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MESTIZA TEATRO: AN EXAMINATION ON THE HISTORICAL ARTFORM
OF THE LATINA/CHICANA THEATRE COLLECTIVE

CHEYENNE FLORES

112 Pages

Teatro groups were a form of devised theatre that came to shape after the influential times of the Chicano National Movement of the 1960s and 70s. Due to its strong relationship with the movement, teatro became the epitome of performance culture for the Chicano/Latino public. But as Chicana scholars argue, the female narrative on stage through the use of teatro was limited, static, dichotomous, and misrepresented. This confining restriction to seeing Latina performers only as mothers, strippers, maids, and other stereotypical roles is still present today. This paper aims to articulate that this gender-subordinate representation has a history in formation, and how it continues to be present even in contemporary practices. By looking at four different teatro collectives over a four-decade span this research applies feminist rhetoric of Chicana counterpublics, vendida logic, retrofitted memory, and decolonized imagery along with the traditional grassroots style of teatro to create a new counter performance culture that embodies the paradigm of Gloria Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness. By giving a visual representation of border towns, embodiment, counter stances, and cultural collision there is an ability to see the inner psyche of mestiza consciousness played out in the outer terrain. Through the groups of Teatro de las Chicanas, Las Comadres, Latina Theatre Lab, and Teatro Luna I give a historical feminist argumentation on the creation of *mestiza teatro*, a theatrical performance style that highlights, critiques, celebrates, reimagines, and renegotiates cultural representation.

KEYWORDS: Chicana, Latina, Feminism, Mestiza Consciousness, Teatro, Theatre Collectives

MESTIZA TEATRO: AN EXAMINATION ON THE HISTORICAL ARTFORM
OF THE LATINA/CHICANA THEATRE COLLECTIVE

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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MESTIZA TEATRO: AN EXAMINATION ON THE HISTORICAL ARTFORM
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CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CONTENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER I: THE MOTHERS OF TEATRO	16
Forming Teatro de las Chicanas	16
Lesbians, Whores, and <i>Vendidads</i> : The Namesake for Teatro de las Chicanas	20
Composing Chicana: Education and Embodiment	28
Making a Motherland Borderland	36
CHAPTER II: MAKING MESTIZA	39
Latina Artist of the Next Decade	39
The Contradiction of the <i>Mestiza</i> : The Start of Las Comadres	42
Navigating the Borderlands: The Counterstances within Las Comadres	46
<i>Border Boda</i> : Where We Grow	54
CHAPTER III: RETROFITTED REPRESENTATION	63
The Ethnic Spot: The Creation of Latina Theatre Lab	63
The Historical DJ: Retrofitted Memory in Performance Practice	69
<i>Immaculate Conception</i> : Re-Owning the Vendida Logic	71
No One is Alone: The Representation Rainbow	80
CHAPTER IV: SHOWCASING THE SPECTRUM	84
The Latina Question: The Start of Teatro Luna	84
<i>Lunática</i> : Contextualizing Consciousness	91

<i>Machos: Talking about Male Mestiza</i>	98
Post Covid: Hybrid Counterpublics in <i>Teatro</i>	102
CONCLUSION	105
WORK CITED	109

INTRODUCTION

Because I, a *mestiza*,
Continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
Because I am all cultures at the same time,
Alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
Me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me hablan
*Simultáneamente.*¹ (Anzaldúa 99)

As Felicitas Nuñez stood with her fellow Chicanas in front of a silent audience, she noticed that her *huelga* eagle pin was crooked. Waiting for their last actress to join them on stage, Nuñez took the opportunity to adjust the pin, only to be quickly greeted with subdued laughter from the audience. These were reactions Nuñez and her group Teatro de las Chicanas were all too familiar with because they were a paradox in the world of *teatro*. This performance was at the first ever 1971 TENAZ or Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (The National Theater of Aztlán), a national organization made up of individual Chicano/Latino theater companies that started to hold festivals, workshops, and seminars. Once the missing actress returned, Nuñez and the group performed *Bronca*, an *acto* formulated through female chanting about the inequality between sexes in the Chicano public. The argument fell on deaf ears as the women heard again that their performance was dated, with there no longer being a need to address “the woman question.” Teatro de las Chicanas was the only all female group to perform, and towards the end of the

¹ Soul between two worlds, three, four,
My head buzzes with contradiction.
I am guided by all the voices that speak to me
Simultaneously

festival, every participating *teatro* group got recognized except for them (Garcia et al. 144). This situation would not be the first time these women have been disregarded, and it will not be the last. For years Chicanas and Latinas have been delegitimized as advocates for accurate representation. These founding moments propelled even our contemporary presentation of the female Latinas as stereotypes of strippers, maids, girlfriends, and overbearing mothers in popular culture. In the context of Teatro de las Chicanas, and other female-based Latina theatre, they simply discuss the frustration of the gender divide and oppression within the Chicano/Latino public. *Teatro* was a male dominated art form that embedded a patriarchal mindset of traditionalism under the scope of cultural nationalism. The result is a labelization of otherness to those who did not follow within that paradigm. The messages behind women's advocacy through *teatro* meant these *teatristas* were using the master's tool against them, provoking themes of feminism and gender equality.²

While *teatro* literally translates to theatre in Spanish, I would like to articulate that the *teatro* I intend to write on is a style of performance that found its renaissance during the development of the Chicano National Movement during the 1960s and 70s. The Chicano National Movement, or *El Movimiento*, was a radical Mexican-American movement whose intention was to fight for empowerment and validation of Chicanos' cultural nationalism. Chicano was a classist and racial slur popularized during the beginning of the twentieth century as Mexican immigration increased in the United States of America. As a result, *El Movimiento* reclaimed the term as a political stance to showcase cultural nationalism, indigenous pride, and the dismissive nature of American assimilation. The 1960s had many civil rights movements spanning across multitudes of minority groups. Chicanos found themselves at a point of

² *Teatristas*: translation equivalent to thespian. While the term is gender neutral in the context of this paper it will be used most often in reference to female theatre makers.

intersectionality with immigrants of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Most significantly, they created intense dialogue and influence within the Black Power movement and the student movement across the nation. The beginnings of *El Movimiento* connected to famous Chicano figureheads César Chávez and Dolores Huerta, co-founders of the National Farm Workers Association, which later became the United Farm Workers (UFW). The UFW, along with the movement, focused on improving the working conditions of farm laborers both economically and socially. The help of the UFW was not limited to just the Mexican-American public; their work helped multiple immigrants, particularly the large body of Filipino workers in the southwest (Bardacke, 162-69). *El Movimiento* was based and grew from the fields, helping give human rights to the laborers who were the backbones of the United States.

For Chicanos, Latinos, Hispanics, Indigenous, and brown-bodied thespians, *El Movimiento* holds a historical pinpoint on the foundation of the *teatro* style I intend to write on, but also played a considerable role in the development of all Latinx theatre worldwide. This is due to the “father of Chicano theatre,” Luis Valdez and his company El Teatro Campesino. Working with the UFW, Valdez pitched the idea of bringing theatre to the fields to convince farm laborers to join in boycotts, strikes, and the movement. Valdez then formed El Teatro Campesino, a group of farmworkers with little to no theatrical experience who would perform in the bed of trucks. The scripts were humorous, following that of slapstick and Mexican vaudeville, writing on the experiences of the fieldworkers. El Teatro Campesino intended to argue their cause by using exaggerated comedy to make a social stance. The plays performed in the fields were short skits known as *actos* (acts) with one common theme of *huelga*, meaning to join the strike (Bagby and Valdez 75). The formation of *teatro* followed that of the *rasquache* aesthetic,³ referring to the working-class Mexicans’ term for brash, unsophisticated, held together by spit and grit, as one

³ In Spanish *rasquache* means “left-over” or “no value.”

negotiates the harsh realities of the working poor either in Mexico or “*en el Norte*” (Huerta 30). El Teatro Campesino was built from the roots of Chicano national identity, embedded in *la causa*,⁴ and surrounded by cultural influences. *Teatro*, in general, is not just a theatre performance but an extension of culture. “Chicanos’ colonization gave way to a devaluation of the work performed outside the home, mostly by Chicano men, and a focus on interpersonal relationships as a source of nurturance and validation of personhood” (Hurtado 400). The meaning behind this is that performances, even something simple like religious ceremonies and birthday parties, were a reminder to the Chicano that they are human beings. The *acto* then became the most prominent idea of Chicano popular culture and continued to represent the masses of the *campesino* workforce. Valdez defines the *acto*, and in essence *teatro*, as the ability to “inspire the audience to social action. Illuminate specific points about social problems. Satirize the opposition. Show or hint at a solution. Express what people are feeling (12).” For years the *acto* became one of the most potent political tools. As the originator of it, Valdez's troupe became the icon of portraying the struggle of the Chicano and accurately discussing the issues that faced immigrants of all backgrounds. Even César Chávez states “*Los actos son muy interesantes, chistosos, y representan la realidad de la vida del campesino*” (Valdez 15).⁵ This quote from such a significant figure highlights the influential hold *teatro* had over its general public and how El Teatro Campesino became one of the most influential Chicano troupes of all time.

The 1970s is when we start to see a considerable rise in the development of *teatro*. While *teatro* groups similar to El Teatro Campesino began to form across the country, it was universities that created the large spark in defining and developing *teatro*. It was this decade that universities

⁴ *La causa* translates to “the cause,” but it was a term used in *El Movimiento* as a phrase to unify masses to an overarching connective fight.

⁵ “The acts are very interesting, funny, and represent the reality of farmworkers life.”

began to see the first Latinos, Chicanos, and immigrant children entering the collegiate world. This was due to many factors, but a significant influence was that universities started programs specifically aimed at families and children of immigration, fieldwork, and lower class income. For younger Chicanos and Latinos, college was a place to help develop the discussion of *El Movimiento* and offered a generational space to plant the blueprints of where the movement was going in this next decade.

However, there was a rather large issue in regards to El Teatro Campesino's representation of female identity. Valdez admitted to himself that he did not know the woman's narrative. The females in El Teatro Campesino, one of them being Valdez's sister, remarked on issues of being labeled as hard or soft actors, playing corresponding roles of *la virgen o la puta*. The troupe often segregated them, referring to them as "the ladies of teatro" (Broyles 167-72). While I acknowledge the impactful influences Luis Valdez and his *teatro* group created for the world of Chicano theatre, the origins of the Chicana character on stage validated the continuation of restraining actresses into tropes. Valdez was the one who dismissed Teatro de las Chicanas as a "legitimate" group during the TENAZ festival. This event showcases how *teatro*, along with the culture, is embedded with gender subordination and a hegemonic masculine narrative. For many female *teatristas*, the *teatro* experience was filled with inaccurate narrative, limited character development, and an overall sexist representation. I argue that the women of Teatro de las Chicanas performances followed those untold guidelines for *teatro*. Their themes highlighted issues that affected the brown-bodied public, everything was self-written in a devised theatre space (meaning there were no definite titles of actor, director, or designer), and they used classic slapstick humor found in grassroots *teatro*. On paper, they were doing the same style as those

teatro groups performing at TENAZ. However, it was the content and messages they were presenting that made the community question their authenticity as *teatristas* but also as Chicanas. Teatro de las Chicanas was more than a teatro troupe; I argue that it falls under Maylei Blackwell's development of the concept of the Chicana counterpublics. Nancy Fraser's work on subaltern counterpublics, which are discursive arenas that develop parallel to the official public spheres and “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (123). Blackwell expands on Fraser's work to formulate a genealogy of the Chicana counterpublics and argues for the influences of these publics created in the development of feminist frameworks (Blackwell 134). While Blackwell's work is centered in print culture, I believe it can easily translate to performance cultures as well. Since *teatro* has a deep history of intertwining itself with cultural nationalism, the larger public form was centered on a masculine perspective. As history continues, this public would perpetuate representation that followed their idealism, which was used to constrain and manipulate female artists. The layers within this public would grow from *teatro* to cultural, to society, and eventually nationally throughout the development of popular culture. By separating from the mainstream public, these Chicana and Latina *teatro* groups could create an autonomous space that followed similar political idealism of their own cultural politics but also added discourse of feminist counter narrative. To further my argumentation, I intend to articulate that these projects also followed Blackwell's work of retrofitted memory, which “is a form of counter memory that uses fragments of older histories that have been disjunctured by colonial practices of organizing historical knowledge or by masculinist renderings of history that disappear women's political involvement in order to create space for women in historical traditions that erase them” (3). As a result, the women could create

an art form that provoked themes of intersectionality, decolonial imaginary, and embodied work. This artwork not only showcased a different narrative within their culture but also gave a place of healing and validation for women placed in a double bind. It was this ability to have space without artistic or cultural expectations that these mothers of *teatro* were able to form a new *teatro* performance community.

I intend to examine female-based *teatro* groups that follow the paradigms of traditional *teatro* placed by the golden-standard of Luis Valdez but also have the understood mentality of creating an art form that questions their own culture. A culture that is not just for the brown-bodied masculine narrative but for the broad spectrum of the actual theatre community itself. It is four different *teatro* groups over a four decade time frame that help calculate the historical growth of a Latina counter narrative as it perpetuates new historiography of the *teatristas* involvement in creating *latinidad teatro*. Through looking at four female-based Latina theatre counterpublics I was able to find their natural ability to produce artwork in a similar style. The groups Teatro de las Chicanas, Las Comadres, Latina Theatre Lab, and Teatro Luna all found corresponding artistic connectivity over a four decade span.

By building on the mainstream work of Valdez and other male-centric *teatro*, we still find grassroots cultural performativity in these female-based troupes. Influences of slapstick, *rasquache* aesthetic and cultural connectivity continue to display the significant *teatro* style. The differentiation in style comes from the women's need and desire to bend the finite expectations of *teatro*'s content. The messages created through their performances expanded the conversation of *teatro*'s cultural practice, and the images displayed on stage broadened the performance culture. By allowing the group to not live in the mindset of the embedded sexist *teatro* public, we can articulate a unique feminist artwork. Through this examination, I intend to articulate what I am

beginning to call the *mestiza teatro*, a form of theatre that embraces the paradigm of the *mestiza consciousness* set by Gloria Anzaldúa's work in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In an interview given in 1991, Anzaldúa defines the “new mestiza” as a “kind of border woman who can negotiate between different cultures and cross over from one to the other and therefore has a perspective of all those different worlds that someone who is monocultural cannot have” (qtd. in Blanco). She created the visualization of the borderland as a place to articulate the constant need for fluidity and ambiguity for those living in lands of both the oppressed and oppressor. The *mestiza consciousness* is a mythos formulated by Anzaldúa to act as a tool to reimagine and reconfigure our understanding of identity; by breaking duality and embracing a new framework, we come to the *mestiza* as a place to embody the contradiction. Through this analysis of these troupes, I intend to showcase how the women's artwork follows the paradigm of feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*. That means that four different theatre groups, during four different decades, managed to produce theatre that shows heritage to their cultural grassroots art form and provoked practices of queer, feminist, and anti-racist philosophies.

For the sake of clarity throughout my paper, I want to express the history and definition of terminology when referring to ethnicity and cultural significance. To begin, Hispanic (at least in the case of the United States) was a term that was added to the US census near the 1970s, although the Spanish term *Hispano* which is where it was derived from existed long before. Before this time Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and so on were categorized as white by the US government. However, due to the movements like *El Movimiento*, the Latin American public argued for a more valid representation in terminology. Hispanic, like the term *hispano*, originally was meant to refer to all those of Spanish speaking origin. However, that is highly anglicized to Spain's origins in the colonization of Latin America. As a result, many refused this terminology

because it erased indigenous roots and its focus on Americanization. The other important factor to keep in mind is that Hispanic/*Hispano* has a different meaning, significance, and history based on geographic location. That means Spain, central and southern America have a different understanding of the term Hispanic/*Hispano*. For this paper I want to express that all this terminology and history I intend to lay out is based in United States debates and its influences within Mexico. Latino became a popular term for self identification because it connected back to Latin America. The term joined Hispanic on the census around 2000. The significance is that Hispanic refers to origins of Spain, while Latino refers to origins in Latin America. Chicano is a term for Mexican-Americans; once a popular racial slur for the lower class, it became embraced during the movement as a point of rewritten ownership. In that case, Latino would be the more extensive umbrella term that Chicano falls under due to their indigenous Aztlán ownership. The difference in ending the word in “a” versus “o” is reliant on Spanish grammar. Chicana/Latina refers to females, while Chicano/Latino refers to males or a group of both genders. The importance is to understand that these ethnic and cultural identities are highly significant. I ask you to keep an open mind due to understanding evolution in terms of identity. In this current generation, the term Latinx and Chican@ are popularized to create room for non-binary and gender fluidity. I will use terminology based on the groups’ self identification. However, I wanted to include it as a term because there will be themes of its presence before the term was notably popularized. I intend to present all these terminologies so that the historical presentation moves forward and you can see its intersectional evolution. To start, I will be using Chicano/a because the person or persons I am discussing self identify as Chicano/a, and it follows the key term of both time and location. Eventually, there will be a switch to using Latino/a because that became the more popularized term as time passed. In some cases, the people/person I discuss

will use and see Chicano/Latino fluidly and identify with both terminologies. Again these terms are evolutionary and dependant on location, knowledge, and exposure. For example, I grew up in the midwest, and the term Chicano/a was not one my family used even though we are Mexican-American. While confusing at times, since many Chicanos took on the term Latino for identity as time progressed, it showcases that these terms are culturally connected. There will be many people I discuss who also identify as Hispanic and Latino/Chicano, which means they find a connection to their Spanish ancestry in Europe. I will tend to choose Latino because my work is based on a connection to Latin American history first. Although these terms are used for ethnic categorization, we must remember they are self identified terms and belong to the person's choice. In the case of myself, I identify as Chicana and Latina, but not Hispanic. Going forward, it is essential to remember this terminology's history because it influences the *teatro* community.

Latinas in theatre have existed before, during, and after the Chicano National movement. Works of Delores Prida, Milcha Sánchez-Scott, Estela Portillo, and Cherrie Moraga found the spotlight from the 1970s through the turn of the century. These women's works also follow the feminist framework I intend to write, embracing and discussing themes and practices of the *mestiza consciousness*. While I greatly appreciate and love the artwork produced by feminist *teatristas*, I have a strong intention to focus on the collective itself, looking at devised Latina *teatro*. Devised theatre, sometimes called collective creation, is a method of theatre making based on collaboration to create original work from within the ensemble. My reason being is that I want to explore the counterpublics and the value of discussion and development within these groups. I look to understand devised theatre through Alison Oddey's work in understanding practices, histories, and theoretical frameworks. Devised theatre is hard to define into a specific category; as a result, the performance framework comes from experimentation and exploration

centered around the group's theatrical development (Oddey 1-3). For the sake of my argument, I want to express an understanding that each group sets its paradigms on how its theatre develops in the creative collection process. Even devised theatre cannot escape the institutionalization that is present in the theatre, and the argumentation in what is deemed professional plays a crucial influence in later years. So many subjectivities affect the devised theatre process, such as space, time, knowledge, location, politics, resources, and audience. However, I believe devised theatre allows an understood mindset that invites the *teatristas* to blur lines of expectation, which helps invite Anzuldúa's *mestiza consciousness*. Devised theatre closely represents this framework because it follows an understood fluidity of thinking beyond the expectation of the environment, culture, and society. Theatre troupes are a specific category of theatre itself; knowing the intention comes from a collective adds a specific lens to understanding the influences of *latinidad* performance culture. My justification in researching over decades is that while these groups most likely did not have direct communication with each other, they continue to grow foundational thoughts from the groups before them, meaning that there is a pattern of the artform itself. While I would have loved to explore more groups and/or *teatristas*, the timeline-driven historical framework created natural fluidity between the groups and the paradigm I intend to analyze.

Yolanda Broyles-Gonzalez's original academic work on historicizing El Teatro Campesino led her to formulate a critique on the women's perspective within the troupe. I intend to build within that lens to understand historiography that continues to legitimize the limitations placed on Latina/Chicana regarding performance on stage. She writes:

In the course of the evolutionary process from *actos* to *mitos* to *corridos* to combinations thereof, from the days of the *actos* performed by farmworkers for farmworkers atop

flatbed trucks to the days of *Zoot Suit* in Hollywood and on Broadway, the female characters have consisted of variations of the same three or four types. Women are first of all defined in a familial category: mother, grandmother, sister, or wife/girlfriend. All women are also divided into one of two sexual categories: whores or virgins (164).

The “great man” narrative is historically embedded across vast spectrums within theatre and the general public. However, at a larger scope, the issue cannot rely solely upon Valdez or the troupe but actually on the culture itself. Cherrie Moraga, a playwright and feminist, writes on the problematic double bind placed on Chicana women as they try and formulate a discourse on expressing the issues of oppression within the oppressed. “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” (Moraga 177). The *vendida* is a woman labeled as betraying her culture by going against cultural norms and expectations. Moraga formulates a historiography on this to articulate the beginning issues and the lack of ability for the queer woman to find identity within her culture. I will go into the details of the *vendida* in the next chapter. However, in introducing the restrictive tropes, Broyles examines parallels directly with the oppressive tool developed within the globalization of the *vendida*.

Teatro de las Chicanas was formed at San Diego State College in 1971. While the women of this group did not intend to segregate from other Latinos on campus (in fact, many were in other *teatro* groups as well), the ability to have a space, community, and sisterhood allowed for art to be produced in a way that was influenced by race and gender oppression beyond just their community. The book *Teatro Chicana* (2008) is a memoir of the intense narrative, work, and art created by the women of Teatro de las Chicanas. This book holds scripts, timelines, and narratives that help formulate the understood environment within the group as it navigates a

machismo-istic theatrical world. In Natalie Kubasek's dissertation "Chicana feminist acts: Re-staging Chicano/a theater from the early twentieth century to the present," she articulates Chicana subjectivities within Teatro de las Chicanas while giving them a platform to discuss narrative experiences beyond their memoir. These sources helped me formulate and articulate the specific regulations *teatro* was expected to be during this time, which propelled my argument on how Teatro de las Chicanas' work was formulated naturally due to their need for a counterpublic.

The largest issue I faced was finding and formulating the next two decades in advancing the Latina collective. In 1984 The Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) was formed as a group of artists, scholars, and activists whose goal was to reexamine the border as a place of transformation and fluidity. Although the group focused on themes of Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*, it was predominantly male and failed to see gender and sexuality as a place for renegotiation. As a result, in 1988, the women of BAW/TAF formed Las Comadres, a group of artists who aimed to understand intersectionality and the woman living in the border zone. The most notable artistic presentation by Las Comadres was a performance of *Border Boda*, where the group collectively wrote in reflection on Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness*. Marguerite Waller was a *Comadre* and wrote about her physical and emotional experiences as the group navigated this new area of artistic development. Another writer is Jo-Anne Berelowitz, who applied narrative-based experiences to create an analytical anthology on Las Comadres. Berelowitz and Waller's writing is centered on historical remembrances that follow closely in understanding the success and failures within the group. This group's narrative through these sources is fundamental in understanding the embodiment of the *mestiza* and the emotional toll within that navigation.

The Latina Theatre Lab was founded in 1994 by four San Francisco Bay Area actresses. Their purpose was to “provide a professional environment where the Latina theatre artist can find their voice while mirroring humanitarian themes that highlight their universality and which bridge the gap between cultures and gender” (Lujan). While they did not have much academic work written on them, the Hemispheric Institute kept a catalog for the Latina Theatre Lab. I was able to have access to old recordings of performances and interviews, along with scripts and performance reviews. I was also able to interview *Co-Madre* Jamie Lujan, who was one of the founding members of the Latina Theatre Lab. I was then able to formulate a more precise idea of the group’s environment through this interview and script access. I contend that the Latina Theatre Lab was a place intended to create space that had not previously existed in a professional theatrical workforce.

Teatro Luna was formed in 2000 in Chicago, Illinois, with an ensemble of ten Latina/*Hispana* women. Since then, they have expanded and set up roots in Los Angeles to continue to spread their ideology. Teatro Luna was formed based on experiences of Latina/*Hispana teatristas* who felt that the Latina was undervalued and underrepresented. Since its growth Teatro Luna is more pan-Latinx based, erasing boundaries of gender in this new era. This choice allows for a more contemporary analysis of the *mestiza consciousness* in a post-covid world. Teatro Luna is the most contemporary troupe I am exploring, and as such, I found dissertations, articles, reviews, and more on their work. The doctoral work by Melissa Huerta, “We Need the Whole Latina Package: Negotiating the Meanings of Latina in Teatro Luna's Plays,” timelines and analyzes the work of Teatro Luna through 2008. Huerta also writes on similar feminist themes and frameworks that help propel my argument on the value of the collective.

The intersectionality between Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* and devised theatre is the importance of creating from within. With such a large focus on body, self, and mind, I continued to find myself not reaching for academic terminology but rather trying to create a tangible analysis of lived experiences of these women. Having a large amount of my source material be narrative based allows the value not to be focused so heavily on performance but rather on the ensemble. These sources gave me a look into what I can perpetuate as theatrical counterpublic.

As a Latina, Chicana, feminist, and *teatrista*, my argumentation comes from the same place of desire as the women I am writing on. I was one of two Latinas in my entire department during my undergraduate career. Communities existed outside the theatrical world, but I was longing to find those of my own kind. As a *mestiza* myself, I remember calling my white mother my first year of college and telling her, "I didn't realize how brown I was in their eyes." If covid has taught this world anything, it is the value of connecting. Theatrical spaces show the world from all sides, shapes, and forms. I intend to show you a style formed due to limitations that have existed throughout theatre. By examining these four groups throughout time, I hope to articulate the value, history, and distinction in art created specifically by Latina women of a double minority. There are endless possibilities when you allow a paradigm centered on ambiguity.

CHAPTER I: THE MOTHERS OF TEATRO

CHORUS: Brona, Bronca, Bronca!

MUJER 5: The *Machismo* hurts men and women alike.

The *Machismo* is a tool of the oppressor.

Man is not the enemy that breeds inequality and disease. The oppressor is!

Brothers, unite with your sisters to fight the oppressor. Down with *Machismo*!

Brothers, unite with your sisters to fight the oppressor. Down with the enemy!

We are both members of the same class: the working class!

CHORUS: Only by men and women uniting as equals can we attain the liberation of our class! (Garcia et. al 192)

Forming Teatro de las Chicanas

In April of 1969, MEChA, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán* or the Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán, was formed as a Chicano student organization with the intention to develop Chicano Studies departments at colleges and universities. MEChA chapters developed across the country and were a designated space for Chicano/Latino students to develop in the academic world. MEChA was meant to be a resource for first time students giving them access to study groups, political activism on campus, and building an academic narrative on the Chicano body. As a result, MEChA became an extension of *El Movimiento*, centered on the next generation of activists.⁶ However, because it became an extension, the underlying issues and gender divide also came along. Maylie Blackwell, an interdisciplinary scholar and activist wrote *Chicana Power: Contesting Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement* (2011). She writes on the genealogies of Chicana counterpublics during the Chicano student movement and the

⁶ Expanding on this discussion, academic activism began to exist in other popularized movements of the time. Black power, Asian American, and the women's movement also played a large part in the student movement and helped college and universities create ethnic and gender study fields for the academic institution.

formation of developing critical feminist theory. Upon her research, she came to find that young women were marginalized in these MEChA chapters on campus on three different levels. First, they were viewed as auxiliary members, which helped reinforce the gendered division of labor. As a result, their opinions and ideas in meetings were often dismissed on the basis of gender and disregarded their political agency in the decision making process. Second, women were continuously discouraged from taking leadership roles and were often undermined when they did achieve positions. Third, they were continuously sexualized and objectified throughout the movement. Many women faced sexual harassment during the student movement and struggled to validate their involvement in political activism (Blackwell 65). The women who participated in MEChA were often placed as secretaries, overlooked as activists, and viewed as too gender centric when it came to the issues of *El Movimiento*. Discussions of abortion rights, birth control, sanitary issues in the fields, childcare, and other “women’s issues” were deemed not central in the fight for *la Raza*.⁷ Blackwell’s work is mainly centered in a print counterpublic of a Chicana based newspaper called *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc*. The newspaper wrote on multitudes of issues that discussed the constant marginalization Chicanas faced on and off campus. In general, Chicanas attending college was a big debate culturally, financially, and statistically. During this time, only one-third of new college students were women, with over half of them dropping out before their junior year. This was not due to failing academic grades (in fact, overall Chicanas had a relatively high grade point average), but rather that they lacked support from family, friends, counselors, and faculty. *Hijas de Cuauhtémoc* found that Chicanas suffered overwhelming cultural guilt for not contributing to household income and care. There was social pressure to get married, and one of the largest silent factors in Chicanas’ dropout rate was unplanned pregnancy

⁷ The Race, another terminology formed during *El Movimiento*. It argues for a utopian fight for the greater collective however it has an embedded history with females as it was used to argue that the fight must be unitarian to the whole racial collective.

due to lack of birth control (Blackwell 62). The Chicana in the academic institute was fighting an uphill battle against their supposed resources and supporters. This created cultural clashes within the home as the new and old generations tried to find renegotiation.

It was in March of 1971 that the women of MEChA at San Diego State College decided to organize an all women event they called *Seminario de Chicana*. The seminar intended to help build a generational relationship between first time female college students and their mothers. The women of MEChA wanted to showcase their opinions and perspective on the experiences they had faced and to show their mothers how they saw the world in this new era (Kubasek 122). With all the issues of gender oppression facing them, this was a welcoming invite to allow the women of MEChA to express appreciation to their mothers. This discussion highlights their generational pain as first time college students but also shows an appreciation towards their mothers. They wanted a space to showcase their collective female experience without the gaze of male figureheads. They debuted *Chicana Goes to College*, a collaborative self-written script discussing themes and issues Chicanas faced as they tried to navigate college. The *acto* is the story of Lucy, a Mexican-American girl who desires to leave home and go to college. The play is broken down into three scenes, each focusing on direct themes and issues the women faced going on this journey to higher education. Scene one, titled “Home,” discusses issues the Chicanas face from their family and community, focusing on the constant remarks and cultural pressure of a woman never needing to leave home. Scene two, titled “College,” has Chicanas experiencing racism and classism from a professor who remarks that their English is not good enough and that they need to downgrade to a remedial class. Along with that, he also makes comments that they may have a better time investing in cosmetology school. The final scene is titled “MEChA Meeting,” where they showcased the dialogue on how hard it is for women to find their voice

and agency when it comes to trying to invest in *El Movimiento* and the United Farm Workers (Garcia et al. 175-87). More significantly, they bring to light the constant issues Chicanas faced with assault and harassment from Chicano men who were in these higher positions within MEChA. Similar to the grassroots style in *teatro*, these women could play characters in a satirical way that allowed for humor and healing. They wore signs with archetypal character names just like El Teatro Campesino did during their performances. In an oppositional experience from the mainstream *teatro*, the female characters had agency while the male characters played stereotypical archetypes with little to no character development. As an all women cast, we see Chicanas crossed dressed, embracing the *vato* swagger of the Chicano roles,⁸ embodying a machismo nature in a satirical way. In comparison, other women put on white powder to take the position of the Anglo professor and students. The intention, like the *campesino* style, was to use stereotypical archetypes in an exaggerated form to showcase absurdity.

The women worried over this script; not wanting to offend their mothers, they hoped that this performance of comedy and vulnerability would leave the generations connected. Once the audience started to laugh, the women knew they had made their point come across and basked in the glow of female *latinidad* (Kubasek 123). Just as the original *campesino* actors, they got to portray those who held and controlled power over them. For El Teatro Campesino it was the *contratista* and *esquirol*,⁹ for *Las Chicanas* it was parents, teachers, and peers. The results of the seminar created unity and an immense sense of pride among the women. The mothers stayed around and bonded with their children over their performance of *teatro*. It was within this

⁸ *Vato*: Urban terminology equivalent to “dude” or “homeboy.”

⁹ contractor and scab

moment and space that these young Chicanas realized the potential to create their own space where they could develop a Chicana-centric dialogue and unity.

Felicitas Nuñez and Delia Ravelo were the original creators to foreground *Chicana Goes to College*. After the experience of *Seminario de Chicanas*, they took to formulating what is regarded as the first all female *teatro* collective. They called themselves Teatro de Las Chicanas to pay tribute to their distinct nature of being a Chicana collective. From 1971 to 1983, Teatro de las Chicanas, which in 1977 became Teatro Laboral and in 1979 Teatro Raíces, would continue to grow and redefine the understanding of what a *teatro* is capable of creating. As women came and left the *teatro* group, they continued to showcase their focus on gender and racial injustice through performances. The women traveled and performed across states creating an origin story of seeing a counter narrative on the presence of Chicana/Latina popular culture. They performed mainly to student audiences at high schools, MEChA meetings, conferences, and recruitments. Their historical influences created the original roots in believing in the power of the *teatrista* (Garcia et al. ix-xx). By applying practices of the *mestiza consciousness*, I argue that, while Luis Valdez may be the father of Chicano theatre, the women of Teatro de las Chicanas are the mothers.

Lesbians, Whores, and *Vendidad*s: The Namesake for Teatro de las Chicanas

While the mothers found great humor and entertainment in Teatro de Las Chicanas, many other eventual audience members did not. As discussed in the introduction, Teatro de las Chicanas were disregarded as a legitimate group at the Teatro Nacional de Aztlán (TENAZ) festival. Their performance of their chant styled *acto* called *Bronca*, which translates to fight, was argued as too gender centric. For the years they performed they regarded the constant backlash they faced, often having men challenge their subject matter and confidence as

performers. So why was a group of Chicana actresses feared, laughed at, disregarded, and segregated from their communities on both a *teatro* and cultural level?

Before diving into the context of Teatro de las Chicanas' artwork, I want to elaborate on the essence of what these women are countering in both their formulated public and narrative. Gender subordination is culturally specific, and there is a historiography on how gender roles were formulated for the Chicano/Latino public. Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga (a playwright herself) discusses in her article 1986 "From a Long Line of Vendidas: Chicanas and Feminism," a history of how Chicanas' identity is restricted through the uses of hegemonic binary thinking. The importance of this history is that these origins of sexism within the Chicano community directly affected the idealism of womanhood both on and off stage.

Moraga starts with the historical/mythical Aztec princess Malintzin Tenepal, more often known as Malinche (173-74). The story is that Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés along with his men, traveled across the sea and eventually showed up in the Aztec empire. Malintzín became a translator and eventually mistress to Cortés because she believed him to be the *Quetzalcoatl*, an Aztec feathered serpent god who would come from the east to redeem his people in the year One Reed to fulfill his destiny (Moraga 175). Cortés and his men, light haired and bearded, fit the description of the God and landed in Veracruz around this estimated time (qtd. in Moraga 175). Aztecs during this time took prisoners of other indigenous populations in order to sacrifice to their warrior god *Huitzilopochtli*. Being the case, the Spaniards were able to form an army alliance with the prisoners to overthrow the Aztec empire (Moraga 175). Inherently, Malintzín was blamed for overthrowing the empire because of her relationship with Cortés. Often accused of betraying her race, she was labeled as *La Chingada*, meaning "the fucked one," or *La Vendida*, a sell out to the white race (Moraga 174-75). This history created a

large divide in Mexican culture in wanting to separate the Chicano from the Anglo. Developing mentality that Chicanos may never forget of *la Raza*, a common ideology brought up in El Teatro Campesino. However this story holds much more nuance and is prone to have erased contextual history in regards to Malintzín. To begin Malintzín was enslaved as a very young girl with little understanding of her own self worth. During those travels as a slave she learned Yucatec and Nahuatl, the languages of the Mayan and Aztec people. When Cortés came he was given a group of enslaved women, one happened to be Malintzín. Malintzín as a translator was a three way process for she didn't know the Spanish language, but one of Cortés men by the name Jerónimo de Aguilar did after being shipwrecked on the Yucatán Peninsula (Downs 397). Malintzín would translate Nahuatl to Yucatec, and then Aguilar would translate Yucatec to Spanish for Cortés. Because of her high position as a translator Malintzín would continue to be remarked in history based on her relationship to Cortés. So while yes she was his mistress, she had also grown up most of her life as a sex slave. Many historian speculate the Malintzín had her own motivation in helping the overthrowing of the Aztec Empire as a way to get back at a culture that sold her off as a slave at such a young age. This is hard to exactly pinpoint, as Malintzín did have a son with Cortés but there is very little known on how much of that was her actual choice, he eventually married her off (Downs 398). Nevertheless Malintzin was deemed for centuries as a sexual mistress that betrayed her own culture. Where this is prominent is the fact that she is most often called Malinche, a term that directly refers to that of a cultural betrayer. For Malintzín, she became the symbol of the horrors to uphold if a Chicana was to have sexual desire or choose an Anglo man over her own culture. This idealism paralleled historically because after the Spaniards colonized the nation, religious influence became a family and cultural identity model. Following historical development, Chicanos' religion became rooted in the Catholic church,

meaning a large presence and pressure for hegemonic heteronormativity. This event created a tool of oppression, validating the idealism that women do not hold the same capabilities as men. Malintzín's story is that of the *vendida*, a woman who betrayed her own culture.

The implications of Malintzín's story reiterated to the Chicana women that there was no need for sexual desire or bodily ownership. Instead, they should seek another historical icon as the epitome of Chicana womanhood. La Virgen de Guadalupe appeared to poor indigenous man Juan Diego, declaring she is "the ever Virgin St Mary, Mother of the true God" (qtd. in Trujillo 214). Many indigenous individuals believed her to be Aztec goddess *Tonantzin* because she appeared just outside a temple that once paid tribute to her. La Virgen was developed and often seen as the alternative Eve or the Mexican Virgin Mary (214-15). Gloria Anzaldúa writes on La Virgen de Guadalupe, saying she is "the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/Mexicano...as a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains and ensures our survival" (52). As La Virgen's presence grew, she was connected to ideas of salvation, freedom, and represented *la familia*. La Virgen is romanticized and pushed forward into the culture as the epitome of what women should aim to be, a woman who needs no sexual desire. La Virgen was the ideal woman because she is the creator of God, and women should strive to be just like her, i.e. a virgin (Trujillo 214-21).

This history tells us that Malintzín is still considered the mother of the *mestiza*, blamed for the mixing of races. In opposition, La Virgen de Guadalupe became the push for the Chicana to seek salvation. Anzaldúa expands on this idea by introducing the influence of a third female cultural icon known as La Llorona. La Llorona is an extremely popularized folktale associated with frightening children. Her legend has different variations, but she is known as the "weeping woman." The summarized backstory was that she fell in love with a man and had two children.

The father eventually left their village and abandoned them. The woman, overwhelmed with grief, drowned her two children in the Rio Grande river. She then became a vengeful ghost who roams the waterfront looking for children to drown. La Llorona's name has continued to pop up in songs, film, television, and even Halloween costumes for centuries. In today's narrative, she is most likely to be used as a tool to frighten Mexican children into behaving. Anzaldúa articulates that La Llorona is the middle ground between La Virgen de Guadalupe and Malintzín. La Virgen de Guadalupe is the mother who has not abandoned her children, Malintzín is the mother we abandoned, and La Llorona is the mother seeking her children (52). The Iconography around Malintzín, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Llorona was the foreground in creating the triple trope of Chicana/Latina women's identity. Speaking from my own experience—along with a multitude of Chicana narratives with my psyche repertoire—caregiving is embedded in our body since birth. Motherhood was the epitome of female expectation, but not in an idolized form. It was an assumption to formulate your identity as being caring and nurturing; motherhood was supposed to be the biological and cultural conclusion. These three women were used as reinforcement to connote the Chicana to always be connected to their family and children first. What this troupe does is manipulate the sexual expectation of the female, along with putting assumptions to control the male as well. “In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted-*Guadalupe* to make us docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people” (Anzaldúa 53). The imagery within these three women formulates a historiography of Chicanas being manipulated, dehumanized, labeled, and segregated.

These tropes help reiterate my argument through the testimonies from the women of El Teatro Campesino. There were only three female actresses, to begin with, one being Valdez's

sister Soccoro, who were categorized as soft or hard actresses. Soft women would play La Virgen, who would be small, meek, fragile, with lighter skin, and had a pretty face. While the hard actresses would play the whores who would look indigenous/Indian and were labeled vocal and difficult to deal with (Hurtado 387). This colorism practice came from Mexican history as Malintzín, the indigenous figurehead, was darker and viewed as “bad” or “wrong.” While La Virgen de Guadalupe, with its connection to the Catholic church through colonization, was viewed as lighter skin with European/Westernized beauty features. Similar to the laborious process of females connecting to motherhood, we find the Chicana character always having a connection, specifically within their character’s name, to a male figurehead or their beauty. Take for example El Teatro Campesino *acto Huelguistas* (1970). While male actors are described as an ethnicity such as Campesino Mexicano, Filipino, and Tejano; the female campesinas were described as Viejita (old lady) and Casada (Married). While subtle, these practices continued to formulate microaggressive gender subordination of female representation. The most common role for the female actresses was to play the overbearing mother who would often smother her son, who was usually the main character. The mother was often pantomimed to the point of humor and disorganization, often carrying babies and in a state of emotional distress over their children. The issues were that most female roles were used as accessories to the male character and often portrayed the female as ignorant, sexual, or messy. Even the presentation of Malintzín in the *acto La Conquista de Mexico* (1968) has the female icon digging into the portrayal of the *vendida logic*. This *acto* is a comedic presentation on the colonization of Mexico by the Spaniards. Malintzín (referred to as Malinche) translates between the Spanish and English sides of the play before being baptized by the Spaniards. She then becomes the “traitor” and is portrayed as sexually attached to Hernán Cortés. She whispers in their ear and becomes a

colonizer herself, having her assimilate saying in the end, “*yo no soy India*. I’m Spanish” (Valdez 65). For female characters in *teatro*, their presentation continued to be the same roles with little to no engagement. As Soccorro Valdez, who was deemed a “hard” actress, states:

It was like walking in the same path over and over. There was the mother, the sister, or the grandmother or the girlfriend. Only four. You were either the *novia*, *la mama*, *la abuela*, *o la hermana*. And most of the time these characters were passive. The way those females are laid out are for the most part very passive and laid back, *y aguantar todo*. I think that is what really chewed me up at the time. (qtd. in Broyles 166)

The women’s dissatisfaction with these roles led to a long and deep struggle developing in El Teatro Campesino and reaching out to *teatristas* across communities. *Teatro*, in essence, was a form of Chicano popular culture, and because of *el Movimiento's* influence, it became the most prominent contemporary source of finding a connection to representation through the use of icons. For these women, it became incredible frustration as they began to see they were being used as tools to enforce this Chicana trope trap.

The argumentation of gender politics within the Chicano community continues throughout *el Movimiento*, viewed only as a feministic idealism. As a result, many Chicana feminist built their academic and artistic careers on articulating the silencing mechanism in the cultural public. This development comes to be known as the *vendida logic*, a tool used against Chicanas to limit their validation in developing their own rights and identity within themselves. Blackwell discusses that there are multiple variants in the use of the *vendida logic* throughout the history of the Chicano National Movement.

The four rhetorical axes that it operates on are (1) race (feminists were *agringadas*, or race traitors); (2) Ideological purity (feminists were sellouts dividing the movement from

the primary struggle that they, as members of the movement, did not have the right to shape and articulate); (3) Sexual (feminist were sexual deviants or lesbians); and (4) Culturalist (feminist were inauthentic/outside of/antagonistic to Chicano Culture). (31)

The *vendida logic* was used and is still used today as a silencing mechanism for not just for women but also men, as a means to reinforce gender roles and expectations. The *vendida logic* exists on multiple planes, and even multiple races, as a dominant hegemonic voice in identity development. The result is the repetition of tropes, icons, and figureheads throughout popular culture and media.

In the case of Teatro de las Chicanas (and eventually the other *teatro* groups I will discuss), this *vendida logic* was not just the representation and pressure in their own homes and communities. However, it was directly used to limit their actual artform. After the experiences of the TENAZ festival, Teatro de las Chicanas continued to be othered by their communities.

Felicitas Nuñez regards,

If we were called or referred to as whores, lesbians, bitches, witches, cunts, communists, or traitors like Malintzín, we made an attempt to not to get all shook up. Yeah right!

Malintzín as an object of possession that was handed down from her own mother to bronze males, and they gave her to white males and both skins degrade women. (qtd. in Garcia et al. 148)

Teatro de las Chicanas member Laura Garcia discusses how men in the community would continue to say the women were whores and bitches who just needed to “get screwed” (qtd. in Garcia et al. 27). Upon reflecting on her own experiences, she cannot help but question, “How do you erase the fact that your gender is the unwanted one, that because of your position in society you have only been good for a fuck, a slap on the face, or as an animal of burden” (40). The

mainstream grassroots *teatro* continued to showcase females in a state of objectification, with little to no acknowledgment of the issues that directly affected them. So for groups like Teatro de las Chicanas, by trying to create a safe space outside the hegemonic masculine discourse and delaying the limitations within the *vendida logic*, they created a counter narrative on the representation of the Chicana/o identity based on authentic representation. Using narrative, research, and sisterhood tools, Teatro de las Chicanas' art healed them in living beyond the cultural expectation of woman identity.

Composing Chicana: Education and Embodiment

As other Chicanas left, the group would rally together every fall to find new recruits. For many of the women, they varied in remembering how they exactly got recruited into the *teatro* group, although the majority got initially into college through programs centered towards farmworkers and immigrant children. You need to remember that all these women were first generation college students. Delia Ravelo reflected that her family's expectation on both sides of the border was that she would never go beyond the Mexican traditions and Catholic fatalism; teatro was something that did not exactly fit into that realm (qtd. in Garcia et al. 6). This time was a new era of experience for an entire female public. "We were all struggling for an identity within ourselves and at the same time struggling to overcome the injustices established by society" (62). In many ways, the origin of the counterpublic within Teatro de las Chicanas was to formulate camaraderie, space, and education for Chicanas experiencing academic uncertainty. I look towards Teresa Cordova's work "Power and Knowledge: Colonialism in the Academy" as a source of understanding the institutionalization of *El Movimiento* into the university setting. Cordova dissects the debate in the university settings that questions what is "legitimate knowledge" (18). Cordova formulates an argument on how universities regulate power and

colonial practices to limit and restrict knowledge to live in the scope of their definitions. The result is constant conflict and dehumanization of students as the universities try to confine knowledge to their specifications. I would like to articulate that these idealisms transferred within the Chicano Student Movement as it began to enter colleges. The hegemonic masculine discourse regulated what they deemed “legitimate knowledge” and “legitimate activism.” Due to the entanglement of the university experience with the Chicano National Movement, there was an embedded institutionalization. This promotion of “legitimate” was a silencing technique to help regulate what was deemed a proper narrative on the Chicano public. However, Cordova articulates that our exposure and understanding of knowledge varies from society to society. The women of Teatro de las Chicanas were of the same ethnic background but varied in personality and lived experiences. While they were not particularly aware of it during the time, they were forming intersectional discourse through their group. “The centrality of Teatro de las Chicanas’ focus on gender and women’s powers-in addition to race and economic issues-was marked departure from the dozen of other male-dominated *teatros* of that era” (Garcia et al. xiv). The willingness to see *teatro* beyond their community, the university, the movement, and their own personal knowledge allows the *mestiza consciousness* to be present.

Teatro de las Chicanas broaden the horizons of understanding what entitles the formation of *teatro*. A core aspect of Teatro de las Chicanas was that they invested in teatro study groups, something not particularly standardized in the teatro community. The subject matter in these study groups would be at the group's discretion but mainly focused on education, research, and discussion needed for their teatro. Some members did not have the same exposure to the Chicano movement as others in the group. Hilda Rodriguez recalls, “I had to read material about the UFW in order to understand my role intellectually. We had study groups to help us grow mentally but

what was happening to me was that now I was learning and understanding with the eyes from my heart” (qtd. in Garcia et al. 93). These women found a stronger sense of embodiment for their characters by taking time for education. Take for instance their production of *The Mother*, an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s play of the same name, which was originally translated from the work of Maksim Gorky. *The Mother* came about through the group’s interest in reading both on Marxism and Bertolt Brecht. Brecht’s original script is the story of a mother who has lost her child in the midst of workers' unionization. The mother urges not to let her child’s death be in vain and seeks to help organize activism on labor laws. In Teatro de las Chicanas’ version, they adapted to the Mexican narrative, having the mother selling tamales wrapped in flyers saying: “Join the union to get better wages and better conditions” (Garcia et al. 66). One of the members, Virginia Rodriguez Balanoff, was to play the character of the mother. She discussed her parallel experiences of working in the fields with her siblings every summer, a dreadful and dirty job that resulted in diarrhea from the children eating pesticide fruit. She later joined the UFW and learned that conditions and laws were placed to protect children and families. These study groups allowed the presentation of reexamination through education.

The first and arguably the most considerable difference between traditional mainstream *teatro* and the development of the *mestiza teatro* that Teatro de las Chicanas was forming is the presentation of intersectional oppression and the group's desire to educate themselves on the tools of that oppression. As I stated previously, due to their study group sessions, they were creating intersectional discourse and education. However, they understood and valued the need for that discourse to exist in a genuine and authentic form on stage. Take for instance an *acto* that was formulated to showcase at a Juneteenth celebration. Delia Ravelo states:

It would have been easier to be handed a written script that required no thinking or research. But no, I went out of my way to consult with an African American professor from the University of California San Diego to make sure our interpretation of Juneteenth, which celebrated the end of slavery in our country, was politically correct. We did our homework on whatever position, idea, or message we had in mind. This meant increasing our efforts to make sure it was the truth and we understood it in its entirety. (13)

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that the Chicana identity in *teatro* was so limited that the women put extra efforts into an accurate and truthful representation of issues that affected a vast span of minorities. The ability to support your artwork with academic research allowed a greater sense of validation and made the oppressive nature they experienced more tangible. How we experience oppression varies in personal experience, and for many individuals, there are issues of articulating oppression to a physical state. So for many women, there is a sense of freedom to be able to articulate experiences of microaggressions, sexism, and racism to the point that it feels legitimized. Member Peggy Garcia writes, “I felt so uneasy about many things, but I was learning to make the best of my experiences and to achieve a balance between accepting the rights of the individual and holding on to my family values” (20). Due to their desire for truthful and accurate representation they did not limit themselves to the same framework of mind regarding *teatro*.

The developmental phase of *teatro* did not only rely on education; lived experiences were what formulated *teatro*. “Creation was a collective process of discussion, study, analysis, and finally improvisation, with human memory as a repository and foundation” (Garcia et al. xiii). This is where the idea of counter memory and narrative comes into play within the group’s

playwriting. Take for instance a memory of group member Evelyn Cruz. Cruz discussed in one of their writing sessions Feliz (Felicitas) Nunez suggested a scene where a mother was so hungry she hunted down field rats to feed her children. Cruz remarked that the situation was not believable but Nuñez countered that it was true, that her mother was fed rats by a neighbor who caught them for her own family. The neighbors had crossed the border illegally and had no other ways to feed her children at the time (130). This is where the idea of realizing the importance of the counter comes into play. By legitimizing these real stories, they create a theatrical narrative that was often overlooked due to its obscure nature. This practice is an embodied knowledge that is supported through lived experiences that are often brushed over in academic work. Cultures like Chicano are deeply rooted in oral history, so the women formulate a new perspective of educational work by creating a new performance culture.

In the cases of grassroots *teatro*, if there was no comparison to the subject matter on stage, they struggled to see its legitimacy. Soccoro Valdez even discussed this issue within El Teatro Campesino, saying how Valdez struggled to see the women's narrative because it was not an issue he faced directly and could only view it from a male perspective (Broyles 168). This problem goes back to Cordova's work on knowledge and how even in cultural communities we can vary in experiences in a variety of educational forms. However, by allowing intersectional idealism into their *teatro*, they opened up and allowed more representation to be viewed on stage. Cruz, raised in the Bronx by her single mother of eight, even found a comparison to the story because she also remembers a time when her family struggled with hunger. By allowing intersectionality into their *teatro*, they can articulate a perspective that does not directly affect their daily life. But they also add to their communities, building on discussions of gender roles and expectations. Take for example an *acto* called *So Ruff, So Tuff*. Two Chicano siblings, Rudy

and Rosie, had just graduated high school. Their community put them through the wringer of cultural expectations to not follow the path of college. Rudy, Rosie, and their mother adventure through others questioning their intelligence, financial situation, and workmanship. This *acto* adds discussion on the current state of the Chicano generation. Rosie often is run over with her remarks of oppressive nature. Meanwhile, Rudy is doted over by his mother continuously. He also experiences issues like financial expectations as the man of the family, along with social expectations to get married. This *acto* was a commentary to express to Chicano/a students that both genders are experiencing issues of cultural pressure. Teatro de las Chicanas wanted to show that they understand that male expectations in the Chicano community also hurt the Chicano male. Arguing there are embedded issues with patriarchal expectations and that Rudy and Rosie both have independent navigation that has points of intersectionality. For Teatro de las Chicanas this was an *acto* that could communicate to their entire community that they see the pains they all face and must band together to formulate a new area beyond expectations. By not limiting their creative process Teatro de las Chicanas allowed aspects of their collective to become developmental and to exist in relation to one another in a way that seemed contradictory at points and redefined *teatro* performance cultures.

The second key component in the formation of the *mestiza teatro* is the ability to welcome ambiguity.

Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche both horizontally and vertically. *La Mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move towards a single goal (a western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by

movement away from set patterns and goals and towards a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (Anzaldúa 101)

I would concur that this idealism follows what I discussed in the previous key component on Teatro de las Chicanas' form of education. By not limiting their understanding of the knowledge, they allow a more ambiguous scope into their creative process. However, I want to take it a step further due to performance idealism that helps differentiate the group's unique style. Often their writing process resulted in more of an outline than an actual script. Delia Ravelo discusses the meaning of this by stating that "as actors joined and left, they always had the option of using their own words as long as the message came across...Change was initiated with each performance of a particular piece, when we would adjust and hone it depending on the actors' needs and audience response" (qtd. in Garcia et al. xiii). By adding the idea of improvisation in their performance, they showcase the ensemble work and relationship within the group. There was such a strong bond formed that the idea of line variation was not frowned upon but actually encouraged. This falls under Anzaldúa's argument for ambiguity within the *mestiza* because they understood the aspects of development and denied fixed expectations of *teatro* performance culture. Take for instance *Chicanan Goes to College* (1971). After the seminar they added a final scene titled "Chicana Revolution," where Lucy writes a letter to her mom inviting her to *Seminario de Chicana*. In the letter Lucy expresses her understanding of her mother's choices and her hopes for both of them as mother and daughter. This came from their lived experiences, and they wanted to create the validation of understanding the possibilities to exist beyond cultural expectations. By allowing opportunities of change, the group became more attuned to the audience itself and focused on the desire of what the audience needed more than their own personal gain as actresses. Teatro de las Chicanas knew what it was like not to be seen or heard.

Teatro was rooted in community, and even though they were continuously ostracized, they knew there was a greater value in centering their art for each community audience. One example comes from member Sandra M. Gutierrez, who called upon the teatro group for help regarding an incident at Coachella's public school. A Mexican child was slapped very hard by an established Anglo teacher. A Chicana teacher at the school witnessed the incident and faced the teacher, asking what right they had to slap this child. The Anglo teacher responded by slapping the Chicana teacher and telling her to go to hell (78). The principal supported the Anglo teacher, and the school board refused an audience. That is when the UFW got involved along with Coachella's MEChA chapter. Gutierrez recalls:

I called the *teatro* to come perform at a community meeting. The next day they were there, ready to perform a skit about the slapping incident and the outraged response from the community. Delia Ravelo had written the script in the car on the way. And several of the women were from Coachella, so they were ready to perform in their hometown. The performance was a hit. The teatro was a hit, and many parents came up to thank me for arranging their appearance. (78)

Teatro de las Chicanas was a feminist *teatro* focusing on showcasing messages that needed to be heard but were often overlooked and underrepresented. By allowing the *mestiza consciousness* paradigm in their collective, they invited the understanding of fluidity and its natural relation in embodied knowledge practices. The practice of ambiguity within the *mestiza consciousness* is not that the idea is unknown but rather the practice of knowing there are multiple answers. They took this understanding and expanded it to formulate their tools, such as improvisation, to express how oppressive actions exist within their cultures and society. The result was a new Chicano performance culture that gave Chicana women ownership over their representations.

Making a Motherland Borderlands

Teatro de las Chicanas' style of teatro was different; the artform itself created cultural counter performances. We know they struggled for their group to be recognized as *teatro*. Laura E Garcia remarks:

People either loved us or hated us. And it wasn't just our performance style like they used to tell us. We knew it was our politics, since in our actos we spoke against cultural nationalism that prevented the working class from uniting , and for class unity. What gave us the idea we could act? Nothing and no one; on the contrary, almost everyone said we were bad actors. But we could care less. (35)

Teatro de las Chicanas found freedom in their *teatro*; in fact, many regarded the escapism created for them to live outside their cultural expectations. A large portion of the group members were mothers and wives, and the ability to play a character gave them great release from their everyday role playing (Garcia et al. 126). They cared about the message and the untold voices in *teatro*, which meant showing the ugly side. “[*La Mestiza*] has plural personalities, she operates in a pluralistic mode-nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned” (Anzaldúa 101). They grew to value themselves through the use of *teatro*, and face their demons all the same. Garcia recalls finding out that one-third of the women in the group had been sexually assaulted by a friend, family, or neighbor (35). The truth is that by creating a borderland *teatro*, they were allowed room for their own identity to grow in a space where they could see intersectional value in their trauma. This borderland was most significantly a place of healing.

Such a massive part of the space they were creating was rooted in *camaraderie*, which meant they were willing to accept every part of you. So many members were mothers, which in

most *teatro* was discouraged. male-centric *teatro* struggled to see how women could create the balance of acting and motherhood, and did not give any assistance in the matter (Broyles 173). Teatro de las Chicanas welcomed it and considered babysitting part of the collective process. They would rehearse while nursing their baby, carry their child while walking the picket lines, and travel with their children for performances (Garcia et al. 85-114). This allowed them to look at the Chicana existence beyond the mother/virgin/whore trope because in that space they were allowed to be more. Through the dismissal of binary thinking the women were able to create a stronger sense of cognitive fluidity, which helped them bend the boundaries of *teatro* culture. One of their *actos* was *Archie Bunker Goes to El Salvador* (1979), a story focusing on the civil war forming within El Salvador between the militaristic government and the guerilla coalition's process. Archie Bunker was a 1970's sitcom character that was meant to represent the white blue collar of the United States. Member Guadalupe Beltran recalls her unique positions:

I was eight months pregnant when I played Archie for the last time, and I am proud to say that the silhouette on one of our flyers is me. I was about four or five months pregnant and Felicitas drew my silhouette; I am kneeling on one knee and have one arm held high, my hands and feet are roots, and I am pregnant. (114)

A pregnant Chicana performer playing a famously white male popular culture character is not something you see every day. The group created a performance culture that counters most images seen on the *teatro* stage. Through this experience they explored theatre that was not accessible during their time and found healing. "Chicanas would join the *teatro* not because their calling was acting (though for some it was) but because the *teatro* fit us, and this is where we felt welcomed and found camaraderie with our *carnalas*-our sisters" (Garcia et al. 34). The space created in Teatro de las Chicanas allowed a counter narrative *teatro* to be formed, which created

validation for the Chicana *teatristas* as they formulated a new presentation of popular culture identity for Chicanas. Laura Garcia writes:

In our own ways we were all struggling to rip off the gag that muffled our cries against the rape our spirits had suffered either by the hunger pangs or poverty or by the sexual and physical abuse we had endured. The *teatro* helped knock down the walls of our silence. It helped us find our voice, and we intuitively knew that once we had our voice we were closer to liberation. (36)

Teatro de las Chicanas were the founding mothers in formulating the artform of the *mestiza teatro*. They faced their obstacles not as barriers but as points of progression to redefine their presentation on representation.

My understanding of referring to Teatro de las Chicanas as the mothers of teatro will become more evident as I progress through this *mestiza teatro* timeline. The foundational presentation of inviting education while creating ambiguity and change makes a borderland counterpublic. As we enter the next decade, I aim to continue to build the need and mechanics within these formulated counterpublics. As was the case in El Teatro Campesino, I want to stress that Teatro de las Chicanas is not a gold standard of woman centric teatro. The concept of the *mestiza* was not something they intentionally invited but became a natural paradigm within their artwork. The *mestiza* releases limitations and expectations, which the group embodied, developed, and continued to evolve. I am grateful for these women because they paved the beginnings of a historiography for female-based teatro, leaving an imprint that shows the heart of a *teatrista*.

CHAPTER II: MAKING THE MESTIZA

At one point in the drama she seems to be trapped in this space, and, with frustrated longing, reaches alternately first towards the Mexican and then to the U.S. side. The implication was that she was caught between two worlds, uncertain even of her relationship to the Virgin de Guadalupe, a quintessential icon of Mexican identity. Indeed, at one point the bride stated: “I don't know what it means to be Mexican.” (Bereelowitz 33 on *Border Boda*)

Latina Artists of the Next Decade

The 1980s into the 90s created a renaissance of artwork for Latinas. Spanning across mediums of theatre, academic work, sculptures, street art, and much more, the Latina grew to create space for herself. *Teatro* began to face a shift as it intertwined with the more institutionalized expectation of theatre, taking their *campesino* style to the traditional proscenium stages. We see the rise of Latina and Chicana playwrights. We see more dynamic representation on stage with productions like *Latina* (1980) written by Milcha Sánchez-Scott, *Sor Juana* (1983) written by Estela Portillo Trambley, *Real Women Have Curves* (1987) by Josefina López, and *La Víctima* (1984) created by the Teatro de la Esperanza. Events like “Tongue of Fire” premiered, a production of all women performing poetry and drama from authors Lorna Dee Cervantes, Gloria Anzaldúa, Lucha Corpi, Ana Castillo, and Sandra Cisneros, among others. In the academic world we have the formation of anthologies in direct relation to trying to form a historiography of Chicano/Latino theatre across the country. Large Latino based films like *La Bamba* (1987) take place as a more vast presentation of Latinx popular culture emerging in film, television, and mass media.

In the area of feminist rhetoric, they were facing a strong push as the mainstream academic world was continuing a push for a politicized western canon. Due to affirmative action, we see increased diversity in higher education institutes and workplaces, but much of this was starting to be removed state by state (Anzadúa 6). This era is where we see political figures invite microaggressive nature within government, such as conservatives pushing to add an amendment to the U.S. Constitution to establish English as the nation's official language. Feminist scholars built on their forming theories and practices from the previous decades and created a more extensive dialogue in published work. Most notably in the realm of Chicana/Latina literature was the book *A Bridge Called My Back* (1981). Edited by Gloria Anzadúa and Cherrie Moraga, the book showcases essays, criticism, interviews, testimonials, poetry, and visual art that engage in the ongoing conversation of race, class, gender, and sexuality that directly correlate to the oppressive nature put forward for women of color. Moraga also had a notable book called *Loving in the War Years* (1983), which was intertwined with poetry and prose discussing family history and political theories. During this time we also see Moraga enter the theatrical work in playwriting with her play *Giving Up the Ghost* (1987). However, what was perhaps most influential in the progression of Chicana feminism dialogue was that in 1987 Gloria Anzaldúa wrote *Borderlands: La Frontera* and introduced the concept of the *mestiza consciousness*.

The impact of *Borderlands: La Frontera* was monumental and continues to be one of the most taught pedagogical tools in feminist and Latinx Studies. The book is currently in its fifth edition, with scholars continuing to add discourse and development. Anzaldúa was born in the United States in 1942, just twenty-five miles from the border of Mexico. Her family was farm workers who would migrate between Texas and the Midwest. She continued to visit Mexico

throughout her life and became acutely aware of the oppressive nature existing in all geographical areas of life. She takes her experiences and stories to formulate her rhetoric that continues to show pride in her Mexican, American, and Chicana ancestry. The fourth edition's introduction of *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, written by Norma E. Cantú and Aída Hurtado, expresses:

Anzaldúa uses the geographical location of her birth as the source of her theorizing. She substantially developed Borderlands theory, which expands W.E.B. Dubois' ideas on double consciousness to the experiences of Chicanas who have grown up in South Texas. In *Borderlands/ La Frontera* Anzaldúa establishes the border between these two counties as a metaphor for all types of crossing- between geopolitical boundaries, sexual transgressions, social dislocations, and the crossing necessary to exist in multiple linguistics and cultural context...Chicana feminists declare the border as the geographical location (lugar) that created the aperture for theorizing about subordination from an ethnicity specific Chicana/mestiza consciousness. (6)

I like to think of these counterpublics I am discussing as formations of individual borderlands. Allowing free space helps individuals embrace the contradictory nature without the looming societal gaze. Beyond that, it also allows the dismissal of cultural expectations in performance practices. The building relationship of the *mestiza consciousness* with counterpublics engages the conversation of space, particularly physical and mental borders. Anzaldúa first paints the picture by stating that we must live on both shores (of our borderlands). "Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory" (101). This paradigm engages the theory and practice of counterpublics because it denies social norms of the bourgeois public sphere in Nancy

Fraser's writing and images of cultural expectations of *teatro* and *latinidad* performance practice. These *teatro* collectives are distinct spaces to formulate discourse on the different ideas, expectations, and experiences on what must be needed to gain a state that we call *mestiza consciousness*. This concept was my reasoning for writing on the collective. In the case of the collective Las Comadres, they all felt as if they were living in the same boat of oppressive nature and experience, yet the outcome for each individual is different. This chapter explores navigating the experiences of the *mestiza consciousness* in artistic *teatro* spaces and the troubling wisdom that comes from participating collectively.

The Contradiction of the Mestiza: The Start of Las Comadres

Starting in the spring of 1988, a collective of female artists aimed to establish a multicultural group that would actively collaborate to engage on both sides of the United States and Mexico border. They gave themselves the name Las Comadres, a term that means godmother, close friend, midwife, and gossip. Initially, Las Comadres' origins began in 1984 within the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) group. In summary, "The Border Arts Workshop was founded in San Diego in 1984 as a multicultural, interdisciplinary group of artists, scholars, and cultural activists. Their goal was to deconstruct and redefine the border as a zone of transformation, an intersectional space of negotiation and fluid interchange rather than a rigid line signifying separateness" (Berelowitz 8). While Anzaldúa's work on border subjectivity was influential, there were various interpretations and agendas spanning in range of a legitimate location to the growing understanding of one's subconsciousness. For BAW/TAF they had the goal in mind to think of the border as those in the margin, often overlooked and underrepresented. They considered the border a zone of transformation where one could redefine, deconstruct, and interchange themselves. Through this framework, they

hoped to bring light to the discussion around racism, nationalism, and anti-immigrant actions. On paper BAW/TAF was a utopian project that had artistic intentions to bring perspective into a growing segregated atmosphere.

The issues within BAW/TAF were due to the fact that it was a primarily male-centric group. Of the seven founding members, only two were female, and many speculated that their entrance was since they were married to another male member of the group. Even though all had artistic talent, it became an apparent pattern that females entered BAW/TAF through their relationships with dominant male figureheads (Berelowitz 9). Because of this the women continued to fight for their legitimacy as valid members and artists. What continued to create a deep frustration for the women in BAW/TAF was the growing frustration that the male members refused to see gender and sexuality as a point of renegotiation within the border zone. This constant marginalization is why these women decided to formulate their collective group where they could have a stronger sense of control and power in developing their ideas around the border zone.

I would like to preface that of all the groups I will be discussing in this paper, Las Comadres does not directly label themselves as a theatre performance group. However, their artwork follows the paradigm of the *mestiza teatro*, and they add discussion on the development of the topic. All the women in Las Comadres were in some way connected to the art world: with them ranging as artists, performers, writers, curators, video artists, teachers, and students. They had about eighteen core members with a dozen or so drifting in and out of the group. They were a multicultural group with the ethnic diversity of Anglos, Chicanas, Mexicanas, and other Latinas. Within that, the women had a range of cultural backgrounds that were Sicilian, German, Irish, Jewish, Indian, Danish, Hungarian, Protestant, and Catholic (Berelowitz 12). Their goals

were built off their BAW/TAF experience; they were hoping to build an affinity group that would theoretically adopt the thought process of Gloria Anzualdua's *mestiza consciousness* through the use of artwork. The issues with utopian based projects are that they are almost all destined to fail in one way or another. This preference is the argument Anzaldúa makes herself, discussing that the *mestiza* is a constant "inner war" that can leave us at a point of "counterstance." My reasoning for including and analyzing Las Comadres within this Chicana/Latina *teatro* collective timeline comes directly from the desire to express the validation of uncertainty and failure. These eventual events that took place during the time of Las Comadres helped articulate the less tangible idealisms of Anzaldúa's work and build a more robust understanding of the embodiment that comes with embracing the *mestiza consciousness* within *teatro*. Expanding beyond that, near the end of their era in 1990, Las Comadres ended up doing one performance piece that helped summarize the internal struggle within their own group's psyche.

Las Comadres had high intentions in their development of the group. They would meet on both sides of the border monthly in Tijuana, Mexico, or San Diego, California. The range of locations varied from private homes to art galleries. In their original agenda they spent their beginnings similar to Teatro de las Chicanas study groups. "They read Gloria Anzaldúa, bell hooks, Donna Harraway, Trinh Minh-ha, and papers written by fellow members. Additionally, they looked at one another's work, offering feedback and support, for all, in one way or another, felt professionally isolated" (Berelowitz, 11). In many ways, these were their beginnings of building a counterpublic, an area they could help build a larger discourse on the issues that mainly affected them as a unit. They would sit out in the yard with various food brought by members and discuss without the weight of professionalism put forward in their careers or shows. They bonded over the understanding of the struggles they faced as they tried to pave their

paths in the artistic world. Because of the group's unique geographical position, they were able to reimagine the idea of the "crossover artist." Both the United States and Mexico were overwhelmed with hegemonic gender divided narratives. Las Comadres' ability to formulate safe space on both sides of the border engages with practices of transnational feminism theory, which is to understand the complexities of location and to deny the assumption that women of the third world experience oppression in the same context as those of the first world. The group's ability to formulate a specific space engages in the transnational discussion because it helps validate the invisibility, isolation, and exploitation they experienced within their independent fields. Through this operation, they could create commentary without a defined need for expectation or legitimization. Comadre Marguerite Waller expressed the relief that these beginning meetings gave stating:

Because nothing was apparently at stake, there were few if any overt conflicts. I enjoyed a sensation of "learning" a great deal about the art scene, about the two cities, and about where I wanted to take my own critical and theoretical work. This learning, though, was more addictive than deconstruction. It gave me a sense of enlargement and accomplishment. (Waller 3)

Education, learning, and knowledge continue to be popular themes within these Latina counterpublics. By allowing this space without barriers we reimagine knowledge not solely to live within the institutionalized colonial practices. For Las Comadres their education ranged from a tenured professor to those whose education ended at high school (Berelowitz 11). These beginning meetings were private and centered on growth and validation as they allowed themselves to explore an area physically, mentally, and emotionally; that they had never been able to achieve before.

Many feminist scholars and individuals of Las Comadres called this the “nice nice” phase within the beginning of their infinity group. Las Comadres wanted to embrace Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* as their blueprint of ideology. With a multicultural background I can only imagine that they saw their group as a potential borderland group, allowing space and freedom beyond labels. As Waller states, “Women in the group wanted to find out what is Spanish, what is Mexican, what is Chicana, what is Anglo? There was a curiosity about how the other side lives” (qtd. in Berelowitz 13). The beginnings shed light on the group's universal understanding of engaging in the ethnic “other” in hopes of embracing what Belowitz calls their “collective muse” in Anzaldúa (13). A sisterhood was built with nothing but high hopes of understanding, compassion, and liberation from expectation. The ideas presented in the group do not live in a world of good or bad, but rather help showcase the influences of subjectivity within the *mestiza* borderlands.

Navigating the Borderlands: Examining the Counterstances within Las Comadres

I want to preference the understanding of Las Comadres similar to what Marguerite Waller writes in her reflection on her experience within the group. Nothing the women did was “wrong,” and there was no way they could have avoided their eventual conflict. Waller elaborates that the problems within this group rely on the influences of subjectivity and the individual navigation of understanding the borderlands. My understanding through examining the group is not to shame them or argue “they should have done this.” I want to examine the group's internal friction to understand how our mechanism within inviting the *mestiza consciousness* works. By using an artistic and theatrical space, we can help articulate the less physical contradictions that the *mestiza* faces in their negotiation of the borderlands. I think of Anzaldúa's writing on bordertown psyches stating,

The struggle has always been inner, and played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society.

Nothing happens in the “real” world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

(109)

The reality of the group, and theatre in general, is that we invite our psyche to grow and develop through theatre. Without a strong understanding of intention we leave ourselves to open up to the possibilities of pain, healing, sorrow, anger, and multitudes of emotions and experiences. By examining the disputes within the *mestiza* collective of Las Comadres, I hope to articulate an understanding of psych mechanisms and that choosing a path in creating counterpublics does not mean these women all live on the same plane. This group's choice to have this specific collective of female artists shows that the concept of the borderlands is vast and hard to navigate, but there is a lesson of growth through its terrain. Anzaldúa says *la Mestiza* is a cultural collision that leaves a struggle of flesh, borders, and inner self (100). While this struggle lives within the inner psyche of each woman, it ends up being played out in the real world. The issues that presented themselves for Las Comadres magnify that discussion around conflict within the *mestiza consciousness*. As Anzaldúa predicts :

Within us and within *la cultura chicana*, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counter stance...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)

The counterstance is a defense mechanism that is directly rooted in dichotomous thought. The eventual events that lead to the internal strife for Las Comadres come from the embedded binary thinking that socially has surrounded them throughout their life. Through my examination of Las Comadres I categorize the counterstance in three different presentations.

The first counterstance I am attempting to articulate is politics and professionalism through the presentation of “inside vs. outside” the group. Las Comadres were a group of individuals with a natural call for using their artwork to articulate political activism. However, there was a blind spot in understanding assumptions on political stance. The most notable experience first came with an event called “Light up the Border,” organized by a coalition of citizens in San Diego. Originating with former mayor Roger Hedgecock in 1989, every third Thursday of the month they would rally anti-immigrant border citizens to line up their cars at dusk and shine their headlights into the no-man’s land between Mexico and the United States. The intention was to discourage and frighten undocumented immigrants from crossing the border under the guise of night. This was a growing discussion from anti-immigrant citizens who continued to articulate a need for more lights and patrolling by the government to make this border less penetrable. For Las Comadres, this continuing act went directly against their mission statement of trans-border culture. Until the spring of 1990 the group remained mainly private, but within this point, they gave themselves their name and entered the public domain. However, while several comadres felt eager to jump back into areas of political activism, some comadres felt like this call did not fit within the original intention of the group and chose to remain apart from those who wanted to make a public stand (Berelowitz 16). Those who chose to participate hired a plane to fly above the parked car, pulling a banner that said “1000 Points of fear-Another Berlin Wall?” This quote was in reference to the current events in Eastern Europe, and the

women used it as a political metaphor. The event captured the eyes of public media, and Las Comadres was talked about on local radio stations and television news. One comadre was even interviewed on National Public radio. Many women were elated by the response to the event and took great pride in developing the group's name and presence. However, as Berelowitz writes in reflection other members of the group disagreed with the coverage:

They felt frustrated at being unable to control the media's representation of them, at the way the media edited and cut their viewpoints, trimming them into digestible soundbites to the point of misrepresentation. (16)

The reason a counterstance continues to pop up comes from a history of oppressive nature. The media's influence will continue to articulate representation in a way that makes their corporations comfortable. This influence is why we have manipulation in representation, presentation of tokenism, and watered down expression of feminist idealisms across vast areas of mass media. From this group's history they had intentions of creating a collective that lived in that counterpublic so there would be a stronger sense of safety. By inviting the mass media in they start to falter and invite the outside without having a direct say in articulating their intention. This is where we also see the group start to build that "inside vs. outside" counterstance. After the group attained some level of success within their artistic fields, individual members were labeled as careerists and blamed for the manipulation and exploitation of their fellow comadres (Berelowitz 10). The group's intention was a collective and that no single individual was to emerge as star-centered. The actions of the group becoming public directly started creating that crack within as the ideas of individual career histories played out before the group. This counterstance in relation to the borderlands that Anzadúa discusses articulates the history of separating the oppression of women. Our psyche often perceives that the outside world does not

understand the inside struggle. These moments of defense come with a history of generations of Latina women being misrepresented.

The second counterstance, and arguably the most painful to dissect, is the influence of cultural relations in “Anglo vs. Latina.” I strongly argue that Las Comadres is a Latina counterpublic because of the influential contexts of the cultural environment within the group. While there is a vast spectrum of cultural backgrounds, the understanding in the surroundings made from within became a divide between Anglo and Latina identities. Now Anglo isn’t a popular term by today’s standards but it has a long history in association to whiteness, European descent, and colonization. This ties back to the history of Malintzin and how after the overthrow of the Aztec Empire indigenous individuals wanted to separate from the Anglo people. It’s the understanding that there is a historical stigma and trauma to separate these groups that has been culturally pushed onto each woman in some way. Cultural influences become hard to explain because in many ways culture has a strong connection to self embodiment, which is not always easy to elaborate within words. The issues the group faced may not have directly come from within the group, but rather that societal history these particular ethnicities faced. For example, the Latina women in the group were highly expressive and verbal when discussing in Spanish but would remain quiet when English was spoken. While they were proficient in the language, this shows light of embedded subconscious influences within their cultural identity. As member Charleen Tochette points out:

Many Spanish-speaking people, whose language is highly formal, are accustomed to elaborate verbal conventions that carefully define the parameters of interpersonal communication to show respect to the person addressed. Thus, they are sometimes offended by the informal, direct way that people talk to each other in English. (22)

Language has a long and ongoing history in presentation within the institutionalization within the United States. This history builds fear in many immigrants that their language, and ultimately their culture, is perceived as uneducated, estranged, and different. This idea creates an ingrained societal silencing mechanism with added layers of cultural gender subordination. Latinas had strong memories of keeping private subject matter to themselves. In contrast, the Anglo women were more outspoken on personal issues and trauma. Comadre Graciela Ovejero commented that the psychological process of inviting personal issues within the group ended up destroying them. These debates lead to what I would categorize as a push and pull effect. The Anglo women wanted to find connection and acceptance with the Latinas, while the Latinas wanted to define their difference and lack of power to the Anglos. The Anglo women's argument, while well-intended, leads to a problematic issue of erasure. For years I would argue with theatre faculty about how I would choose not to use the expression "color-blind casting," which is casting without taking into consideration actors' race, ethnicity, and skin color. The phrase always left me as a thespian of color hearing, "I am going to pretend you are white." While not always the case for many directors and productions, my point is that the phrase creates a sense of erasure. (If you are curious I prefer the phrase "integrated casting" or "blind casting," removing the specificity of color). In order to have a desire for unity and community, you must understand the presentation of identity that welcomes difference. "Furthermore, it assumes that a "core" essence connects women, that each subject possesses an inherent identity and can understand and be "present" for another as she (assumes) that she can for herself" (Berelowitz18). This is an echoing idea from the history of *El Movimiento* and its use of *la Raza* as the ultimate fight every Chicano is arguing for, which we know erased women's issues. The pressure for a unifying identity left the group in an emotional state, and collective meetings became insufferable. The

Latinas also had a sense of longing for unity that was specifically *latinidad* based. As one Chicana remarks:

I became uncomfortable with some of the white women... I felt really burdened by my experience and wanted to share my feelings with other Latinas and so I asked for a meeting with just the Latinas. But that also turned out to be very difficult for me. One Mexican woman said: “What makes you think that I am going to have more of an affinity with you than with another white woman in the group?” And I realized that she had a point. I guess that if you are a dominant within the dominant sector of your society, then you are not going to understand what racism is. I realized that it was necessary to throw out essentialism, and that we all had completely different takes on things. (19)

In many ways these women were fighting their perceived notions of essentialism within themselves, their culture, and the women around them. Assumptions become problematic for multiple reasons, but in a devised creative space, they create unnecessary battlegrounds. The ideas of the “Anglo vs. Latina” counterstance came from the perceived assumptions in society itself. They are still fighting preconceived notions of the *vendida logic* and its embedded idealism of nationalism to separate anglo from Latino. For the *mestiza* to become present, she must define and negotiate within herself and the environment around her.

The last counterstance is the most present not just in this group but within any *mestiza* borderland, and that is the importance of individuality in the “me vs. them.” As discussed in the previous counterstance, it is hard to remove the idea of privilege, race, and class and the role they played within the group. There was an intense discussion on privilege; who had it and who did not? Those differences in areas of work, education, and history bubbled as everyone longed for validation independently. “It was difficult for women who felt far removed from that kind of

prominence and privilege to empathize with women who seemed to have it all and yet wouldn't concede that they did" (Berelowitz 21). However, no women in the group felt fully accomplished or respected in their field. Privilege is an analogical concept that associates with power. The truth is that no group member consistently stayed in a position of privilege across all axes; there was not anyone who "had it all." Identity is fluid and subject to change and invites renegotiations and subjectivity, something the *mestiza consciousness* makes room for within its paradigm. Even Anzaldúa argues that we live in border towns in relation to each other. This is where the idea of intersectionality can be presented and understood. The issue of this "me vs. them" counterstance is that it has a long history within discussions around vast areas of oppression across many fields. This conflict inevitably leads to problematic internal pain within the group.

The most painful issues included resentment about leadership, lesbian desire for women in the group, and professional rivalry, for some of the women, strengthened by their success within the group, had begun to strike out their own and attained individual success-which other members regarded as opportunistic and contrary to the group's original ethic of collective artmaking. (Berelowitz 53)

Resentment's relationship within collectivity comes from a desire not to be disregarded or manipulated. There were also underlying aspects of women being intimidated by certain members and/or struggling to find a communal relationship within the group. This is where the idea of collectivity and individuality within artistic terrains becomes complicated. One does not want to get lost, but also one wants to be recognized. This terrain of the *mestiza consciousness* puts one's theatrical psyche through uncertainty. How can both the collective and the individual be seen, understood, and represented?

First off, I invite you to look at Anzaldúa's words "to rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves" (10). All these counterstances and issues Las Comadres faced truthfully articulate the struggles of the *mestiza*, and honestly lead to be a natural characteristic in developing the *mestiza consciousness*. The inner struggles present themselves in the outer terrain. Yes, these events, situations, and discussions can be painful, and perhaps you would think that having a counterpublic would lead you to a sense of safety. Yet, the *mestiza* is neither good nor bad; she must invite all parts of herself within the borderland. Las Comadres never had a clear idea of what their process was meant to be, and I think they were just hoping to grow and learn as artists together within this group. The counterstances that happened within were inevitable in many ways, but I hope to articulate that they created a strong form of *teatro* that showcased all this discomfort they have been through, both together and individually.

Border Boda: Where We Grow

The reason I view Las Comadres as a *teatro* group comes from the largest and most influential artistic piece they created. Not long after the "Light Up the Border" event, comadre Aida Mancillas was invited by the Centro Cultural de la Raza to curate an exhibition. As Berelowitz expresses, "She asked her Comadres if they would like to take this opportunity to make a collective visual statement that would fully embody and communicate their goals in a context where they would not be distorted by the editorializing of the media" (23). The women took the opportunity and ran with it, creating an installation called *La Vecindad/The Neighborhood*, along with a seventy minute performance piece titled *Border Boda/Border Wedding*. Although the installation carried a number of different artistic aspects, the women focused primarily on the performance. Similar to my discussion on the evolution of language

from Chicana to Latina and even Latinx, *teatro* has an evolutionary sense. While this performance was not an *acto* or traveled across the country as a troupe, it continues Chicano performance idealism and even invites the *mestiza* contradictory imagery. To put into perspective, El Teatro Campesino disbanded its original collective in 1980, and we see Luis Valdez continue to make a presence with his iconic play *Zoot Suit*, which was produced in 1979 and turned into a film by 1981. For Chicano/a, Latino/a, and Hispanics, performance was at a new evolutionary point where their public was invited into the theatrical and film world. As such, there was a navigation of the presentation on traditional grassroots *teatro* while taking into account the institutionalization of professionalism in the theatre community. In this case, Las Comadres had Laura Esparza as the director, but many women regarded this performance as highly collective based and developed from within the group. As a result, Esparza wanted to highlight the renegotiation between relationships in the theatrical world.

She saw *Border Boda* as a bridge between two theatres—the great Chicano *campesino* theatre of the sixties and seventies and the avant-garde performance art of an emerging group of more multicultural, urban performers like Luis Alfaro and Guillermo Gómez-Pena. The visions of both, she feels, are needed in a Chicano theatre that addresses the improvisational realities of a decidedly nonmonolithic Chicano culture—that speaks to the Chicano living in Ohio, to the monolingual, English-speaking Chicana who cannot talk easily to her Spanish-Speaking parents, to the bicultural child of a bicultural marriage, or to the descendants of the four-hundred-year-old *tejano* family, a family colonized four times, by four different countries —Spain, Mexico, Texas, and the United States—without ever having left the neighborhood. (Waller 77)

Perhaps this is why *Border Boda* was well received and praised for its political discursive nature. Through the significance of presentation and dialogue we see Las Comadres welcome the contradictory as they dismantle the binary; they create a visual constraint to show the constant struggle Latina women face with the cultural dichotomy they face.

As a person who finds great joy in analyzing theatre, I appreciate when embodiment becomes a visual because I believe it invites the audience to join in the process. *Border Boda*'s performance space was divided into two different areas to directly reflect the cultural spheres of public and private. My analytical sense views this as a visual representation of the counterstance "inside vs. outside" from when the collective was trying to navigate their experiences with the media's representation. In the private sphere, we have the kitchen, representing the heart of the domestic home. As artists, the women took the initiative in creating the metaphorical argument through the imagery placed throughout the set. The table was both the heart of the private sector and the play itself; it was a huge bilingual cookbook filled with family recipes atop of table legs to show a "metaphor of nourishment from mixture" (Berelowitz 25). The walls were blue turquoise and had large painting with subject matter specific to that region. Upstage behind the kitchen table was an open kitchen cupboard the shade of blood red that also resembled an altar, and the doors contained xeroxed faces of women from Oaxaca. To one side, we have shelves with images of historical border type women painted on plates. Downstage contained bits of shattered mirror and barbed wire to create a "visual metaphor for fragmented identities and the border" (25). The private kitchen area was colorful and contained other culturally significant props and decorations.

The public area was called the "media" or "conflict" room and contained a stark contrast being black and white (another metaphor within itself). This area prominently featured a

television set along with a podium meant to be used by two journalists later on in the play. To visually counter balance the recipe book table in the kitchen, the media/conflict room had an oversized book referred to as the “book of conflict.” “On its cover were the words: todos es verdad, todo es mentira, /All is truth, all is lies- a comment on the journalistic enterprise” (Berelowitz, 28). Between the two rooms was a border zone itself and continued one of the most sticking images as Waller explains:

The figure of the Virgen de Guadalupe was evoked by a huge, mandala-shaped aura painted on wood, which was hinged down the middle. A toothed circular saw had started its descent through the center of this icon, headed for a mirror, hung at eye level across the hinged cut. A few feet in front of the mandala stood the chain link fence with its window and, suspended from it, a painted bodice reproducing one of Frida Kahlo’s images of invisible physical and psychic pain. (76)

Las Comadres wanted to articulate the distinct blur that comes with ambiguity and the *mestiza*. Although the visual may seem opposite of that argument, they followed the grassroots *teatro* style by understanding the influence of the exaggerated to the point of political resistance. From the audience’s perspective, you see the kitchen as the world of women filled with love and suffering, while the media/conflict room was meant for the man with pride and public discourse. It was this middle ground that engaged a conversation and brought forth the themes of Las Comadres’ goals.

The primary narrative of *Border Boda* took place in the private kitchen sphere. We have a young Chicana girl on the eve of her wedding where she is to marry a *gringo* named Ted. The other two women are the bride’s grandmother and her great aunt, referred to as *Tía*. Both the aunt and grandmother have great concerns for the young girl and express their emotions in a different

variety. The grandmother plays our storyteller as she unfolds narratives of their family's history. As Berelowitz analyzes, "unlike written history, storytelling is an art of the body, transmitted from mouth to ear and from heart to heart, establishing a chain and continuum between the generations who pass it on, thereby providing a link between past, present, and future" (29). As such, the grandmother represented the significance of unheard and underrepresented history. These narratives allowed more presentation of the public and private narratives that existed in the women of Las Comadres. In contrast to the grandmother, the *Tía*, on the other hand, does not say a word. She spends most of the production preparing fruit, sugar cane, and cinnamon for *calientitos* to be served to the audience at the end of the performance. However, on four separate occasions, we hear the aunt sing Spanish songs with a strong historical presence as border songs. These songs comment on the stories told by the grandmother and add artistic discussion. The theme of deteriorated language comes into play as we discover that *Tía* married a man who speaks only English while she only speaks Spanish. However, they both speak "the language of love," which transcends boundaries and creates universal intersectionality. Along with that, we find that *Tía* never stops talking when she is in Tijuana, but in contrast, she never speaks again after she is north of the border. The bride/niece/granddaughter knew only English and expressed frustration at her inability to talk to her aunt (Berelowitz 29-32). These three women help reiterate the constant struggle that existed within Las comadres along with many Latina/Chicana across the world. Rather than view language as a barrier, we must embrace aspects of the *mestiza* to reconfigure and reimagine our perceptions of language.

Within the media/conflict room, we see personas somewhat differently, with two apparently Anglo performers assuming the role of journalist interrogating official U.S. representation of Chicano culture, one being a hard-boiled cynic and the other an idealistic

liberal. Through a presentation of skits, poems, debates, and videos, the two figures come to the realization of the inadequacies of their positions in the job of reporting on border subject matter. “Entangled within the logic of Anglo representation and appropriation, they try intellectually, but always interestingly, to formulate satisfying interpretations of historical and contemporary events” (Waller 76). This area within the play continues to portray Anglo based idealism to directly contrast the private sector. Independently it showcases those characteristics of the traditional *acto* character in formulating stereotypical archetypes.

The relationship between the two rooms is when we see the overall argumentation Las Comadres tries to take away from their own experiences. At one point, the grandmother reminisces about her and her sister’s marriage, resulting in *Tía* singing “*arrieros somos*.” As she sings, the young bride moves towards the place of the fenced mandala sculpture. She dances with movement to express the torn emotions of being stuck between two worlds, cultures, and emotions. After the song ends, the video monitor in the conflict/media room begins to play images of Mexican farmworkers within large U.S. agricultural fields. As the images play, another performer delivers a dramatic monologue by Gloria Anzaldúa called “We Call Them Greasers.” This poem ends with the story of a rape and murder of a *Tejano* rancher’s wife by an Anglo landgrabber. We then hear the young granddaughter bride ask, “what happened to Mama?” This question leads to the conclusion that the story was that of her mother. The other presentation of the two rooms having a relationship would be a presentation of media performers crossing over into the kitchen and learning them not to be “Anglo” but Jewish, Italian, English, and German. In contrast, our “Mexicans” stop seeing themselves as *Indio* or Spanish, but also Romanian and Jewish. This scene was a developmental thought from Las Comadres’ own experiences within the group’s negotiation for identity. In cynical balance, we would see the grandmother cross to

the media room and become a racist media presence called Heddy Rodgcock (a play on a female Roger Hedgcock) (Waller 78). This balance of the private and public sphere allowed the collective to take ownership of media presentation and use it to their artistic advantage. It also articulates that despite their differences, Las Comadres was able to formulate a representation of how the *mestiza consciousness* can be used to create and control new spaces in the presentation of mass media and its relationship within the mainstream public sphere. One particular scene of significance is on the monitor of the media/conflict room, where we see Mrs. Vásquez, a Mexican woman, recounting in Spanish a story about being seized by U.S. agents while she was selling tacos near the border. After the tape we have our granddaughter in the middle of the aura fence border sculpture reciting Mrs. Vásquez's story in English. At this moment, we cross paths of presentation and allow the two women to merge within each other's stories. Waller helps expand this by writing that "The inclusion of both tape and Eloise [the granddaughter] mandala-framed reenactment of it in the performance further complicates the notion of representing the border, replacing the notion that such a reality is susceptible to mimesis with an example of complex, composite practices of deterritorialization and translation" (78). It creates a reimagining of La Virgen de Guadalupe on stage into contemporary imagery. As such, we see the granddaughter embody the border women, embracing both young and old, English and Spanish, and north and south; we can conclude a presentation of the contradictory. The play ends with the granddaughter entering the middle mandala terrain in her wedding dress. She removes her gown to reveal her shift dress and bodice painted to represent the corset that Frida Khalo called her pain-wrought body. The message was that marriage and its relationship within the patriarchal system both celebrates and torments the woman (Berelowitz 51). It created a perplexing lasting image as Waller expresses:

The performance ends, for example, not with any resolution of the conflict over the granddaughter's wedding or answers to the question of how to represent border stories in the U.S. press, but with a proliferation of foci and interaction among spaces, which fills the gallery with the energy of ritual rather than the catharsis of Aristotelian drama. (80)

Critics remarked *Border Boda* was too busy and took on too many issues within the span of the play. However, I argue perhaps that was the intention. Within the group's internal conflict, they did perhaps "take too much on," yet this plays on an argument that these issues directly correlate with each other, and many (particularly women) don't have the liberty to separate one problem from another.

Both *Border Boda* along with Las Comadres navigate the borderlands without knowing the end result. Perhaps that is the point, that in order to embrace the *mestiza*, one must always move in the way of ambiguity. The feminist Chicana theatre historian in me has a great appreciation for Las Comadres, and while they ended up disbanding a year after *Border Boda*, they remarked how it had influential growth within them and their own negotiation into the new *mestiza*. I truly believe that it was all this internal conflict that led to the beauty that is *Border Boda*, and perhaps that is why it was regarded as too busy. The women were creating a visual performance that accurately showed their own acceptance of understanding the painful contradiction of the *mestiza consciousness*. Anzaldúa's work is a theory, often written in poetry, which can be intoxicating and difficult to articulate. Art, specifically theatre, has the same ability to be contradictory and welcome ambiguity. While I could write what went wrong or right within this group, I believe that neither is the case. *Teatro* is devised, it comes from within, and when one welcomes the *mestiza consciousness* into *teatro*, you are allowing exploration without defined boundaries. Directors, artists, performers, and thespians continue to be asked, "why this

theatre now?” From my perspective, Las Comadres needed to exist because in this era of the 80s into the 90s, Latina/Chicana women were just beginning to understand their individuality as artists. Often grouped together, one might be lost in the vast generalization of the Latina. Las Comadres welcomed (perhaps unexpectedly) an area to negotiate identity around others who were also negotiating. Careers, artistry, education, personal experiences, culture, and basic individuality doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to form a collective of individuals. As Anzaldúa says, we are all within border towns of another. It was a painful experience, and I thank the women for going through it because it helped formulate a passage for the next era of *mestiza teatro*.

CHAPTER III: RETROFITTED REPRESENTATION

Chola: WHY DOES EVERYBODY HAVE TO TAKE IT TO THE WALL?

YO SOY LATINA, A WOMAN THAT'S ALL

NOT LOOKING FOR GOD, RELIGION OR A MAN

I WANNA FIGHT FOR PEACE SUCCEED IF I CAN

BUT HOW CAN I FIGHT IF I STAND DIVIDED?

CAN A PROUD BROWN WOMAN EVER FEEL UNITED?

LA CURA, LOCURA IS ALL I EVER HERE

LLENANDO MI CALLE WITH BLOOD AND FEAR

A KISS ON THE CHEEK AND A KNIFE IN THE BACK

MI BARRIOS BEING SCREWED BY THIS THING CALLED CRACK

ENSENAME LOCA, QUE TENGO QUE HACER

BUT WITH THIS DAMN LUCHA

YA NO HAY AMANACER (*The Immaculate Conception* 24)

The Ethnic Spot: the Creation of Latina Theatre Lab

Latina Theatre lab was founded in 1994 by four San Francisco Bay Area actresses: Dena Martinez, Jamie Lujan, Tessa Koning-Martinez, and Wilma Bonet. The Latina Theatre Lab intended to create theatre that went beyond the static, dichotomous, and limited presentation for Latina women. The 1990s had a large ever growing influence on the exposure of Latina representation when it came to popular culture. One of the most prominent influences I would say came from our terminology around the growth of the Latina actress. The 90s became known as the “Latina wave,” with influences like Jennifer Lopez in the hit film *Selena* (1997), a biopic of the real life Tejana singer Selena Quintanilla. For Lopez, her experience was that of the media

questioning her Latina authenticity, with most media news obsessing over her bottom end and its legitimization (Beltrán 131-40). Lopez's experience helps illustrate the "real latina" question: What does a Latina look like? Years after the film we still see scholars questioning the history of Latina actresses' success being attached to ideas of colorism and the media's ability to create the "authentic Latina." What this does is continue to reiterate Chicana feminist argument in regards to the *vendida* logic. With terminology like the "crossover star," we see Latina actresses presented as exotic and sexual. It was the evolutionary sense of seeing the Latina as "good or bad" but evolving to contemporary tropes. The Latina body was either used in place of sexual desire or presented in a way that made them seem un-American and/or unintelligent. While the *vendida logic* was built academically based on the histories during the time frame of *El Movimiento*, I cannot help but articulate that the virgin/whore trope for Latinas would eventually grow to become the maid/stripper stereotypes during the time of the 1990s.

The Latina Theatre Lab's history begins with the understanding that the Latina body is a vast spectrum, and they wanted to give the legitimization back to the Latina. While many factors take place in the actual development of a theatre group, it seemed so much of Latina Theatre Lab's history came from the experience within the "ethnic spot." The ethnic spot does not have a direct definition as much as embodied experience actors of color see throughout the practice of theatre. It is those moments where you are the only person of color on stage, or your ethnicity is used as the defining characteristic. The ethnic spot lives in parallel with the practices of tokenism when minority performers are used to insinuate equality in areas of race, gender, and sexuality. Since the ethnic spot lives in multiple terrains of performance, all the actresses that would eventually become Latina Theatre Lab compared to this segregated experience. It would help create their intersectional *latinidad* in their eventual performance years.

I was lucky enough to interview Jamie Lujan, one of the founding members of Latina Theatre Lab. I want to use her personal narrative as a jumping off point to discuss how the experience of the ethnic spot had a direct relationship with the formation of the Latina Theatre Lab. Lujan completed her M.F.A in acting at the American Conservatory Theatre (ACT) in 1995. The goal for this program was that during your third year, you would audition for a professional company in hopes of getting the main stage role on which you could then write your thesis. However, reflecting back on the time, Lujan knew that the way this was set up was not exactly in her favor. Companies want to be balanced with their actors so they can cover all main, character, and ingenue roles. These old school style theatre companies would have a certain amount of minority positions and often viewed them as interchangeable. Looking at the company, Lujan saw that the Latina spots were already filled, making it very unlikely for her to be cast within a company. But Lujan was an alternate for a Black woman's position, which even confused her (Lujan). These ethnic spots continue even today in theatre practices and directly affect multiple minority students, particularly regarding ethnicity. In fact, in my own experience of undergraduate work, I had fellow classmates drop out of the theatre program due to issues of not getting cast enough for a performance degree. We still struggle to see how actors of color can play roles with a long performance history of embedded white narrative.

For her thesis, Jamie Lujan ended up working on Cherrie Moraga's developing play of the time, *Heroes and Saints* (1994). She got to take on the role of Cerezita Valle, a girl born without limbs due to her mother's exposure to pesticides in the field. This is where Brava! For Women in Arts, a professional arts organization in the Bay Area that showcases women, people of color, youth, LGBTQIA, and other underrepresented voices, came into play. Brava wanted to produce Moraga's play, and Jamie Lujan was invited to audition. She got the role, and with

Moraga's notoriety in the theatre world she hoped this opportunity would help launch her career. After *Heroes and Saints*, Lujan did not get as much luck as she would hope, but she did start volunteering at Brava. Around the same time, Lujan crossed paths with Dena Martinez, who had just returned from Los Angeles burnout from also dealing with a disappointing audition scene. Lujan regarded that the two would almost fantasize about the idea of an all Latina theatre company, but at that point it was only an idea. But as Anzalúa says, “nothing happens in the real world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (109). Lujan invited Martinez to a fundraiser she was coordinating with Brava, where the board was raffling off many prizes. Martinez ended up winning one of the prizes, a two hour consultation with a nonprofit organizer. As Lujan recalls the two women looked at each other and thought, “Huh, there is an open door. Should we walk through it?”

They took the meeting, and eventually Brava became their fiscal sponsor. It was at this time that they invited *Veteranas* Wilma Bonnet,¹⁰ a twenty year theatre veteran, and Tessa Koning-Martinez, a street theatre based actress who had experience with Teatro de la Esparza and El Teatro Campesino (Ikas 97). These four women would then become the founders of Latina Theatre Lab. They called themselves *Co-Madres*, a play on co-producer, co-director, etc. and the Spanish term *Comadres*. As they got started, they decided on a cabaret showcase to see all the Latina talent in the Bay Area. They put out an advertisement for an audition and were surprised by the results. Between the four women, they assumed they knew all of the Latina theatre community in the area and were happily surprised to see women they had never seen or heard of before. This casting call helped reiterate the need for a space like this company was making, validating an understanding that a community of *teatristas* existed in the area but struggled to find a place that would recognize them as an artist. While the group was only

¹⁰ *Veteranas* translates to veterans, but in this case it is a term to those who had years experience in performance.

looking for about ten women, they found great inspiration in every audition. This audition experience helped build up the eventual productions of Latina Theatre Lab, as they aimed to continue highlighting Latina women's unheard voices and performances. As theatrical artists, the *Co-Madres* wanted to help find what connected all these women together. During the auditions, Jamie Lujan regarded that Wilma Bonnet would ask the women if they ever experienced racism or discrimination during their theatrical experiences.

Almost everybody started with no not really but there was that one time when... and then everybody had a story. So we kind of jumped off of that idea in terms of our throughline. So for the actual show, we videotaped Wilma as the director asking some of these absurd questions that sometimes we would get. "Can you do an accent?" Well, what kind of accent would you like? I could do British, I could do Southern, I could do you know....Those kinds of things. (Lujan)

Casting situations, auditions, and other forms of interviewing have a history of making Latinas question the relationship they were playing to the ethnic spot. The accent question continues to be one of the most present experiences *teatristas* (and people of color) have regarding their understanding of how they are viewed as the ethnic spot. The continued reiteration of interchangeability and the denial of Latina individually came overly apparent with each women's audition. Something Latina Theatre Lab directly wanted to discuss on stage. In fact, at the showcase, the group put on a scene where they reenacted an experience in a casting office. Lujan remarks:

We also created a scene that actually happens in a casting agency, where we were noticing all the Latinas there we're going to be auditioning for the nurse or something.

The role was a one-liner, and it was like for a *Children of the Damned* sequel. And all the

Black men were like the garbage man or something. Then all the Asian men were the doctors, and they went in just before us. You hear the Asian Dudes and part of their like one-liner was a giant scream. And we're like what's going on, and so we started rating them when they come out. We'd like to put up a number ten or number eight. We started laughing loud, and then we were just like "hey man, yeah we should go in there and do the *Barrio of the Damned!*" Then we started acting out the scene in the casting waiting room.

Eventually, this scene would not just be performed at the showcase but worked into Latina Theatre Lab's first show *¿Que Nevas?—What's new?* (1994) This presentation allowed slap-stick humor to exist while addressing problematic issues. They wanted to engage in the conversation of presenting the ethnic spot while simultaneously discussing issues of representation. Their dialogue is built on experiences that parallel with the *vendida logic*. The *vendida* logic of seeing Latina/Chicana women as the toupes of mother, virgen, and whore has a strong history of female identity being directly connected to a larger male figurehead. It helps propel the idea that not just Latina performers, but minority women, are often used merely as props to enhance other actors. For Latina Theatre Lab, they had experienced this procedure firsthand and took new practices to combat it. During the auditions, they would ask these women what they would like to do on stage that they had never been allowed to before. The result was an exhibit of blended performance with a variety of Latina talents ranging from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* monologue to *ranchera* singing (Lujan). These performance pieces are the beginning trickle of Latina Theater Lab's influence in developing the *mestiza teatro* style. By inviting practices often overlooked by the Latina performer, they created a new but also expansive *teatro* style that helps formulate our timeline of the *mestiza teatro*. They took the understanding of older grassroots style *teatro*, along

with other performance cultures and contemporary practices, to formulate their collective that created practices for the Latina *teatrística* to formulate their own authenticity.

The Historical DJ: Retrofitted Memory in Performance Practice

Latina Theatre Lab helps build the timeline discussion on representation by directly having a space that allows room for varieties of knowledge. Their representation in their performance allowed room for critiquing the iconography of *vendida logic* while engaging in the discussion of dismantling through reimagination. All the groups I discuss also engage in this reimagination, an ongoing theme throughout the *mestiza consciousness*. “She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths” (104). Through Anzaldúa’s paradigm, I aim to formulate an argumentation of *teatro* that invites feminist reinterpretation while playing homage to cultural performance practice. These collectives validate pain through humor, use designs of *raqueshes* aesthetics, try to discuss themes that directly affect the Chicano/Latino public, and invest in political action. This *mestiza teatro* expands on that by challenging the *vendida logic* through the use of embodied experiences. Because of these intertwining practices, I believe these performances also implement the use of retrofitted memory. According to interdisciplinary scholar Maylie Blackwell:

Retrofitted memory is a form of counter memory that uses fragments of older histories that have been disjuncted by colonial practices of organizing historical knowledge or by masculinist renderings of history that disappear women's political involvement in order to create space for women in historical traditions that erase them...By drawing from both discarded and suppressed forms of knowledge, retrofitted memory creates new forms of consciousness customized to embodied material realities, political visions, and creative design for societal transformation. (Blackwell 2)

As a counter memory, retrofitted memory allows a sense of cultural validation by allowing aspects of history that are not highlighted throughout institutionalized knowledge. Think of Teatro de las Chicanas' *acto Chicana Goes to College*; they use their own embodied knowledge to create a history they experienced and use the scenes to highlight mechanisms of erasure during the hegemonic masculine narrative of the 1970s. As Blackwell states, this creates a new form of consciousness that allows validation for those underrepresented and often unacknowledged forms of knowledge.

I see *teatro* as a form of oral history because there is an intertwining in performance practice through oral histories, such as myths, fables, and legends. Because of this, our *teatristas* were able to follow the similar philosophy Blackwell uncovered when examining oral history through the metaphor of DJ-ing. "Oral historians spin the historical record by sampling new voices and cutting and mixing the established soundscapes to allow listeners to hear something different, even in the grooves they thought they knew" (Blackwell 38). This practice means one can access historical records, such as archives, and invite missing narratives, or songs, if you will, to formulate a new avenue of historical representation. As a historical DJ, you are allowed to combine different forms of historical knowledge to create an overlooked or unknown narrative. When retrofitted memory is combined within *teatro*, we get retrofitted performance practice. Take for instance, the variety of takes on the Mexican icon Malintzín. In *El Teatro Campesino*, Malintzín in *La Conquista de Mexico* is played as a woman that assimilated with her Anglo captives due to sexual desire, forming her as the *vendida*. In Las Comadres' play *Border Boda*, they see Malintzín as the embodiment of a mediator, trying to give her presence shown through the bride's negotiations within the public and private space. It introduces the thought process of the *vendida logic* and visually morphs Malintzín and La Virgen de Guadalupe through

the bride taking place at the center sculpture. By inviting suppressed forms of knowledge, we can create a new history with plays on iconography, which helps formulate a retrofitted representation of Latina identity.

What I take an interest in with Latina Theatre Lab is the actual mirror it created in inviting all these feminist practices within their own group. Even the choice of having their leaders go by the phrase *Co-Madres* implies a renegotiation of professional theatre structure while implementing influences of cultural performativity. While interviewing Jamie Lujan, she often referred to those in the company who are older with more experience as *veteranas*. This is not to separate them but to praise the idea of the extensive range of generations engaging in this company. She reflected great appreciation for the generational mentorship that was greeted within this group. These practices help create idealism of validating different practices of not just knowledge but actual performance. The reasoning for waiting to introduce retrofitted memory within the process of writing this paper is again to understand natural evolution in regards to feminism. *Vendida logic* bleeds into the *mestiza consciousness*, which then bleeds into retrofitted memory, and all play a vital role in the progression of *mestiza teatro*.

Immaculate Conception: Re-Owning the Vendida Logic

After the cabaret showcase, the first production Latina Theatre Lab took on was *¿¡ Qué Nuevas!?*—*What's new!?* in 1994. It was an original musical comedy that examined the stereotypes the actresses experienced within the entertainment industry. It was built from the original cabaret showcase, and the women invited more Latinas in for the performance and created a vignette of *teatrista* authenticity. With video, music, Shakespeare, scene work, and a cattle call for Carmen Miranda; this production was a hodgepodge of performativity that gave

light to the vast spectrum of the Latina actress. Wilma Bonnet directed and reflects in the program:

No one knows what we really do or the stories we have to tell. The industry is ready to jump in for the sensationalism—the heavy accents—the gang warfare—the beautiful *senoritas*, without looking into our hearts and souls. Hollywood does not see Latinas, we are only oddities—like Carmen Miranda was— and oddities are only objects to look at or to “color” the screen. We are only the “fill-ins” and even though we are all Americans, we are constantly reminded that we are not. (4)

¿! *Qué Nuevas!?*-*What's new!?* Was a jumping off point for Latina Theatre Lab, and it created the ongoing dialogue to understand why representation in all forms of popular culture matter. I think every Latina *teatrista* compared to the understanding of feeling like an oddity or that ethnic spot. This production brought to light an understanding that there is a vast spectrum of Latina, and they all have autonomy of their individuality. Using the exaggerated stereotypical roles, these Latinas experienced the same outcomes as *teatro* groups before them; they had the ability to heal through humor while also educating the audience about preconceived notions the Latina goes through regarding representation. This again had the essence of a counterpublic because this artform would not come to light had they not felt comfortable in the collective space they formed.

The creation process for Latina Theatre Lab is collective and based through a crescendo of engagement. While led by the *Co-Madres*, they took into consideration the valuable talent they had before them and took inventory. Lujan reflected that while they got rehearsal spaces with help from Brava, their developmental stage often began with a giant board in someone's living room. Using sticky notes and brainstorming sessions the collective would develop ideas

from within the group. Sometimes they would break down into smaller groups and work on a scene, eventually coming back to put it together. For the *Co-Madres* they would break it down to see who can direct, produce, perform, design, and transcribe projects. On top of that, taking into consideration grant proposals and the actual mechanics of running a theatre company. However, like many of our other groups, they knew the extraordinary talent from within and found the ability to lean on each other.

You know the four of us had more responsibility than the ensemble. So the running of everything, but it was very you know busy. As well as having to remind each other “hey man so and so has this talent, let them take that off.” As opposed to having ten million things that you're doing as a producer. So and so knows how to mix music, ask them to do it. So those kinds of things, it helps to not have to take on everything. This room has talented women here that will be happy to take on a little extra. (Lujan)

Because of its historically culture based background, practices of *teatro* allow collective attitudes to lean towards a *familia* ideal. For Latina Theatre Lab, they welcomed the understanding of differentiation to engage in *mestiza consciousness* accurately. This helps reiterate the understanding that groups that invite devised theatre paradigms can also explore those bordertown psyches to understand the validation of individuality through collectivity. By naturally bleeding theatre roles of design, directing, performance, etc., we can see a welcomed understanding of ambiguity and fluidity.

While Latina Theatre Lab did many different productions until its disbandment in 2000, the play that I think most engages the *mestiza teatro* performance style while showing examples of retrofitted memory is *Immaculate Conception*. First performed in 1996, the play intends to explore the virgin, mother, whore mythology and stereotypes through topics of body types and

images. “What does a Virgin look like? A Whore? A Latina? Do we get these ideas from magazines? Television? Men? Each other? Is there a God? A Goddess? And why are all Latinas expected to know how to salsa dance” (Lujan)? *Immaculate Conception* is the story of La Virgen de Guadalupe coming down to California (Aztlán) to help her various iconographic daughters. She begins the production by La Virgen giving a spoken word poem right before giving birth on stage to the icons La Llorona, Soldadura, Campesina, and Marisa Tomei; who is shoved back into the womb. This imagery is in the practice of retrofitted memory because it reimagines the image of La Virgen. Remember chapter one and the examination of La Virgen as an icon. By having La Virgen give birth on stage, we are reminded of sexuality along with motherhood notions, blending the barriers produced by the *vendida logic*. Latina Theatre Lab continues in this engagement by having La Virgen being our heroine and overarching throughline within the play. While older grassroots *teatro* showcased La Virgen simply for a state of iconography, this group gives her a new narrative with agency. Beyond saving her children in various situations, La Virgen comes to California to explore its current state. Within the play, she encourages positive body imagery by first deconstructing the issues with organized eating habits through the scene “the miracle diet.” In this scene, she helps one of her *comadres*, Frannie, realize the power in self love and validating one’s own body. This moment uses retrofitted memory because it had La Virgen engage in sisterhood rather than the preconceived portrayal of her only as a mother. Another moment that gives La Virgen a new image of identity is when La Virgen transforms into wearing a mini skirt and high heels and gives another slam poem style monologue similar to the show’s opening.

La Virgen: I am woman of the great darkness I am one who paints her face

I am woman who is independent

I am woman who dresses herself

If I can't wear my serpent skirt Then a short leather skirt will do.

I am woman who wears the moon and the sun on her shoulders

I am woman who is tired of being immaculate.

I am woman who continues to reinvent herself

Yo soy, I am Guadalupe. (14)

This moment gives La Virgen agency and autonomy over her body and narrative. By presenting decolonial imagery and story, La Virgen dines the preconceived notions of perfection tied to her iconography. Not only that, but through this choice of costuming and dialogue, she simultaneously engages with the practice of embodying the three tropes of the *vendida logic* by being mother, virgen, and whore. This choice partakes in traditional *teatro* style by using exaggeration to create a foil character in contrast to the icons she is trying to personify.

Another theme *Immaculate Conception* is bringing to light is the pressure of assimilation and colorism in regard to the Latina body. In the scene “Estee Leedia” we find La Virgen’s daughter Campesina trying to find an ability to blend in with the general public, in which case she enters a *cosmetic palacio* run by Estee Leedia and her Lip Liner Locas. The scene hilariously blends the exaggerated characters of *teatro* style with absurdity in dialogue to help reiterate the problematic pressure of assimilation to western beauty for Latinas. The Campesina, whom we find out is named Fieta Cruz (although Estee Leedia continues to call her Fajita Cruz) must go through a “cross-over makeover.” Estee Leedia and her Lip Liner Locas lead a makeover on Campesina, complete with an exfoliating cleanser with chicharrones, Peach-Pina-Papaya-Lipo-

action lotion, and a guacamole revitalizing face mask. The scene shifts as our Campesina gets upset with each new ridiculous treatment. However, the Estee Leedia crew eventually leads Campesina to realize that she cannot spend the rest of her life hiding from the *migra*. This scene becomes a musical number of the “Cross-Over-make-Over” disco medley. Starting with the tune of “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor.

Estee Leedia: Once I was a fool, I was ignorant.

I didn't think it mattered if I was an immigrant

I was young and naive and I thought I would go far

I had to change, I knew I had to be a star.

My mother cleaned hotels my sister babysat

That isn't me I'd break my nails oh I just can't do that

I saw the reflection of myself 20 years down the line,

I said,” NO WAY THAT BODY CAN'T BE MINE”

I ran outside, out in the rain

The raindrops blended with my tears, but they could not hide the pain

Who people saw me as and who I wished to be were not the same

What is my place in this here life? How would I find my fame.

Lip Liner Locas: FAME! She wants to live forever. She wants to learn how to fly

Hiiiiiiigh.....

Estee Leedia: Then I saw the answer, lying there.

A white plastic dish that shown so bright

Someone left pancake out in the rain.

I picked it up, It said, Max Factor.

IVORY 187...And I knew I'd never look the same again! OH NOOOOOOOOOOOO!

(Immaculate Conception 5-6)

The scene engages the discussion on the *vedida logic* because it aims to articulate the absurdity of “good vs. bad” Latina imagery. Disco by nature has a sense of exaggeration, and music holds high cultural significance regarding Latina performance culture. By having Estee Leedia and her Locas become over the top in their music number, they become a foil in articulating the Campesinas experience. While extremely humorous and entertaining, the scene ends with the Campesina succumbing to the crossover makeover in order to “feel like a natural woman.” This leaves an embedded argument that comes through by articulating that for Latina women assimilation can help one survive, but that also means leaving her own culture. Again the inner struggle of the *vendida logic*’s push to keep women in a double bind of always being in the wrong.

The villain character in *Immaculate Conception* is a Latina authenticity checker known as the Salsa Police. Throughout the play, La Virgen and her children try to hide and outrun the salsa police who attempt to arrest them over the Copa Cobanna Law. As a driving force, the Salsa police continues to pop up to ensure that these Latina women know how to properly salsa and accurately represent the Latina body. This character is a manifestation of criticizing the media, industry, and other institutions’ misrepresentation of the Latina body. One scene in particular called “The Case of the Marias” has the Salsa police chastising and stereotyping each Maria-like character. This is a humorous scene that draws from the practices of stereotypical archetypes in *teatro* practice by listing out famous Marias you see across popular culture. You have West Side Story Maria, the epitome of pure virgin energy. There is Maria Callas which translates to Maria shut up, famous for renditions of “Carmen, La Traviata, y, La Putita Peligrosa” (19). Then there

is Maria Martinez, or Mary Martin, regarded as Hispanic Magazine's Business Ruca of the Year, faking the Macarena, and yelling "Que viva la Mujer" at the Republican National Convention in San Diego. After that is Maria Dolores Angel Ayala Parras Ramona Moncha Alicia Moran, or Maria the Maid. Lastly is Maria Guadalupe, our La Virgen character (18-20). This scene has similar styles to Luis Valdez's *acto Los Vendidos* (1967), where they present different models (robots) of Mexican-American male troupes to be rented out. In this case, we see the Marias create bodily autonomy by continuing to counter the degrading remarks the Salsa police make regarding their iconography. It draws attention to that ethnic spot discussion in understanding the absurdity of thinking that Latinas (as well as Marias) are all the same within different archetypal tropes. By portraying the Maria Case we can have Latinas take ownership over the oppressive terminology around them.

Immaculate Conception ends with La Virgen returning to the heavens, where we meet Soldadera, Adelita, Chola, and an Argentinian Spy. La Virgen's daughters ask her how her trip to California was until they are interrupted by an out-of-breath Salsa Police. At this moment, the Salsa Police discovers that the Maria Guadalupe they were chasing was actually La Virgen de Guadalupe. The Salsa Police find out that they died from choking on a donut and have a meltdown confessing all they ever wanted to be was a ballerina. In the last play shift, we have Estee Leedia entering as a Cherub singing "At the Ballet" from *A Chorus Line* and all the *Angelitas* doing a dance in a "Swan Lake" rendition. The play ends with a rendition of the spoken word poem that follows throughout the play.

La Virgen: I am woman of great darkness

La Virgen & Spy: I am woman who paints the stars

La Virgen & Soldadera: I am woman of great oceans

La Virgen & Chola: I am woman of the Divine Sea

La Virgen & Adelita: I am a Saint Woman

La Virgen & Cherub: I am a Spirit Woman

La Virgen & Salsa Police: I am the Dark Mother

ALL: the Earth

La Virgen: I am Karmic action, and I'm coming to a neighborhood near you. (*Immaculate Conception* 27)

Teatro is meant to end with a call to action. *Immaculate Conception* did that by presenting the ongoing problem with society's mindset on how we present not just Latinas but women of color as well. It engages the conversation of the *mestiza consciousness* by putting a satirical play on the *vendida logic* through a practice that was once used to enforce it. While in the times of *Teatro de las Chicanas*, they were chastised and delegitimized as *teatristas* for articulating such subject matter, they still hold historical significance. The response to the Latina Theatre Lab production was a resurgence of legitimization. When I asked Jamie Lujan about audience reactions, she stated:

I think women loved it, period, whether they were Latino or not, and a lot of men did as well. I think that a lot of our stories are universal and I don't think we set out going "oh we're going to tell a universal story." We were very specific: we're going to tell that Latina story, whatever that was. And then we figured out that the Latina story can be a young teen boy's story, you know. An older man's story. You know that our stories are universal, but that's not what we set out to do. We set out to be very specific within our storytelling and then we learned that the audience was broader and they did appreciate what we were doing.

Authenticity for Latina performance and representation comes from self. By implementing practices of retrofitted memory, the group created decolonial and demasculinized expectations of Latina representation. This retrofitted representation reimaged our perception of Latinas in performance culture. The reassurance from audiences makes one understand the authenticity within the oppressive natures they were trying to discuss. Humor is the best medicine, and by creating satirical discussions, perhaps we leave room to expand this counterpublic and create border towns of intersectional trauma within our psyches.

No One is Alone: The Representation Rainbow

While reactions to Latina Theatre Lab from the general public were overall positive, there was still questioning from their inner community. Similar to Las Comadres, many of these women had their own careers outside of the Latina Theatre lab. Lujan remarked on a situation at a playwright festival where a member continued to be questioned about their legitimization as a playwright of her own caliber. Beyond that, the women continued to be ostracized when they critiqued the systemic problems. Such as calling out casting agents and directors for creating microaggressive assumptions about the Latina public. Latina theatre labs collective as a whole was also extremely significant by offering professional theatre practices based explicitly on the Latina identity, which had not previously existed.

This is why the idea of the counterpublic is so important in the practice of the *mestiza teatro* because it allows space for retrofitted representation. A large part of *mestiza teatro* is creating *teatro* not just for one's own community but also for the communities around them that experience intersectional oppression. Latina Theatre Lab collaborated with other groups during their time in hopes of engaging in practices like Anzadúa's discussion on border towns within the *mestiza*. They collaborated with women writers from The Asian American Theatre Company to

produce *Dragon Lady vs. Pocahontas* (1999). This play explored the similarities in dealing with discrimination and well as cultural stereotypes that Latinos and Asians have about each other. They also did *Close Encounters of the Third World* (2000) in collaboration with the Asian American Theatre Company, Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center, and the 18 Mighty Mountain Warriors (Lujan). Beyond that, they aimed to highlight talent within their own collective. They produced *Good Grief Lolita* (1995), a solo play written and performed by *Co-Madre* Wilma Bonet, which told the story of her daughter Lolita and her death at seven years old from cystic fibrosis. They also lead a Ranchera Workshop available to the community. Lujan recalls:

Yolanda Rhonda was a *ranchera* singer. She was like well I've never taught before. And I'm like well I want to learn and everybody in the company wanted to learn to sing ranchera. And that's how *Last Stop Ranchera* the show came about. The class was full of Chicana women, Chilean women, Puerto Rican women, all of us were there as well as a few people from the Community. One of the questions Yolanda asked when she taught that class was, "what does *ranchera* mean to you?" Why as a Puerto Rican do you want to sing *ranchera* music? Why, as a Chilean woman, do you want to sing *ranchera* music? What is it about? So from that it was all about family, everybody had a family story connected to *ranchera* music specifically.

Last Stop Ranchera (1999) ended up being a play of three movements drawing on personal history and memories; "Once" – Stories from the past about ancestors; "Jump"—Stories of family and growing up, viewed through little girls' eyes; "Forte"— observations that make up who we are today (Lujan). Ranchera is a traditional style of music from Mexico dating back to before the revolution. Nowadays, it is often associated with *mariachi*, but culturally it is

performed at multitudes of ceremonies and parties. By inviting *ranchera* into their *teatro* collective, they expand the scope of their performance culture and introduce practices that allow the blending of cultures.

Latina Theatre Lab, like groups before them, gained camaraderie and sisterhood. One of the most memorable moments in my interview with Jamie Lujan was asking her about how the Latina Theatre Lab wanted to be different from other groups. Beyond the discussion of the ethnic spot and the spectrum of Latina representation, she discussed something that really highlighted my own argument within *mestiza teatro*.

I did have conflict with my *veteranas*. The concept of no audition, of just hey let's invite you to be part of this particular project... They were adamant and Dina and I were like no. And I had to have a conversation with Wilma about that, I said look Wilma I thank you, I thank you as a *veterana* for jumping through all the fucking hoops you had to jump through to get cast at ACT or the American conservatory theater where I graduated from but was not getting cast... so I had to bring that and say thank you for all of those hoops that you had to jump through in order for me to be here running a theater company. But we're not gonna we're not going to do that here, we are going to put our hand down and pull our sisters up because out there they're gonna have to jump through the hoops we all have.... In certain aspects, we are mentoring the younger women and it's a two-way street. We're learning a lot and they're invigorating the veterans and us within that construct. So that was sort of a thing we had to convince the veterans, like hey we're gonna pull them up, we're gonna bring them in.

Latina Theatre Lab existed for six years, and within those six years, they cared about the Latina *teatrista*. To me, this situation was a counter stance directly influenced by ideas of traditionalism.

Their goal was to give a room that hadn't previously existed and to highlight the wide variety of Latinas in and out of popular culture. The significance of this discussion is that it breaks down the preconceived notions of theatre making as a practice. The idea of auditioning and earning has the learning echoes of patriarchy, colonization, and the overarching experience of invalidating legitimization. Simply by just discussing this topic and adapting their own independent style, they dismiss the counterstance itself. So much of being a Latina in the industry is facing questioning. We get questioned on our professionalism, our authenticity, our legitimization, and so much more. Latina Theatre Lab knew their goal, to be able to tell *teatristas*, "we have a space for you."

CHAPTER IV: SHOWCASING THE SPECTRUM

Nilsa: I knew I was a Latina when I could first speak my last name.

Editha: I knew I was a Latina when I became best friends with another Latina.

Erika: I knew I was a Latina when I moved to white suburbia.

Tanya: When did I know I was a Latina? What a stupid question ... (*Generic Latina* 65)

The Latina Question: The Start of Teatro Luna

The turn of the twenty-first century brought America's attention to the Latino/a public in a new way. The 2000 U.S. census result highlights that Hispanics, which also counted Latinos by the government's standard, were the most highly populated ethnicity in the nation. This awareness caused a boom in the U.S. public as they flocked to misrepresenting and appropriating the Latina identity (Latorre and Mitchell 19). While large in number, the Latina identity in popular culture still was heavily embedded with *vendida logic*. Most actresses continued to be categorized as maids, strippers, nannies, and other stereotypical character roles. Beyond that, representation was heavily influenced by the practice of colorism as mass media highlighted actresses that had the ethnic ambiguity look. This ambiguity is different from the argument Anzaldúa makes in her *mestiza consciousness*. The manipulation of ethnic ambiguity is a social construct built from a history of racism and colorism. It would be the media choosing those who are lighter in color, are of mixed race, and/or look of multiple ethnicities. While actresses were of a mixed race before this time, many did not "out" themselves before the 1990s. This choice was due to both the boom of mixed race children during the 90s along with actresses avoiding the conversation for fear of being typecast (Beltran 157). What this ethnic ambiguity influence does

is perpetuate the *Vendida Logic* in representation. Those “ambiguous enough” would actually have a larger chance to be cast as a character with more of a developmental arch. While those of darker skin was viewed as “too Latina” or “too ethnic” and continued to be cast as the background one-liner roles. This goes back to grassroots *teatro* practices where they formulate a history of portraying darker Latina women in “bad” roles while lighter Latinas can play “good” roles. What this does is directly affect the entire Latina public because it continues to create a misrepresentation of the vast spectrum not just of Latina skin tones but also narrative.

It was these continuing practices that created a considerable influence on the formation of Teatro Luna. After experiencing the multiple casting calls that implemented that you have to look like a certain Latina for one role and look like a different Latina for another role, Coya Paz and Tanya Saracho longed to form a space that showcased all Latinas in a positive and uplifting light. Founded in 2000, Teatro Luna became Chicago’s first and only all Latina theatre company. Teatro Luna wanted to establish a theatre ensemble that would write, direct, act, manage, and market their own artwork (Latorre and Mitchell 19). They named the collective *luna* in reference to the moon because, in indigenous cultures the moon was often associated with the female. Paz and Saracho wanted to build a Latina community that they knew was present in the Chicagoland area but struggled to find. This was mainly due to the same issues that Latina Theatre Lab faced in mainstream theatre companies not seeing a big need to recruit Latina actresses. Centered in collaboration Paz and Saracho hoped for Teatro Luna to be an “establish a safe space in which Latina women could transmit their stories, express problems unique to their heritage, and actively respond to discrimination” (Acosta and Martinez-Cruz 284). This practice follows the themes of our previous groups while still advocating for the need of a counterpublic space for Latinas to engage in theatre practices actively. Similar to the other groups, their intersectionality

came not from their ethnicity but from the fact that they were all experiencing the same marginalization in the theatre community, and they wanted to give themselves access beyond that limited space (Latorre and Mitchell 23). The collective of women really wanted to highlight and validate their differences. One way they did this was around 2006; they shifted in saying they were a *Latina/Hispana* collective. Now Paz articulates that *Hispana* is different from Hispanic because it is gender and language specific. Some women in the group identified with the term Hispanic, but the women agreed that they did not want the term for their company collective (Latorre and Mitchell 23). Something that helps elaborate on this is going back to the introduction and remembering that Hispanic (or *Hispanos*) has a different cultural meaning based on geographical location. Latin America often uses the term Hispanic/*Hispanos* in reference to themselves because the origins of this terminology for their geographical location just meant a "Spanish speaker." However, in the case of the United States, after civil rights movements like *El Movimiento*, many Spanish speakers denied the term because it has a long history of colonization and a tendency to erase indigenous ancestry. Teatro Luna's choice in using *Hispana* is broadening contemporary terminology for those who compare it to the Latina experience (Latorre and Mitchell 22-23). Eventually the group would expand to pan-Latina as well, meaning diversity on multiple ethnic terrains, to include diversity in nationality (Acosta and Meda 152). Teatro Luna's practice in adapting terminology creates a conversation with the *mestiza consciousness* because it allows room for a broader sense of ambiguity in cultural terminology. Beyond that, Anzaldúa argues that we need to break down preconceived notions of identity and practice within our inner realms. By continuing to adapt their terminology in identity, the group is able to highlight the evolution that comes from the *mestiza teatro*.

Teatro Luna's collective process, like the *mestiza teatros* before them, is directly rooted in story, testimony, and narrative. The women would start sitting in a circle, talking to each other about their independent Latina experiences. Paz remarks, "a lot of us come from different class experiences, different migration patterns with our families, so what we had in common is that we were all actresses. That's how we all met each other (Latorre and Mitchel 23)." They bonded over shared experiences and healed through the group's willingness to highlight independent stories. Something that significantly affected the group's attack on giving accurate representation was Maria Teresa Marrero's article "Out of the Fringe? Out of the Closet: Latina/Latino Theatre and Performance in the 1990s," published the same year as the group's formation. Marrero's article called for safe spaces that represented the complex identities beyond the white and male centered narrative—giving insight into the vast spectrum of *latinidad* and articulating the already existing performance cultures that follow those paradigms. As such, Teatro Luna followed along to make a Latina counterpublic that could continue to question and formulate their narrative on performance culture. Even in the 2000s, Latina women were fighting preconceived notions of their own understanding of education, knowledge, and legitimacy; on top of the cultural baggage that came with wanting to study the arts. Latinas have such a strong history of storytelling, and indeed all the women had the natural ability, but there was fear in the idea of writing it all down. However, in those circles of discussion, the ideas of the eventual scenes came forward. It was this discursive nature that added to the dialogue of underrepresented stories. Teatro Luna's first production *Generic Latina* (2001), was a play directly engaging in the conversations developed in these original circles. They wanted to broaden the societies and their preconceived notions of what the Latina narrative is. Expanding transnationally and engaging as artists, they wanted to showcase the issue in representation through their performance practice.

Coya Paz: I remember that really early on we had an exercise where we could either adapt or write something. At one of our gatherings, a member of the company got up and read her piece “What's Past Is Prologue” about being half-Filipina and half-Puerto Rican and getting her first period. I remember so vividly when she read that story.

Tanya Saracho: She got her first period, and her mother put the blood on her face. This tradition was passed down from one generation to the next. It was this beautiful thing.

And she ended her story with the phrase: “and in my little urban bathroom, I made a connection with the past.” We were all moved and crying and thinking: “Wait a minute, I got a story like that, that I want to talk about.” That's how *Generic Latina* was born.

Stories like these were often viewed as taboo, unrealistic, or not following the unitary idealism of *latinidad* popular culture. The group, frustrated with this notion, fought to showcase what is never said or heard in performance cultures. It seemed for the group that the number one thing they found intersectionality in was the performance experience. Comments from directors were saying they are too “spicy” or remarks that they aren’t the “right Latina” for this role (Lattore and Mitchell 21-25). Exhausted by other preconceived notions, They titled the play *Generic Latina*, as a satirical way to highlight that the mass media was looking for an all-encompassing Latina body, but the group through this performance, argues for Latina individuality.

Generic Latina directly integrates into the practice of *mestiza teatro* because it engages in elements of grassroots *teatro* style while articulating the need for new perspectives and paradigms in Latina performance culture. The opening vignette, “The Hyphen I am,” focuses on identity and the labelization that comes along with that weight. The scene starts with a statistic, “there are nearly 14 million Latina women in the United States...By the year 2050, nearly one of

every four women in the U.S. will be Latina” (*Generic Latina* 1). As the women enter the stage, they each hold a sign of an ethnicity to formulate an equation for a new ethnic labelization. One example would be, “MEXICAN + PERUVIAN = MEXIRUVIAN” (3). This constant movement of identity signs showcases the spectrum of ethnicities under Latina and *Hispania*. Along with that, the performance has practices of grassroots *teatro* because of the sign usage. Most of the original *teatros* during the 60s and 70s used signage on characters which enhanced the idea of tropes. Teatro Luna's opening vignette argues for the complexity of Latina identity and that there is not a generic Latina. “Thus, this vignette speaks to a hyphen shift, or the removal of it, to a combination of words to signify multiplicity in the identity, much like the use of the hyphen” (Huerta 35). Through the use of over exaggeration, we can find humor in the complexity of labeling one's own identity.

Generic Latina contains twenty different vignettes, each arguing for independent Latina subjectivities in life experience. They discuss racial prejudices that are not just present in their community but in their family as well—showcasing how practices of *vendida logic* have created an implementation of colorism. They also expand topics of cultural influence in connection to Latina authenticity. One vignette named “And the Bride Wore Beige” discusses the influences of traditionalism regarding ceremonial practice and cultural significance in food and symbolism. It opens with the bride's mother and *tias* discussing our bride character Nilsa's choice not to practice aspects of traditions in Latino wedding ceremonies. Beyond just choosing to have the dress not be white, she also remarks she does not want tamales at her wedding but rather curry, and also chooses to have swing music instead of mariachi. This choice put all the older Latina women into a tizzy of argument for family traditionalism as culturally significant. However, the bride then addresses both the audience and her family.

I don't cook the food, and I don't listen to any type of Spanish music, but I'm still Latina./As for the Mexican wedding traditions, I honestly can't include them in the wedding./They mean nothing to me. ... /I don't want our ancestors rolling in their graves./ And I am marrying Bruce because I love him .../I don't have to prove anything to him and he never questions my identity. I don't have to constantly throw my Latin roots in his face because I am secure with myself. Can you understand that?" (55)

This vignette helps renegotiate the authenticity of *latinidad* practices. By articulating the understanding of her own Latina identity Nilsa renegotiates herself as a Latina bride. Also, the last statement of the quote argues that Latina authenticity is a self identified idealism that comes from one's own embodiment. This engages in practices of retrofitted memory because it denies the understood traditionalism. By creating retrofitted representation, we allow a more ambiguous scope of cultural practices in ceremonies and family. This conversation directly highlights the practices of the *mestiza* because the Latina bride wants to live in the sense of cultural fluidity while still understanding her own identity independently.

Generic Latina ends with each ensemble member saying whom they are by giving their names, place of birth, their parents' birthplace, how they saw themselves as women, and when they began to identify as Latina (Huerta 58). As their first production, Teatro Luna wanted to directly counter the Latina representation narrative presented in the entertainment industry. They blended *teatro* practices to articulate a new performance culture that criticized culture by vocalizing their own Latina authenticity in self. This is done by the group's willingness to put their own embodied experiences and find healing through humor in one's own story. "Teatro Luna always finds a comedic moment when the melodrama is interrupted by the reality of lives; which is often represented by the characters' frustration and disappointment in the limitation of

their self-definition and representation” (Huerta 46). Teatro Luna works within that lineage of *teatro* because they incorporate that Mexican vaudeville style into the twenty-first century. By adding more contemporary theatrical practices, these vignettes play on the traditional *acto* style, but they use counter narrative to argue for Latina authenticity in self. Through practices like the historical DJ of retrofitted memory, they make the audience question their own inner psyches on how they have been exposed to the Latina body.

Lunática: Contextualizing Consciousness

Like the *teatristas* before them, Teatro Luna continued to face backlash from their own communities. Performances like *Generic Latina* had many audience members and reviewers calling for less Spanish in performance. But the women argued that is where the representation is; by blending language barriers, they can give more room to the Latina performer that does not get shown. The other groups discussed in this paper may have experienced a similar criticism, but this is also where ideas of time and location come into play. Every other group I discussed was based in California and performed in the general southwest area. Since they had closer proximity to Mexico and the border, there was not as strong a push back regarding Spanish. Mind you, racism and assimilation played a large part and no group escaped that push for a more “English based” performance so that they could connect with more audience members. Teatro Luna was based in Chicago, and even though one-quarter of the city’s population identified as Latino/Hispanic, the overall area had a different history in regards to the Spanish language (Huerta 4). Teatro Luna argued for the Latina's ability to embrace every language, and by extension knowledge, to show cultural representation. There was also an argument to evolve Latina collectives, to showcase subject matter that had not previously existed. The argument I am making in formulating the *mestiza teatro* is that of alternative representation through the use of

unheard histories to blur lines of cultural paradigms. When these practices occur, the validation is first centered on the actress and extended to the audience. For example, one piece in *Generic Latina* talks of a Russian Jewish family that migrated to Latin America after being a refugee. Co-founder Paz remarks that after the show a Jewish woman from Argentina came up to thank the group for the accurate representation (Latorre and Mitchell 30). These were narratives that were not as apparent in the older *teatro* collectives. By inviting these practices, Teatro Luna blends ideas of the *mestiza consciousness* of ambiguity along with cultural collision. This fight for showing intersectionality beyond the preconceived ideas of Latina and engaging in broadening the *mestiza teatro* practice helps create room for more contemporary identities and representations.

The other issue Teatro Luna faced was the navigation in the actual theatre community. Often for the Latino community they remarked that the collective was holding the movement back, arguing for unity. Paz even remarks on a situation where a Latino male actor kept trying to correct her that it is a Latino theatre company, not Latina, even though it was all females (Latorre and Mitchell 26). There was also the issue of the other public's misrepresentation of the collective vision and mission. The most significant example comes from an experience with a women's cultural organization. While both Paz and Saracho had high hopes that these organizations would embrace their argument, they continued to experience microaggressions that were direct themes they were trying to highlight in their *teatro* practice. Like a stage manager expressing uncomfortability with the women talking Spanish. Alternatively, another incident where they received a thank you note saying, "thanks for adding spice to our festival!" (Latorre and Mitchell 35). The women became aware of the tokenization their collective was becoming in festivals and chose not to partake in them anymore. This follows similarly to those

counterstances I express in chapter two. The public's involvement in theatre making has the ability to create a misrepresentation of the overall collective's goal. Even within theatre communities meant to showcase various performances, the women felt as if they were not heard as much as used for “diversity.”

Not just Teatro Luna but all the groups I discussed were so highly marginalized because the performance culture they were making was rooted in retrofitted memory, denying colonial and masculine narrative. Systems like the *vendida logic* were meant to be silencing tools that allowed the oppressor validation to articulate these Latina women as others. The implications created made the Chicana/Latina feminist become labeled as difficult, deviant, and crazy. This brings me to the next Teatro Luna piece I want to highlight as the expansion of *mestiza teatro*. *Lunátic(a)s* (2007) is “a performance that built on the figure of the Mayan moon Goddess Ixchel in order to explore ideas about women, hysteria, and everyday insanities” (qtd in Huerta 147). Language is a powerful tool that can both help and hurt the articulation of messages and subjectivities. Latina identity has a long connotation with ideas of insanity, craziness, and hysteria. This has to do with the historiography of the *vendida logic* through the use of icons Malintzín, La Virgen de Guadalupe, and La Llorona. Implementation of craziness tied to deviation from Chicano/Latino culture became all too apparent for Latinas with sexual agency during the times of *El Movimiento*, and the idea continues to pop up in popular culture today. Teatro Luna attacks this discussion by implementing a presentation of re-owning mythology as a place that challenges the hegemonic narrative.

Lunática(s) was a play with many different elements significant to the *teatristas* of teatro Luna. The title itself not only referencing the idea of lunacy but also the symbolic nature of the term *luna* in reference to the group. Scholar Melissa Huerta created a significant academic

timeline for Teatro Luna, and how the collective negotiates the meaning Latina. In her research on Teatro Luna's *Lunática(s)*. Huerta states on *Lunática(s)* script:

Lunática(s) is an alternative history, that is, it is a non-linear, oral history, coming from generations of women who have told a similar story before: "Ix Chel was a mother, a wife, a lover. She was you and me only a little bit more eccentric and a lot more Sci-Fi [...]" By reclaiming the myth and history of Ix Chel, this piece attempts to contest, redefine and allow for instability in the term *lunática*, and consequently, creates a type of Latina subject that challenges ascribed roles. (147)

Lunática(s) uses retrofitted memory to articulate new historiography on the presentation of mythology. The play opens with four women dressing Ix Chel in bracelets, a *penacho* (a feathered headdress), and a dress made of contemporary items such as blue jeans and plastic jewelry; they aim to have a Mayan essence with urban influence. After this ceremony, Ix Chel sits on an orb to observe the audience as a definition of lunacy appears: "*Archaic*. Intermittent insanity, formerly believed to be related to the phases of the moon" (qtd in Huerta 148). This opening is to set a tone on the ongoing Latina iconography relationship with lunacy. Think of the history behind Malintzín, labeled as a cultural deviant; she became this image of oddity, and her sexual desire connected her to insanity. Huerta even expanded on this beyond women of mythology, arguing that the influence of educated women also has a connotation to the word (149). By educated women, she means those who continue to ensure careers, degrees, and knowledge that deconstruct idealism parallel to the patriarchy. The proceeding scene begins with women all expressing euphemisms that have a connotation to lunacy in socialization. Saying how family members called it "being touched" or that it was "worse when the moon came out

(qtd. in Huerta 149).” This begging sets the tone for interpretations of lunacy while also engaging in the moon's influences on behavior.

Lunática(s) is then broken down into smaller vignette scenes talking about subject matters of lunacy in correlation to the Latina counterpublic. In one scene, each woman describes what excites them by using “crazy” as an overarching adjective. “Maritza states that her current love interest gives her ‘brain sickness’ because he does not ‘touch her’; in Gina’s case, she is ‘touched’ by the need to shop, while Belinda is crazy for a Korean singer, and Miranda gets wild at the sound of salsa music” (qtd. in Huerta 150). This seizes one’s interpretation of the terminology as a characteristic society has deemed. This also discusses relationships in parallel to the idea of craziness, such as calling too much or being overly attached. The group then uses those slip-stick humor moments to exaggerate the absurdity by having the character express they are not crazy; they just got their period! Hysteria comes from the Greek word meaning “uterus,” and as such, there is a common conception of its relationship to the female body and sexuality. This scene engages this relationship by using the stereotypical practices of grassroots *teatro* to highlight the misrepresentation of lunacy and craziness as it connects to menstruation, the female body, sexuality, and motherhood. Something that I think helps build on this idea is the scene “Fucker” where they discuss the idea of gaslighting in reference to relationships. This scene has multiple stories that discuss ideas of abuse and violence. In comparison, another narrative has characters going to extreme lengths for love while the rest of the world gaslights them with labelizations of crazy and obsessive. These scenes help present the relationship lunacy has with the Latina public while expressing the issues it holds in their psyches. By using exaggerated character and embodied narrative practices, the women can find freedom and healing through performativity.

One theme that I think Teatro Luna highlights more than the other *teatro mestiza* groups is the presentation of queerness and sexual desire. While queer theory existed before this century, it was this time that it became more influential as it intertwined with feminist scholarship and broadened our understanding of intersectionality in regards to gender and sexuality. “Bad Girl” is a scene that aims to articulate the representation of Latina sexual desire. By having three women embrace the concept of “bad girl,” they explore their own preconceived notions of the terminology and explore their inner sexual desire. “Counter to sexist, patriarchal and heteronormative expectations and judgments, the monologues reveal more than just how their fantasies are perceived, they explore the degrees in which women’s fantasies and desires are also as varied as their male counterparts” (Huerta 154). Through this representation, we expand our *mestiza consciousness* to allow room for queerness and ambiguity.

In the case of Ix Chil as a character, *Lunática(s)* gives the mythological character autonomy over her own story. Ix Chil continues to sit in her orb while her interlocutor, Yadira, introduces the audience to her story. Ix Chil is the goddess of weaving and childbirth, connoting her symbolization of the moon and sexuality with other gods. “According to Yadira, ‘[...] the Maya drew Ix Chel getting everybody sick (cuz she was in a bad mood,) then healing them back up, weaving, giving birth [...] but mostly they drew her in the act. Getting it on [...]’” (qtd. in Huerta 155). Ix Chil had a long history of being portrayed as crazy through both hegemonic masculines and colonized narratives. By giving the indigenous goddess Ix Chil, who was connected to the contradictory ideas of sexuality and motherhood, a voice, we use practices of retrofitted memory to enunciate the silencing techniques colonizers used in creating misrepresentation. The Spaniards burned most historical records of indigenous people due to its blasphemous nature. In Yadira’s monologue, she accurately weaves the narratives that

misinterpreted Ix Chil while giving insight into the living oral history passed down through women. This gives room for embodied history and rewrites patriarchal center female identity.

Lunática(s) is a play that denies the preconceived notions of the *vendida logic*. Labeling women as abnormal in relation to bodily autonomy has a historiography specifically linked to indigenous cultures of mythology and folklore. Our icon la Llorona is a folktale with its own history and reasoning behind her actions. However, by contemporary portrayal, she is labeled as a crazy spirit that wants to drown children. What Teatro Luna highlights is that the same individuals who categorize Latina women as crazy, nuts, obsessive, *loca*, etc., are the ones who set those parameters to begin with. This conditioning makes us act a certain way to avoid a sense of otherness or backlash. I believe this is most prominent in institutionalization because ideas of being a loud or strong Latina is deemed crazy, and the conditioning makes us believe that it is unprofessional. The *vendida logic* portrays living within these confines or being labeled a cultural betrayer. This engagement in the *vendida logic* influence in lunacy helps negate the existing rhetoric around Latina representation. *Teatro* continues to be a driving tool that helps give embodiment to the *mestiza consciousness*. “Through this imaginative appropriation and redefinition of Ix Chel and, “*lunática*,” Teatro Luna creates a new [Anzaldúa based] mythos, textually and visually speaking, a *lunatic(a)(s)* consciousness, that leads to “a change in the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave” (qtd. in Huerta 164). Huerta’s argument on the *Lunática consciousness* reinforces the genealogical feminist timeline terminology of how colonized terminology evolves to allow the oppressed to take ownership. Influenced by the refusal of *vendida logic*, embracement of the *mestiza consciousness*, and presentation of *mestiza teatro*.

Machos: Talking about Male Mestiza

Where Teatro Luna expands on the practice of the *mestiza teatro* is its willingness to broaden the counterpublic conversations to include those who also face cultural expectations through patriarchy. While the other Latina *teatro* groups I discussed engaged in conversations about gender roles and male expectations, I believe Teatro Luna lengthens the representation of the male in *mestiza teatro*. Teatro Luna introduced *Machos* in 2007 after spending the previous year interviewing 100 Latino men in six different cities. The goal for *Machos* was to create a performance piece that directly engaged in the question on the terminology of macho and engages with our preconceived notions of the term. This show followed previous collaborative practices that Teatro Luna had implemented in their other devised theatre pieces. By interviewing the men, they longed to showcase a form of embodiment through other lived body experiences. While other *teatro* groups of the previous times chose to separate from the masculine performance style, Teatro Luna explores the performative nature of masculinity. This shows that there is a possibility not to have the *mestiza teatro* be so gender-centric in female representation. While it might have been suitable for their own historical time to separate into their Latina counterpublic, Teatro Luna engages in contemporary theory of deconstructing ideas of gender performance. They aimed to critique expectations of gender performativity but not to demonize the male experience. *Macho* in itself is a word that has a long history of being connotated with sexism and chauvinistic nature. Originally derived from the word *mas*, meaning “more,” macho became the expected idealism the Latino men should aim to achieve.

In Maylei Blackwell’s research around the Chicano and Student Movement, she engages in this discussion by contextualizes a subaltern masculinity. This masculinity is built on the traditions of social bandits of U.S.-Mexican border, the *pachucos* of the 1930s and 40s, and

outlawed masculine iconography of *pinto* and *cholos* as revolutionaries.¹¹ Blackwell expands by saying “This ‘tradition’ of masculinity countered the way racism denied men of color the right to be men under patriarchal norms; asserting ‘machismo’ then became a pathway to resist the gendered implications of white supremacy” (96-97). Even in today’s linguistics, *machismo* is an evolutionary term that continues to pop up in Latinx academia to showcase the presentation of “exaggerated manliness,” connected specifically to Chicano/Latino pride and traditionalism. But what does that all mean? How did Latino men and women perceive the word “macho”?

Teatro Luna argues for an accurate representation of the Latino male body and uses their collection of interviews as site knowledge. They wanted to show an embodiment with the male Latino public so much that they dressed in drag, added facial hair, and even went out of their way to formulate their own strap-on phallus to explore the stage as men (Acosta and Martínez-Cruz 286). The embodiment process was a building experience as they negotiated their preconceived notions and their community and societal influences. This practice engaged a new level of physicality in relation to gender norms on the theatrical stage. Women were divided on the experience of the full embodiment; one member regarded the new sensation it gave her as a *teatrista* exploring a body that she had never been able to perform before. She regarded a feeling of freedom to explore practices, exploration, and movement in relation to conceived notions of gender roles. While another member regarded that the embodiment of maleness felt heavy and weighted, leaving her in a state of uncomfortability that she had never previously experienced (Acosta and Martínez-Cruz 292). This engages the performativity we connect with gender roles and expectations while allowing room for exploration beyond the gender binary. This embodiment integrates, criticizes, and explores our preconceived notions around masculinity. It

¹¹*Pachucos*: Mexican American adolescents, who belonged to juvenile gangs from around the 1930s to the 1950s
Pinto: A member of a Chicano/Latino subculture who are or have been incarcerated.
Cholos: A term often associated to mean a Mexican gangster.

develops a Latinx performance style by highlighting a non-normative exploration of gender and sexuality.

As a *mestiza teatro* group Teatro Luna directly engages in the idea of creating accurate representation and narrative. The grassroots *teatro* history present during *El Movimiento* gave the male actor agency, but the overall themes connected to power, culture, strength, and other preconceived notions of “macho.” Teatro Luna redefines cultural definitions of macho; the show examines the vast spectrum that is the Latino male public. They presented *Machos* in their typical vignette style to highlight independent narratives and subject matters. The show opens up similarly to their other productions by having a chorus of male figures each defining qualities of a man. Themes of working hard and economic pressure create an exaggerated dialogue that follows the traditional *teatro* style. The performance did not make fun of male identity as much as they made fun of societal pressure in the dialogue around the actions “to be a man.” One character named Frank directly cites the pressure to follow iconic “macho” figures such as John Wayne and his father. Through his monologue, he articulates the exploration of his own experiences of the connotation maleness has to power; and the loss of power if he were to lose this certain aspect of strength. This scene creates the ongoing presentation that the previous *teatro mestiza* groups were criticizing, understanding how iconography and cultural symbolism plays a role in perceived notions of identity. Teatro Luna also implements the practices of the exaggerated to showcase the absurdity of the Latino male public experience concerning expectations around even the terminology of macho.

FIVE: you know, like they refer to salsa as being macho.

THREE: You know like, oh this is a macho sauce...

FIVE: [...] if you walk into some burger joint and there's a macho burger'* THREE: *a macho burger

FIVE: cause they have jalapenos [*sic*] on it,

SIX: or the spicy cheetos are MAAcheetos. (qtd. in Huerta 180)

This snippet shows how sarcasm is used to have the audience react and formulate their own conscious conversation on their perceptions of macho in relation to the Latino public and beyond. It also gives new historiography on the word macho itself when it connects to performativity.

Another subject matter Teatro Luna discusses is the male body image and critiques the patriarchal and heteronormative notions of how the male body should look. In one scene, they have men address a mirror discussing their dislike of body weight, facial structure, body hair, and much more in its relationship to their male identity and agency. This imagery also highlights the notions body images have in their relation to how males believed females to see them. "By romanticizing *macho* to mean chivalrous, protector, and provider to his kin, this perpetuates the dominant position of men and the subordination of women, whereby the woman needs physical, economic, and spiritual protection and comfort from her male counterpart" (Huerta 182). The other themes and problematic patriarchal pressure *Machos* highlights are abuse, relationships, sports, fatherhood, language, homosexuality, and so much more. These discussions and dialogues on stage create retrofitted memory practices because they deny the idealism of patriarchal perception in the masculine narrative. They even build on perceptions of private and public male expectations through the vignette "The Urinal." As researcher Melissa Huerta points out, the price of urinal etiquette is something that logistically happens primarily in the public sphere (184). This scene has a father teaching his son how to use a urinal properly so that he can follow

social protocol to continue his authentic male identity. At one point, the father says that one must never “double park,” meaning not to go right next to another man’s stall. In which case, another male figure using the urinal nearby calls it the “gay buffer,” so no one thinks you gay (qtd. in Huerta 185). The other male joining the conversation creates humor as he does not practice what he preaches. But it also highlights essential themes such as the Latino public’s history of demonizing homosexuality.

As Acosta and Martinez-Cruz point out in regards to Teatro Luna; “As an anti-oppression theater project, the ultimate aim of *Machos* is to denaturalize the binary construct of woman/man that habilitates patriarchal hegemony and to activate new social engagement with gender and sexuality as a dynamic continuum, a process of becoming, rather than a state of being” (284). The engaged ambiguity in inviting male identity in the borderland practice of Anzaldúa’s *mestiza consciousness* through the use of *teatro* humor allows a larger sense of *mestiza* identity. As thespians, we must “...seek new images of identity, new beliefs about ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question” (Anzaldúa 109). Teatro Luna’s *Machos* allows the male to renegotiate their own *mestiza consciousness* in relation to self and others. It also attaches to the conversation of queerness and nonbinary. By blurring and objectifying gender roles, we received a retrofitted representation that leaves room for the *mestiza teatro* to grow.

Post Covid: Hybrid Counterpublics in *Teatro*

When I started collecting research for this paper it was around the winter of 2019. I was in the midst of my graduate experience when the pandemic of Covid-19 hit, and the entire theatre community faced its own internal shift. How was I to write a paper on collective and connectivity when I was sitting alone in my townhouse for months on end? Theatre is about

connection and ensemble, something I had lost around me. I could not write in coffee shops or even a library for a long time. It felt as if my whole life was connected to my outdated laptop.

Let me express I am about to do a rather large time jump as the last performance I just talked about was from 2008. However, I think I could be remiss if I were not to discuss how Covid directly affected and expanded the *mestiza teatro*. Teatro Luna still exists today, and it has expanded to having another branch in Los Angeles. Beyond that, I believe Teatro Luna to be directly creating hybrid counterpublics. Marc Lamont Hill's article "Thank You Black Twitter: State Violence, Digital Counterpublics, and Pedagogies of Resistance" (2018) examines the digital public formed through the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Through this research, Hill argues that many counterpublics have since "relocated, constituted, or extended to virtual, online, and other digitally networked spaces, resulting in the formation of *digital counterpublics*" (Hill 288). Teatro Luna is the first *mestiza teatro* group I have analyzed that had this ability to influence digital platforms into their *teatro* collective. Student Alexis-Carlota Cochrane uses the combination of definitions on both Nancy Fraser's work on subaltern counterpublics and Hill's work on digital counterpublics to formulate an argument of hybrid counterpublics influence in *latinidad* (11-13). Hybrid counterpublics are counterpublics formulated by creating space both digitally and physically.

Hybrid counterpublics help enhance ideas of the *mestiza teatro* because it allows a greater collective without restriction to just the physical. While many thespians were (and still are) divided on the presentation of theatre over platforms like zoom, we cannot deny the overarching influence it has had in theatre making. Teatro Luna offered online writing workshops like *Your Body is Your Superpower* in April 2020, a virtual Latina showcase in May, and an embodiment workshop called *Stories Our Body tell* in July (Facebook). Beyond that, they also produced an

online short story collection as an Audible exclusive, titled *Talking While Female & Other Dangerous Acts* (2019). These virtual opportunities and performances help expand the counterpublic of the *mestiza teatro* style to live virtually and invite *teatristas* that may not geographically have the ability to connect.

However, this becomes somewhat blurry regarding directly defining *mestiza teatro*. Are writing workshops and virtual seminars *teatro*? Would writing in online chats count as devising and collaborating? I do not fully know that answer, but I believe there is capability with the hybrid counterpublic in regards to *teatro*. The other aspect is that the theatrical world is directly working within this conversation as I write this paper, so I'm sure there is room to come back to this discussion as time progresses. Nonetheless the concept of hybrid counterpublics allows someone like me located in central Illinois to connect with the *teatrista veteranas* that have a more prominent presence in the southwest. I believe this is an engaging and ever changing discussion, which ultimately echoes the practices of the *mestiza consciousness*. By implementing new practices of performance, we can expand collectivity and connection. Introducing hybrid counterpublics as the ending of my timeline leaves the *mestiza teatro* open ended with questions. Which to me seems the most *mestiza* way possible.

CONCLUSION

To be critical of one's culture is not to betray that culture. We tend to be very righteous in our criticism and indictment of the dominant culture and we often suffer from the delusion that, since Chicanos are so maligned from the outside, there is little room to criticize those aspects from within our oppressed culture which oppress us. (Moraga 180)

The quote above continues to be one of the most influential insights into my analysis of cultural performativity. The examination of trying to historicize the Latina *teatro* collective is a personal one. My exposure to any and all of this literature was not until my graduate career, something that was both challenging and freeing. Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* was my driving force in connecting all these *teatro* groups. While years apart, the groups continued to build parallel artistic work that aimed for the same artistic intention. As a result, I would like to highlight the significant characteristics of the *mestiza teatro*.

1. Embraced influences of the traditional grassroots *teatro* performance style. This includes but is not limited to Mexican Vaudeville, slapstick humor, rasquache aesthetic, exaggerated characters, and stereotypical archetypes.
2. To criticize representations misportrayed by hegemonic masculine narrative, colonized forces, and/or institutionalization performance industries. As such, you must aim to accurately represent oppressed communities through uses of reimagination and new performance imagery.
3. Engage in the conversation and representation of inner struggles through the outer terrain of *teatro*.

4. Lastly, to create alternative history through performance culture. This history includes but is not limited to terminology, iconography, representation, narrative, etc.

The *mestiza teatro*, like the *mestiza consciousness* it is influenced by, is not a perfect paradigm. It argues for an ongoing reinterpretation, ambiguous nature, and cultural straddling that will forever be changing. I want to highlight my use of the *mestiza* as opposed to Anzadúa and other scholars' work on the *mestizaje*, which allows room for the non-binary and gender fluid. While the collective I discussed partook in practices of the *mestizaje*, I can't help but argue that this historiography I formed was extremely female-based. As such, it felt unjust to use queer terminology when the performance culture was not directly queer. That being said, I believe that is where the *mestiza teatro* is heading, but as always, it relies on us to continue to act and engage in renegotiation.

I would also like to touch on the pedagogical possibilities the *mestiza teatro* can create within a teaching sphere. All four of these collectives argue for a reexamination on their understanding of knowledge and education. As such I believe the concept of the *mestiza teatro* allows a certain theatrical teaching aspect that most students in academia aren't exposed to during their college careers. I believe it allows a reimagination and expansion of the practice of devised theatre. I continue to want to call attention to the significance of the counterpublic in relation to these *teatro* groups. Without freedom of space to articulate their own artform, they would not have been able to partake in the conversations that directly affected aspects of their livelihood. Teatro de las Chicanas was the first of its kind as an all female *teatro* collective. By denying the tropes used to confine the Chicana in the *vendida logic*, they are our beginning mothers of *teatro mestiza*. Las Comadres was a group that drove head first in trying to embrace the *mestiza consciousness* fully, but as such, they helped us see the internal pains that come with

a renegotiation. However, they take ownership of their faults, or counter stances, to add to the *mestiza teatro* performance culture. Their group highlighted the themes of their internal struggle and partook in the practice of how the *mestiza* navigate collectively and independently. Latina Theatre Lab used practices of retrofitted memory to emphasize the problematic issues Latina *teatristas* were facing regarding representation in the entertainment industry. By extension, they highlight retrofitted representation, criticizing and reimagining Latina iconography. Lastly, Teatro Luna introduces agency, bodily autonomy, queerness, and male intersectionality when it comes to misrepresentation. By introducing the idea of hybrid counterpublics, we leave the door open and engage our own theatrical psyches on where *mestiza teatro* is heading. I thank each and every one of these *teatristas* from the bottom of my heart because I understand how much they have been glossed over and questioned regarding theatre history. To me, to embrace the logic of theatre one must remember the value of self. So many of these women shared their stories, experience, and narrative, so I felt it only fitting to share mine.

I am *mestiza*. My parents divorced when I was very young, and I spent most of my time raised by my White mother. However, I spent most of my time before and after school, along with weekends, surrounded by my Mexican family and father. My white and Mexican worlds seldom crossed. I spent my life jumping from one borderland to the next, unaware that this was the inner code switching I did to feel comfortable with my family around me. I never questioned or felt I had to validate my Latina identity until college. You become tokenized and overly aware of false allyship from the theatre community around you. When I started my graduate program, I saw an opportunity to take a Chicana feminism class, and it continues to completely change my life. This is why I argue for a restructuring of our own preconceived notions of knowledge. Having access to terminology and academic rhetoric that directly references the oppression I

experienced was the most influential moment in my life as a *teatrlista*. A couple of months before the pandemic hit, I met Maylei Blackwell at a book signing. Her work on retrofitted memory directly influenced everything I wanted to fight for in the theatrical world. As I sit here typing this, I have her written note to me in my overly sticky-noted book. “You are next in line of *Mujeres* revolutionaries!” This paper, research, examination, and everything it holds is my manifesto to articulate the power of collectivity in a time I felt so isolated. When I interviewed with Jamie Lujan I asked her where Latina Theatre Lab lives now twenty years later. She said, “that we’re here, that you’re not alone.” The theatrical world by nature is a collective one, and this historical timeline shows that throughout time Chicana/Latinas have found healing through these collective natures. It’s a beautiful shame that what brings these women together is a similarity in frustration, but more significantly a willingness and a want to redefine their understood identity within their own cultures. Even years apart we can still grow and find comfort in knowing that we aren’t alone. That there is a history behind these feelings, experiences, and narratives that aren’t nearly highlighted enough in academics. I hope anyone reading these pages you can see the importance of the *mestiza teatro* and the value of history’s influence in the progression of feminism, academia, performance culture, and Chicana/Latina identity.

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