, this entity that's there. And who is she? Why is she the way she is? And how are we going to connect? And so we developed that relationship through a span of two years. We started doing little *teatro*, like, for recruitments: "you're the counselor and I'm the student. What questions do I ask to get into a career," you know? So we played with that kind of stuff and then we added the third element, Peggy (Garcia): very outgoing. Just amazing. And so you had Delia on this side and Peggy on my other side. So how do you combine these forces? Until the book was being done, I said, "I didn't realize there was so much pain. There was so much hurt." And I never realized it. We were just like "We've got these issues and we've got to move!" We were bonded by very political views. And like she [Mendia] pointed out, we've got a lot of emotional and personality conflicts and everything else, but what guided us was our view and our understanding of politics and what issues we wanted to address.

**Beltran:** Look at the difference between when you met [Delia Ravelo] and I met her. I walked into a political science class with Moya and Delia and she had on Levi's jeans, long black hair and she was like this: [crosses her arms and takes a tough stance]  
[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** And just talking politics. Completely different than what you're [Nuñez] saying when you first met her [in the *rebozo*]. And when I met her it was, *damn I want to be like that*. By the time I met her, she was completely different. That's part of *teatro*, that transformation.

**Nuñez:** And part of *teatro* is too—and you [Kubasek] asked the question, are we still active? We saw ourselves as doing *teatro* every day. In our jobs—[Mendia and Nuñez]

were just talking about this—I mean I didn’t know how to be a psychiatric nurse. I pretended I did, right then and there. In three hours I was a psychiatric nurse because they through me into that den. So all of us—Lupe (Beltran) talks about when she had to sell a product. She got up there and she was talking to everybody out there and the public didn’t know. She was selling a product. And that’s what *teatro* does. You have that stage presence plus the fact that all of us, regardless of our differences, we believe in education. And in one way or another, all of us in our lives every day push education; if it’s talking to your niece or if it’s talking in a class lecture in a high school. [Pointing to Gutierrez] A union organizer. [Pointing to Beltran] An apartment manager, you know, like, Lupe. She brought this whole collective together in an apartment complex and had these people bring food and know each other in this urbanized setting.

**Beltran:** Every year we’d do a barbeque and a Thanksgiving [at the apartment complex]

**Nuñez:** Are we active today in *teatro*? Every day!

**Beltran:** I have the type of job now where I react to the people that’s coming in to see me that are traumatized. Some people have trouble putting up their arm to have blood taken. So you have to, as a nurse, you see that person and as soon as you see that person you *know* what the problem is. You have to make that person comfortable. And I can tell right away if I’m going to tell that person “Hey, we’re gonna [sic] lay you down here. I mean we’re going to lay you down period. I’m not going tell you, ‘would you like to lay down.’ No. You’re laying down.” And I can tell them. And then there’s other people that come in...and you have to slow them down and you have to find out why is he that way? Because he’s showing his fear differently...you have to act the part to make them be comfortable with you and allow you to do your work. That’s acting.

**Mendia:** I remember the first time I was going to get up on stage, like everybody else. I was shaking, I was shaking with—just—fear! And then she [gesturing to Nuñez] tells me, “They don’t know who you are. They don’t know that you’re Becky. They don’t know anything about you. So just go out there and be whatever.” It’s such a life lesson for you because then as you go out into your life, you *can* be whoever you want to be. You’re still this person, but these are all the different roles that you play: Mom, Worker, Sister, or whatever—all the other roles that you play. So we *are* acting every single day in *teatro*. We’re just conscience of it more because we got to do it on stage.

**Garcia:** You know, the other thing is that in the Chicano Movement we were criticized a lot for our form, oh my god.

**Gutierrez:** We still are.

**Garcia:** And it’s true we didn’t take any acting, we learn as we go, but one of the main things was the political message that we had. We were not spouting cultural nationalism or anything like that. We were talking about issues people were facing and changing people’s minds. *Teatro* is about affecting you intellectually. You put out new ideas and some people don’t grasp them. You hope everyone [will] but if not at least it’s changing [their minds]. So yeah, we were criticized a lot for our form *pero*...it didn’t really stop us. We were more like—

**Gutierrez:** More in your face about it.

**Garcia:** Yeah. At the same time we did learn.

**Mendia:** We studied. We did a study group. I go, “What? We have to study?” “Yes, we’re having a weekly study group.” And everybody’s like “noooo, I don’t want to do

that; I didn't sign up for that!" But we did. [Nuñez and Ravelo] forced us to do a study group.

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** And then we did have techniques—massaging our backs to relax, and getting into our characters, you know. At the beginning we didn't write our plays per say, but we would agree on the main points for most of the skits and then in time when we went to Teatro Laboral we started writing the skits, writing the characters and all that. Evelyn helped a lot with all that, Evelyn Cruz. And then we continued with Teatro Raíces. And also—it's in the book—we did a points of agreement?

**D. Rodriguez:** Points of Unity.

**Garcia:** Right, we did a Points of Unity...so it did evolve. It did evolve in some of the form and some of the technique but not in content of what our message was gonna [sic] be and how you are going to have that link between community and us at that time. When we first started, the community was the students, you know, and ourselves—trying to change how we think—but the *teatro* did evolve into different things and you could say we became more “professional.” But the last *acto* that we did as a teatro was, what? Three or four years ago? *Mujeres de Juárez*. Talk about preparing! We had to take a week off from work. Evelyn (Cruz), who is a script writer and a professor, she directed our play, and we would go from nine o' clock until four o' clock to practice, rehearse and memorize our lines. And I was the one that I would say my lines and forget them and we had Delia (Rodriguez) being the assistant director. And then she would say—if I forgot a word—she would say the word and at one point I said, “Forget it! I can say which ever word I want to!” And Evelyn said, “No you can't!”

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** That last play wasn't a street theater play—

**D. Rodriguez:** It came out to be a street theater play—

**Mendia:** It was still addressing an issue—

**Garcia:** When you [Kubasek] were saying if we went back to feminine issues and it's not that we went back to feminine issues but that was something that was going on at that time that we wanted to address—the femicides. But yeah, we were a little bit less rough. And I think we wanted to do it that way too.

**D. Rodriguez:** There were some techniques that we got and adapted.

**Nuñez:** I just want to say that we do want to give credit to the Civil Rights Movement and Luis Valdez. He was the one that started a lot of the *teatros* in the southwest.

Although when we were doing his plays, they were very traditional roles, but it gave us a stepping stone from where to say, “Well, you know, there could be something else than just a mother, or a prostitute, or a nun.”

[Group laughter]

**Nuñez:** So it was a good foundation from us to take off from. And yes, we do recognize and give credit to the Chicano Movement. I was proud of my name. I used to be Felice, and then I became Felicitas.

**Garcia:** Now she's Feliz.

[Group laughter]

**Beltran:** I used to be Guadalupe, but I thought that was too Mexican, so then I was Lupe. Now I'm Guadalupe because that's my name and I shouldn't be ashamed of it.



**Garcia:** Yeah, if it wasn't for Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino we wouldn't have our *teatro*.

**Mendia:** And then we had to fight them. We ended up having to fight them at TENAZ because they refused to let us perform. We had become something to be reckoned with and they didn't like it.

**V. Rodriguez:** But we ended up performing anyway—not for the whole group but we ended up performing for groups who wanted to see us.

**Nuñez:** I think we wanted to be more inclusive, as she [Garcia] pointed out, we were talking about all people, all sexes, lesbians...we weren't being exclusive: just these people. We were saying, "No, no. This is our world. It's a global village." So that was very hard to deal with because in those days it was very much nationalist.

**Mendia:** We were all socialist. We were the next level of consciousness, which was socialism, not just nationalism.

**Kubasek:** That comes out to me a lot in the form and how Teatro Chicana transformed the *acto*, itself. In Valdez's *actos* it's a complete subversion of power relations, but in Teatro Chicana *actos* it's less about complete subversion and more about connecting or bridging, and I was wondering if that was something that was conscious your part?

**Beltran:** Very conscious.

**D. Rodriguez:** That's how you connect with your audience, right?

**Mendia:** And we were much criticized because of that. Very criticized because then all of a sudden we were Marxist. Everything was Marxist and they wanted to black ball us and block every way but they couldn't stop it because you can't stop knowledge because

knowledge is power. That's the recall that's coming right now for everybody in society today. Today is knowledge is power and that's what's gonna [sic] make a change.

**D. Rodriguez:** And you have to apply it to your own situation, you know what I mean? You can't just be somewhere up here, detached.

**Nuñez:** And I think especially at that time, in the early days of the Chicano Movement, which came out during the Civil Rights Movement, if you were called, "Oh, you're a women's liberationist" and a lot of the Chicanas would say "No, no, we're not. We're with our men." They would call you a feminist and you'd go, like, "What is that? I guess so, whatever it is." And if I understand the term more correctly from its origin it means "Fey—Faith," "Minus:" Minus faith in the patriarchal organized religion. If you were labeled a feminist during The Inquisition you were burned and tortured. So, were we feminists then? Well, we were beginning to understand that. Are we feminists today? Damn right we are because we do not agree with the culture that limits you and threatens you and keeps you submissive. As long as women are submissive, the children are going to suffer.

**Gutierrez:** Isn't that a way of always having control over women's bodies? Putting a label on it and making that label a bad thing.

**Beltran:** You could do that to any group you want to.

**Media:** Even right now, there are some girls who don't want to be labeled feminist. Actresses, and people who are in these positions go, "Oh no. I am *not* a feminist."

**Gutierrez:** It's a way of always ensuring you have some kind of control in society is by being able to hand out a label and make that label a bad thing. You know, whatever it is, it's a bad thing. Women have always been that target. In a patriarchal society, guess

what? Women are going to be the bad guys all of the time. We're going to find a way of keeping you down, whether it's lower wages or making sure you don't get that promotion, or making sure you don't get birth control, making sure you have to have a lot of money just to buy a tampon, you know, whatever it is, it's making sure *mujeres* are down. So as women speaking up, there's a lot of threats in being a woman and being able to speak out against things at work. And personally, speaking up at the work place is what gets you fired.

**Garcia:** Those are the consequences.

**Gutierrez:** Yeah, so you got to be willing to take that risk.

**V. Rodriguez:** Definitely.

**Garcia:** But, in spite of the fact, or because of the fact that we were embracing Marxism and the class question that we never strayed too far away from our community, which was the Chicano, Mexicano, Latino community and we always addressed the issues facing our community, but instead of giving them a nationalistic twist we talked about the question of class and that was very different than—just, you know—that was the difference between us and other *teatros*. And the same thing can be said for feminism. You know, one of the things that the women's movement was criticized for was—at the beginning and rightly so—was that they saw the enemy as the men and not the system behind what was engendering the male supremacy, and the privilege and all of that and where it came from. With our little understanding of Marxism we were able to see that it was a class question and therefore men were not our enemy but they were the victims as well as us because it is a way of controlling our section of the population, the workers. So, [Marxism] gave us that understanding, so that we join with the women for women's

rights but we don't join in attacking the men, you know? Because it's not a question of gender, it's a class question. So, it was different. We were part of [the women's movement] and we weren't. We were united with what we could be united with and that was the same way with the Chicano Movement, the whole Movement with the *teatros*, and also the women. We don't throw everything out with the baby, right?

**Mendia:** The baby out with the bath water.

**Garcia:** Right.

[Group laughter]

**Garcia:** Oh, no, you keep the baby!

**Mendia:** Some people do!

[Group laughter]

**D. Rodriguez:** In feminism there is an anger towards the male but its misdirected, it's so misdirected. You can hear it in the tones against males, like they're the ones who are always the bad guys. And even though it is a patriarchal society that we live in, not all males are privileged.

**Gutierrez:** And that's what's so sad is in modern culture we hear lyrics that really put women down and they're popular. It really is upsetting to hear that. It's really upsetting to hear women being referred to as bitches all the time. It's like a stab in my heart. Get a political consciousness!

**Beltran:** When my son was fourteen and I used to—he wanted to buy some cd and I would look at it. And one of them, I turned it around and it said something about burning your mother and I said, “Hell no! Do you know what it's talking about? It's talking about me!” And so, when you're a little bit more conscious, you have to teach your children.

But everything that's going around is being allowed and this is why you have that type of music and these types of movies.

**Mendia:** You can't be a little bit more conscious. You've got to take that next step in your evolution, you know?

**D. Rodriguez:** But once you know, you're not going to do it because you only do what you believe in or don't understand.

**Gutierrez:** Going back to what is it about the women who became part of the Teatro and got to college and part of that rebelliousness that Delia [Ravelo] spoke about: I think it's intellectual curiosity. We have to have a little bit of intellectual curiosity; we want to know about this one thing or that thing and have the energy to go pursue it. As I get older I have less energy to go pursuit political, intellectual things.

[Group laughter]

**D. Rodriguez:** So you pass the torch!

**Garcia:** We're passing on the torch to you [Kubasek]

## Conclusion

The history I have charted in *Chicana Feminist Acts* proves that Chicana Theater is an ongoing process enacted across time that acts within, between, on and against dominant male-discourses in U.S. and Chicano/a culture. Central to Chicana Theater's performative process is a continual rehearsal and re-staging of Chicana identity. Furthermore, my project's history of Chicana Theater from the early twentieth century to the present reveals that Chicana Theater's re-staging of Chicana identity moves from a staging of an individual Chicana subject circumscribed by the confines of patriarchal gender/sex ideologies to collective performance identities that stage a Chicana collective subject who resists and counter acts the bondage of proscribed patriarchal roles of gender and sexuality. Even though the Chicana feminist acts analyzed here emerge under different historical circumstances, they each stage the physical and psychological violence of racist patriarchal oppression and offer a series of increasingly more explicit iterations of Chicana subjects in process stemming from Chicanas' "historically raced/gendered/classed position forged through the interstices of two nation states" (Alarcón 198). As subjects in process, Chicanas occupy multiple and contradictory discursive sites and enact "diverse subject positions which cannot be unified without double binds or contradictions" (199).

Niggli's *soldaderas* isolated in the mountains of Saltillo, Mexico are indicative of a subject acting in alienating circumstances very much like the playwright, who wrote and performed the play far from her native Mexico in North Carolina and who, as the only Mexican-born Playmaker, was expected to display an authentic Mexican identity for an Anglo director and an Anglo audience. Portillo-Trambley likewise wrote in isolation, as

the only published Chicana playwright during the Chicano/a Movement and Renaissance, whose conventional drama refused to reiterate Chicano nationalism's passive and subservient renderings of Chicanas. Instead, Portillo-Trambley dared to stage an actively desirous Chicana subject in *The Day of the Swallows*. Their plays position Niggli and Portillo-Trambley as cultural outsiders negotiating resistance against the very real threat of ideological censure by dominating male discourses. This resistance manifests through individual protagonists that possess irresolvable contradictory masculine/feminine and active/passive traits. *Soldadera* and *The Day of the Swallows* both end in the suicides of their protagonists, simultaneously signifying the disappearance of a subject under racist patriarchal power structures and expressing a desire for new discursive formations that account for a multifarious Chicana subject who refuses to be constrained by binary and oppositional racialized gender ideologies.

In other words, their deaths symbolically open up the possibility of staging a Chicana subject in process. Adelita's death is mourned by her *comadres*, emphasizing the cultural and social alienation of a bifurcated individual Chicana subject as a supreme act of racist patriarchal violence, but her suicide also quite literally explodes the ideological ties that bind this subject. *The Day of the Swallows* does not end on such a finalizing note. Instead, while Josefa's suicide confronts sexist and homophobic violence in Chicano/a culture, her death is staged as a return, expressing a desire for alternative discursive performances of a Chicana subject unfettered by the binds of a patriarchal and heterosexist gender/sex system. However, she cannot be fully realized in a "first wave" of Chicana feminism limited by its reiteration of Chicano/a culture's compulsory heterosexism and homophobia.

Cherríe Moraga moves Chicana theater even further to a staging of a collective Chicana subject with *Giving up the Ghost*. Moraga refuses to reiterate the discursive disappearance of a lesbian Chicana subject whose bifurcated identity troubles gender/sex binaries, as staged previously in *Soldadera* and *Swallows*. Instead, through a non-linear and disidentificatory *teatropoetic* aesthetic, *Giving up the Ghost* performs an alternative discursive frame for breathing new life into the Chicana subject reflective of the emergence of “second wave” Chicana feminism’s expansion and radicalization of identity categories. Moraga re-stages Chicana identity through a fully embodied split subject who is caught somewhere between alienation and belonging but who refuses to succumb to social and cultural exile, determined as she is to make “familia from scratch.” The play also departs from earlier considerations of how physical and psychological racist patriarchal violence constructs the oppositional categories of masculinity/femininity that structure relations between men and women to an examination of how this gender paradigm informs lesbian identity and plays out in relationships between women in the context of Chicano/a culture. Moraga opens up Chicana identity even further by offering a spectrum of racial, gender and sexuality identifications that resist foreclosure through a disidentificatory movement between contradictory identity traits. As a result, *Giving up the Ghost* stages a pluralized Chicana subject who, rather than being defined, constrained, and ultimately disappeared by a racialized gender/sex binary, traverses along the axis of this divide, continually oscillating between Chican@ masculinities and femininities as well as individual and collective identities. *Giving up the Ghost*’s pluralized Chicana subject in process refuses to have her conflicting identities be



resolved, indicated by a profound sense of irresolution at the end of the play that exposes fixed identities as fictions staged by hegemonic ideological power structures.

The stages of Chicana feminist acts in this dissertation arrive at a collective Chicana subject in process with Teatro Chicana whose constant transformations and collective creative process is constructed from the interaction of multiple Chicana subjects across generational, social, and cultural sites. In short, Teatro Chicana performs a collective staging of a collective Chicana subject in process. Their collectivity is both practiced and imagined, speaking to, embodying and enacting social, cultural and historical realities. Teatro Chicana's enactment of a collective Chicana subject in process functions as "performance activism," bridging Chican@ communities across the stage through a communal cultural experience of "being seen and heard," (Aldama, Sandoval and García 3; 5). For instance, Teatro de las Chicanas's performance of *Chicana Goes to College* at San Diego State's Seminario de las Chicanas in 1972 bridged generational gaps, through honoring female community elders, affirming connections between mothers and daughters, and enacting the *teatro's* woman-centered politics. Teatro Chicana's shifting politics requiring different performative tactics to stage, for its working class Chican@ audiences, a vision of liberation based on social equality between the sexes indicates how their collective identity utilizes a diverse arsenal of performative practices to intervene in multiple discourses concurrently. Teatro de las Chicanas's satire of masculinity destabilizes the authority of a patriarchal ideology embedded in Chicano nationalism, while Teatro Laboral's adaptation of *Salt of the Earth* unifies men and women in a struggle for class liberation and effectively reclaims and re-purposes the forgotten film script of a significant historic event in Chicano/a labor history. Teatro

Raíces builds coalitions between working class Chicanos/as and migrant Latinos/as through its exploration of the role of U.S. imperialism abroad in South America and at home. Ultimately, Teatro Chicana's tactful employment of various performance practices proves Chicana theater's multiple negotiations of resistance and survival as "a process of taking and using whatever is necessary and available in order to confront, negotiate and speak to power" (Sandoval 29).

The collective Chicana subject in process that this history of Chicana theater arrives at challenges dominant discourses of performativity that place emphasis on the individual performing subject which leads to essentializing notions of identity even as theories of performativity seek to break subjects out of essentializing paradigms. As many feminist and queer Chican@ and Latin@ critics have pointed out, gender and queer performance studies continues to reiterate a white Eurocentric subject as the norm.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, performance studies maintains white and Eurocentric models of identity, culture and history, perpetuating further the discursive disappearance of non-white subjects, their histories and their knowledges. As an ongoing performative process that moves toward a collective mode of Chicana subjectivity, Chicana theater intervenes in performance studies' white Eurocentrism by challenging and exposing its monolithic status in the field as a fictional and exclusionary mechanism of power. Furthermore, if, as Butler asserts, identity performance is a "process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Norma Alarcón, "Cognitive Desires" in *Chicana (W)rites on Word and Film* edited by María Herrera-Sobek and Helena María Viramontes (Berkeley: Third Woman Press 1995) and Michael Hames-García, "Queer Theory Re-visited" in *Gay Latino Studies* edited by Michael Hames-García and Ernesto Javier Martínez (Durham: Duke UP 2011).

the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter” then the repetition of an “abject” act of identity performance only serves to reiterate an individual’s marginalized status and reinforces an essentialized abject/subject paradigm (9). Rather than rehearsing a singular performance of Chicana identity, Chicana theater’s continuous re-staging materializes a collective Chicana subject in process that refuses fixity and disrupts stable boundaries. Because Chicana theater remains rooted in collective history, cultural practices, and shared experiences, the collective Chicana subject in process substantiates an interactive form of performativity that simultaneously encompasses and enacts various Chicana subject positions through continual re-stagings that centralize, diffuse, pluralize, shift and transform Chicana identities.

As we have seen, Chicana theater is not limited to “inherently transgressive” identity performances. On the contrary, rather than enacting strictly oppositional or transgressive modes of identity, many of the characters we’ve encountered traverse between opposing sites of identity or occupy both sites simultaneously to unsettle binaries of Mexican/American, male/female, gender/sex, subject/object, essentialism/anti-essentialism, identification/counteridentification, and to dismantle the power structures that such binaries uphold. Soto points out that theories of identity difference marking Chican@ bodies as “inherently transgressive” further perpetuates “the fantasy of a normative center inhabited by homogenous, static, racially pure, stagnant, uninteresting, and simple sovereign subjects” thereby maintaining the symbolic structures of power that such identities in difference seek to disrupt (Soto 3). Gloria Anzaldúa, José Muñoz, Emma Pérez, Chela Sandoval and Sandra Soto agree that performances of strictly oppositional or transgressive identities do not always ensure the survival of marginalized

subjects and thus articulate third modes of intervening in dominant ideologies. In particular, Muñoz's theory of disidentification continues to occupy center stage in the field of Chican@ and Latin@ performance studies because it significantly offers an alternative to the essentialist/anti-essentialist paradigm that dominated late-twentieth century feminist and queer performance studies by challenging the fields' negation of queer Chican@s /Latin@s and accounting for the intersecting histories, cultures and identities of minoritarian subjects. Indeed, *Chicana Feminist Acts* attests to disidentification as a critical mode for understanding how the *teatro-poetic* aesthetics of Moraga's *Giving up the Ghost* materialize a queer pluralized Chicana subject in process who moves between contested sites of identity and is reflective of post-Movement era Chicana feminism's interventions in Anglo hegemonic feminist theories that disappear women of color. However, as *Chicana Feminist Acts* has shown, although Chicana theater is inclusive of performances of disidentification, it is certainly not limited to them. The history of Chicana theater charted here proves that Chicana identity is not defined by disidentification's bi-lateral movement across oppositional categories. Instead, the collective subjectivity of this history asserts a multi-directional performative trajectory, acting within, between, on and against multiple discourses and moving among multiple Chicana subject positions. In this manner, Chicana theater challenges Chican@/Latin@ performance studies' privileging of disidentification as the predominant performative mode of survival and resistance for Chican@ and Latin@ subjects.

The history of Chicana theater in these pages also bares significant implications for how we 'do' performance studies by unsettling the binaries of text/performance and archive/reperitory that structure performance studies methodology. Patrice Pavis's theory

of reception emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the actual production of a staged performance as autonomous from the play-text, advising that “the words spoken by an actor (or any kind of stage utterance) must be analyzed in terms of the ways in which they are inscribed and concretely produced on stage...and not in the ways in which we would analyze them if we had read them in the published text” (23). Pavis’s differentiation between an analysis of staged productions and an analysis of a play-text calls for a methodology attending to the unique and often volatile conditions of a performance.<sup>2</sup> However, Pavis also sets up a binary relationship between performance and text that privileges the analysis of one symbolic structure over the other and neglects to consider the new performances generated by an intertextual analysis if, whenever possible, we can read a performance and play-text alongside or against each other. Reading Niggli’s play-text against photographic evidence of its staged production offers a re-staging of *Soldadera* by uncovering the play-text’s significant feminist interventions that are pacified under Koch’s male directorial gaze. Akin to Pavis’s distinction between text and performance in reception theory, Diana Taylor differentiates between the archive and the repertoire in the domain of performance history. Taylor argues that “the repertoire enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing” that rather than ephemeral, functions as its own cultural memory repository separate from

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Pavis maps out the various concentric paths of reception that the spectator-analyst “brings to bear on the performance, in more or less conscious and extensive ways” thus offering a reconsideration of analysis itself as a highly subjective performance of reception that is shaped by various converging psychological, sociological and anthropological factors (227). See Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, Film* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003) pp 225-227.

a nation's "official" memory housed in the archive (20). She asks, "Whose memories 'disappear' if only archival knowledge is valorized and given permanence?" (36). While she does not set out to construct an antagonistic relationship between the archive and repertoire, it has become a dominating paradigm of knowledge production in performance studies. *Chicana Feminist Acts* complicates this paradigm by demonstrating that both the archive and the repertoire are critical to the construction of a collective Chicana theater history. The current trend in performance studies' to privilege the repertoire over the archive with regard to minoritarian art forms implies that the archive cannot recover that which has been lost in embodied performance. On the contrary, in the case of Niggli, wherein embodied performance serves Southern folk drama's patriarchal interests, the archive offers a new performance of *Soldadera* that restores the feminist meanings that were critically lost in Koch's production. At the same time, the conversation with Teatro Chicana in the final chapter of this dissertation performs a re-staging of the *teatro* by constructing new knowledge through the oral and embodied interaction between the *teatro*'s members. The new performances generated by the archive in one context and the repertoire in another illustrates the significant ways in which Chicana theater's collective history is composed of and makes use of multiple discursive domains that destabilize dominant paradigms in performance studies in ways that recover and generate new performances that cannot materialize within a singular mode of knowledge production. The collective Chicana subject in process that culminates this dissertation is not the final act of Chicana theater, but rather a "site of emergence...which points toward the future," toward the possibilities of re-staging Chicano/a theater history by accounting for Chicana

feminist acts that are need of recovery and that are already being rehearsed (Alarcón 129).

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